Women Poets and National History:
Reading Margaret Atwood, Anna Akhmatova, and Lina Kostenko

by

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the portrayal of historical events in the works of Margaret Atwood, Anna Akhmatova, and Lina Kostenko. These Canadian, Russian, and Ukrainian poets present women as participants in political events, possessing historical agency, and taking part in the creation of a national past. While acknowledging the epistemological limitations of history writing (its inherent narrative mode, ideological and political implications, and other factors), I argue that the three authors uncover the tangible link that unites two remote points in history and enhances our perception of the current situation. Atwood's awareness of the hermeneutic limitations of the writing of history informs her literary works; however, Akhmatova and Kostenko hold a more traditional view of generating historical accounts and their validity. What unites these poets is the belief that past events have an impact on the decision-making process of future generations.

Adopting a new historical and a postcolonial approach, I demonstrate how the texts under investigation enter into a complex relationship with hegemonic ideologies and how their position changes in relation to power structures. These writers' poems act as dynamic forces that reflect past events and simultaneously reshape the discursive field, producing and negotiating new meanings. These works function at the intersection of the present and the past, mapping a "third space" that has a discernible connection to the past and offers the possibility of different futures. Historical poetry offers a unique perspective

on past events because it describes a specific historical context that resists homogenizing tendencies. This genre amalgamates the realms of the individual and the collective, making it a profoundly private and at the same time a communal experience.

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Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century, two distinct approaches to the writing of history have emerged. Relativist scholars view history as a discourse generated by historians: our ability to represent and interpret historical events is restricted by many epistemological factors (Gossman 29; Hutcheon, *Poetics* 89-90). All historical inquiries function within certain ideological or political structures, and historians' analysis is conditioned by the mode they use to conduct their investigation. At the other end of the spectrum, empiricists contend that in spite of these hermeneutic limitations, some interpretations produce more viable claims, are supported by evidence, and lead to different consequences in the present and the future (Appleby 255; Davis 116-17; Koselleck 10). These debates in the field of historiography have produced a significant impact on literary studies, and the value of historical fiction and poetry has been reconsidered and challenged. In spite of numerous differences in their perspectives on writing about history, Margaret Atwood, Anna Akhmatova, and Lina Kostenko have a similar understanding of the poet's role. They depict past events and write women into the archive, filling gaps in the historical record. Atwood and Kostenko focus on the colonial past in Canada and Ukraine and the importance of overcoming its legacy in order to create a distinct national identity; Akhmatova explores the issue of moral responsibility before the victims of Stalin's repressions and warns against repeating such historical mistakes.

One of the main premises of relativism is that history is a contested field where different ideological and political forces operate. Hayden White asserts, "Commitment to a particular form of knowledge predetermines the kinds of generalizations one can make about the present world, the kinds of knowledge one can have of it, and hence the kinds of projects one can legitimately conceive for changing that present or for maintaining it in its present form indefinitely" (21). According to this perspective, historians select past events, organize them in a certain order, and use narrative elements – inaugural, terminating, and transitional – to present them as a coherent structure. Evidence is often insufficient, and scholars inevitably analyze historical circumstances from their own political, social, and cultural vantage points. Although these concerns are undoubtedly relevant, such awareness of our epistemological restrictions should not act as a deterrent to our interpretation of the past and understanding its significance for the present and the future. To some extent, history is shaped by contemporary motives, and its boundaries are renegotiated and redrawn. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob state, "Successive generations of scholars do not so much revise historical knowledge as they reinvest it with contemporary interest. […] New versions of old narratives are not arbitrary exercises of historical imagination, but the consequence of the changing interest from cumulative social experience" (265). A historical account can be defined as a dialectic relationship between the historian's interpretation and past events. Still, these accounts hold intrinsic social and moral value that is emphasized

both by relativists who warn against "moral agnosticism" (White 433) and empiricists. Works of history are as important as the events themselves and become material practices, functions in the field of discourse that acquire relative autonomy. As Atwood observes, "The words continue their journey" (*Poems* 105) and contribute to consolidating or challenging the existing balance of power.

Producing their works in disparate historical contexts, the Canadian, Russian, and Ukrainian poets create female protagonists who not only take part in political events but have the ability to portray them. Atwood, Akhmatova, and Kostenko assign their characters roles that often transcend the limitations of their respective time periods and expectations of women writers. The three authors present historical occurrences from a female perspective, focusing on the losses brought about by wars and revolutions and the physical and emotional destruction inflicted on women who lost their family members in the course of such ruptures in history. Atwood's protagonist in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is a nineteenth-century author who could depict her life in the wilderness due to her privileged social status and education (for example, in comparison with working class women, particularly those of non-British background). Akhmatova's lyrical "I" equates her memories with historical records, narrating her experience as a grieving mother and writing for those women whose relatives were executed, imprisoned, or exiled during Stalin's reign of terror. Kostenko's protagonist in her novel in verse *Marusia Churai*

writes songs about battles and the wars of liberation belonging to the sphere of exclusively male interests. The poets foreground the process of representing historical events and emphasize their characters' creative gift that allows them to generate their version of history which occupies various positions in relation to the official master narrative, disrupting or supporting and legitimizing it.

Each ethical decision depends on particular historical circumstances but still has a symbolic referent, "the absolute axiom," which is reapplied and re-enacted. Derrida writes, "The displaced presentation remains definitively and implacably postponed" (*Margins* 20). The idealized sign appears in specific contexts, never achieving closure; therefore, the transcendental is repeatedly undone by various empirical conditions, and every moral choice has to be made as if for the first time. Keith Jenkins states, "So, history, say, is thus at once constituted both by the transcendental gesture—that promise to deliver a fully knowable history per se—and the material particularly that denies that promise. […] There is no 'last instance', no definite history ever" (282). If the sign were to be reapplied without any shifts in its meaning, individuals would not be facing moral dilemmas and the historical precedent would have already determined their choice. They would still have to make their own decisions based on their unique historical circumstances and live with the consequences. Both relativists and empiricists agree on the same premise: "a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical

circumstances" (Rorty 189). These historical circumstances are socially, politically, and ideologically different, but there is a governing principle, a symbolic gesture that produces an impact on future ethical decisions. Undoubtedly, it is the extent of the knowability of this main symbolic referent and its impact on the subsequent decision-making process that excites major epistemological debates.

In spite of epistemological challenges such as the narrative mode of history writing, the arbitrariness of language, and other factors, historians uncover real connections between past events and their consequences in the present. As Appleby puts it, "History is powerful because we live with its residues, its remnants, its remainders and reminders" ("Power" 20). The role of historians – and anyone engaging in history writing – becomes twofold: to establish these connections between historical events and the present and to exercise moral judgment. Even if the intentional forgetting of the Holocaust had happened, the past itself would have given scholars necessary clues to provide more accurate accounts of this event. Kostenko emphasizes the importance of an ethical dimension in writing about history. For example, in her poem *The Duma about the Non-Azov Brothers,* Cossack Sakhno Chernyak and two other officers remain loyal to their leaders although this decision equals execution. *Duma* (literally translated as a "thought") is a "type of epos without a great central hero, an epos with a tendency towards anonymity" (Čyževs'kyj and Luckyi 257). The poet ironically comments that future generations left the assignment

of analyzing past events to a computer whose record was historically accurate but devoid of any moral implications or emotional engagement, and the main message of the story – maintaining allegiance even at the cost of one's life – is omitted.

While applying different approaches to analyzing historical events, both relativists and empiricists inquire into what interpretations it is possible to offer based on available evidence. It has become a popular staple, almost a commonplace to state that the same occurrence is portrayed differently over time based on changing political and historical circumstances. It might be inferred that there is little or no connection between the event itself and its subsequent representation in history writing; moreover, it is supposedly the needs and motivations of the present that determine such portrayal in its entirety. Nevertheless, historical facts are not revised – their interpretations are, and the connection between the past and the present is established through an investigative process and not invented, but not without employing some elements of narration or reconstruction. Richard Evans claims that historical analysis is based on facts, not external factors: "The historian had to find objectivity not by virtue of some moral or religious criterion outside history, nor by eschewing any wider generalizations and sticking to a mere recital of facts, but by looking for a larger meaning within history itself, an ongoing history moving from past through present to future" (225).

Atwood, Akhmatova, and Kostenko depict historical events to alter their current political situation or, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, they "utilize the past for life" (91). By invoking the figure of the nineteenth-century Canadian pioneer in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie,* Atwood reawakens public interest in the national past and defies the notion that European history is more interesting or exciting. In *Marusia Churai,* Kostenko portrays the wars of liberation in seventeenth-century Ukraine, which was a forbidden subject during the Soviet era, and thus subverts colonial structures. In *Requiem*, Akhmatova commemorates the victims of Stalin's repressions and counters the strategy of forgetting employed by the totalitarian state. Their works are influenced by the ideological factors of the time period in which they were written; however, their status has changed and acquired a different position in relation to competing discourses. Claire Colebrook notes that some of canonical works were "once seen as a threat to the institution of letters" (43), and ultimately changed these institutional boundaries. The three authors' historical poems are embedded in concrete cultural practices and resist being analyzed in universal terms. Their literary works emerge as a product of specific social and ideological circumstances and simultaneously contribute to reshaping discursive practices and negotiating new meanings. Atwood wrote about past events in Canada when European history occupied a much larger space in school curricula and "Canadian literature … was not taught, required, or even mentioned (except with derision) in the public sphere" (Introduction 20). Her poems on Canadian

history undermined the colonial mentality of the 1960s and 70s and challenged the hegemonic power structures, but now they have become part of the dominant discourse. Akhmatova's and Kostenko's books were not published for decades, and paradoxically, remained popular when they were copied by hand or circulated by *samvydav* (self-published books). The Ukrainian author's works that contribute to creating national identity are now legitimized by the state and used at educational institutions to create the holistic idea of a nation. Akhmatova's poems about Stalin's reign of terror are anthologized not only in Russia, but across Europe and North America.

Their protagonists' creative power is an important dimension in their literary works. Poetry is a powerful medium to express the strong lyrical "I." As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar state, "The lyric poet must be continually aware of herself from the inside, as a subject, a speaker: she must be, that is, assertive, authoritative, radiant with powerful feelings while at the same time absorbed in her own consciousness – and hence, by definition, profoundly 'unwomanly,' even freakish" (179). The genre itself is invested with agency, allowing the poet to reconfirm her individuality and creativity. Atwood's Moodie suffers from a split identity and possesses two voices. The Victorian writer portrays herself as a pioneer forced to face the hardships of living "in the backwoods of Canada" (Moodie, *Roughing* 330). A more sincere character, a mother, is worried about the well-being and safety of her children. Akhmatova constructs her own identity as a poet who wants to remember those who fell victim to the Russian

Revolution, two world wars, and repressions – her "half century" of turbulent political events. In *Marusia Churai,* Kostenko refers to the historical figures of Cossacks, but the character of the singer-songwriter survived only in legends and dumas. In other words, it was not part of the dominant version of history and was not included in the archive. It is doubtful that Marusia would have been accepted as the voice of Ukraine in the seventeenth century, but Kostenko makes it happen in her poetry, creating a testimony for the present. However, to some extent, the agency of her protagonist is still performed within patriarchal constraints. Marusia is valued by Cossacks and is saved by hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky because her songs focus on Cossack glory and bravery, i.e., the discursive space of patriarchal social codes.

One of the main uses of history is identity formation and shaping national consciousness, but the reader should view these categories critically, question and challenge them. The resurgence of historical fiction in Canadian and Ukrainian literatures is a counter-reaction to colonial influence. These literary works attract a large readership precisely because they instill national pride that appears to be a popular commodity. Appleby maintains, "The identity politics of our day have emerged precisely in reaction to the claims of the nation to represent a homogenized people. The challenge now is to think ourselves outside those old categories, not in order to weaken the country to which we give our political allegiance but to free ourselves from a kind of intellectual bondage" ("Power" 10). While Akhmatova and Kostenko perpetuate a

monolithic, holistic notion of national identity, Atwood includes the experiences of French Canadians, namely uprisings in Lower Canada in 1837-1838 and the political events of the 1970s in Quebec, in particular, the October Crisis and the War Measures Act. Most of Atwood's historical poems portray the lives of English-speaking Canadians of European descent, such as the upper-class Susanna Moodie; however, in her collection of criticism *Survival*, Atwood analyzes the works focusing on the psychosocial integration of Hungarian, West Indian, and Jewish immigrants. As she claims in her introduction to the 2004 edition, this book would be quite different then because "Many new writers from diverse ethnic backgrounds have added their stories" (10) and native Canadian writing has proliferated.

In contrast, Akhmatova portrays historical events, applying the strict dichotomy of Russian/non-Russian while both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union were composed of different nationalities and ethnic groups. She places a significant emphasis on the preservation of the Russian language and the continuity of Russian cultural traditions and seems intent on maintaining them in spite of major historical ruptures such as the Revolution of 1917 and the Second World War, threatening their very survival. Similarly, Kostenko communicates a strong anti-colonial message, re-establishing the importance of Ukrainian culture but never mentioning other nationalities as elements of the national metanarrative, thus representing Ukrainians as a monolithic group. The author utilizes historical events selectively, focusing on the wars of liberation and the

role of Cossacks as protectors of their land and the founders of democratic institutions (for example, they elected their leaders and had a set of oral rules that resembles a modern constitution and was strictly adhered to). This historical perspective is not entirely a product of fiction and is based on facts. As John Smith states in his 1810 account of Cossack life, "Their constitution was purely democratic, their ataman, to which dignity all alike were eligible, was annually elected, and at the expiration of his year, ranked but on the level with those he ruled before" (305). In Kostenko's national myth, Cossacks not only act as historical figures but become politically charged cultural and ethical symbols. In *Marusia Churai* and *Berestechko*, "Cossack" becomes synonymous with "noble," "courageous," and "righteous," even though such depiction of Cossacks is a historical idealization. After all, "The economic base for their way of life was organized brigandage and mercenary service. A sense of profit was what motivated their annual decisions concerning the direction of their military raids" (Obolonsky 26). The Ukrainian author creates a heroic past which becomes legitimized by her audience. Her poems are anthologized and her collections of poetry became bestsellers, which is quite uncommon for the genre of poetry.

The three poets operate within the framework of their current literary discourses, but they also transcend their boundaries. Postmodern works are double-coded because they "simultaneously acknowledge their dependence on established forms of representation and disturb or even subvert these forms" (Allen 190). Atwood relies on traditional pioneer narratives, at the same time

undermining and deconstructing them. Although Canadian pioneers look for new beginnings, their choices are often governed by the perceptions of the Old World they internalized and, as a consequence, they do not fit into their new environment. When they attempt to conquer the wilderness, it invades them, turning their very bodies into a Gothic landscape. Demonstrating "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 71), Atwood portrays explorers who are supposed to be invincible heroes, but she depicts them as ordinary people who commit everyday acts of courage and endurance. Akhmatova and Kostenko construct their own poetic identities, following the tradition which dates back to the Romantic notion and is certainly different from a present-day Western perspective: writers serve as catalysts for historical events and act as "unknown legislators of the world" (Shelley 765). Therefore, the Russian and Ukrainian poets use the traditional model of poetic agency, re-investing it with new meanings opposing the hegemonic ideology.

One of the most controversial questions in the writing of history has been the status of evidence. It substantiates certain claims about the past and eliminates other interpretations; however, it is often scarce or can be used selectively. During the colonial period, Canadian national events existed outside the archive, while European history remained the primary focus. Atwood writes that she has to collect historical artefacts piece by piece – literally and metaphorically:

I turn back, search

for the actual, collect lost

bones, burnt logs

of campfires, pieces of fur. (*Selected* 102-03)

Using Moodie's memoirs *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853), Atwood employs the accounts provided by the nineteenth-century writer but rediscovers a double voice behind the narrative of perseverance: the voice of a refined English lady of gentle birth and that of a woman who was confronted with a harsh landscape and suffered from "cultural schizophrenia," trying to integrate into her new country and maintaining allegiance to her beloved England. Atwood's Moodie is a historical persona, but she is also the contemporary poet's creation, a locus where the twentieth century's concerns and anxieties are acted out.

The loss of evidence becomes one of the dominant motifs in Akhmatova's poetry. In a totalitarian state, the destruction of historical documents is a conscious strategy aimed at instilling terror and obliterating the very memory of its victims as if they had never existed. Akhmatova explains that the lists were confiscated and she has to remember all of their names, thus relying on her individual memory as a means of maintaining a historical record. Herbert Grabes notes, "Ethical memory can only do justice to the silent and silenced by emphatically giving them a face and a voice and by making their voices disturbingly resonant. Their re-presentation must mimetically repeat and continue the temporal, semantic and even cognitive and intuitive rupture which

separates then from now, them from us" (347). Like Akhmatova, Kostenko has to depend on alternative, unofficial sources to keep national history alive. In *Marusia Churai*, she refers not only to historical documents but also to folk songs, *dumas,* which act as the embodiment of the collective national consciousness. Few records survived when Ukraine was invaded by the Polish army in the seventeenth century. Almost all the protagonists – the historical figures of Cossack leaders depicted in the novel – died in battle, but their memory will be preserved in *dumas*.

When national history is regarded as inferior by the colonizer or is consciously destroyed by a totalitarian state, historical poetry acts as a site where different versions of history are recorded and re-negotiated in relation to power structures. It has an ethical dimension that guides the reader towards making historical choices and explicitly demonstrates the effect past events have on the present: "The past as a series of events is utterly gone. Its consequences, which are very real, remain to impinge on the present, but only a retrospective analysis can make their influence apparent" (Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob 255). Presenting objective past events in a very subjective manner, historical poetry combines the analytical and the lyrical, appealing to readers' moral judgment and urging them to act as "a panel of jurors," in Paul Ricoeur's terms (333). This ethical value is inherent in the writing of history, with its emphasis on the decision the reader has to make on discovering the link between two disparate events in the past and the present – be it maintaining the existing order or

resolving not to repeat this course of action ever again. Atwood, Akhmatova, and Kostenko utilize history to achieve their ethical goals. For example, the Ukrainian poet creates an ideal past where Cossacks are fighting for the statehood of their country and the female singer-songwriter contributes to the national narrative. Atwood portrays Moodie as a protagonist who overcomes hardship, demonstrates remarkable courage, and is determined to create a new life for her family and herself, having found a new place of belonging in her adopted motherland. Akhmatova defines her role as a poet whose main purpose is to preserve social memory and become the "mourner of days long gone" (*Lyric* 288).

In Chapter I, "History, Memory, and Women's Poetry: Writing the National Past," I examine two approaches to writing about history. While I agree that many premises of relativist scholars such as White and Hutcheon should be considered carefully and acknowledged in any analysis of the past (be it a historiographical study or historical poetry), I still maintain that historical accounts possess a certain validity and become important factors in the process of social dialectic, informing us of past events and contributing to the process of decision making pertaining to current political and cultural choices. In my dissertation I adopt the conceptual model of Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, who view historical analysis as a process of negotiation between the investigator and the event itself (260-61). This approach underscores a causal relationship between an occurrence in the past and its

consequences in the present, and the range of these interpretations is restricted by archival evidence. As Frank Kermode argues, "The question is not if they [historical accounts] are unfairly selective, but whether we want to break one strong link we have with the past – our ability to identify with the interests of our predecessors, to qualify with their judgements without necessarily overthrowing them, to converse with them in a transhistorical dimension" (*History* 126). I also examine the role of a shared past as well as individual and collective memory in creating and reshaping national consciousness. Some events in the past are viewed as a rupture in history and have to be forgotten, while others are maintained in the archive to forge a sense of continuity. Certain versions of history can support the current hegemonic ideology, but other, dissenting voices challenge the power structures, advocating for reviewing and reshaping their boundaries. Using Homi Bhabha's theory, I analyze the category of nationness in its pedagogical function (the unifying idea of a nation) and its performative application (people's everyday lives and practices as a field where political, social and cultural forces compete for dominance).

I further analyze the characteristics of historical poetry as a genre that reflects objective historical circumstances but also focuses on an individual emotional response to these events, simultaneously transcending them and creating a humanistic appeal. One of the unique features of this medium is that it juxtaposes the individual and the collective, invoking the notion of a personal responsibility for political decisions. Finally, I analyze the most influential

feminist theories in relation to history writing. While the main goal remains to show women in a subject position as active historical agents, many scholars suggest approaching the category of women not in terms of subverting binary oppositions, but of diffusing or proliferating them, incorporating the factors of class, ethnicity, and nationality, among other variables. Construction is not opposed to agency because "the very fact that it is created or produced makes social change possible and allows to view construction as a site of agency where it is generated and re-enacted" (Butler, *Feminist* 371). While traditional expectations of female poetry as focusing on the sphere of "feelings" and "the private domain" have been challenged, many feminist scholars assert that its residual influences remain in the current literary discourse and more literary works not only making women visible in history but presenting them as active participants are still needed.

In Chapter II, "The Historical Poetry of Margaret Atwood: The Politics of Representing, Recreating, and Witnessing," I analyze the ways in which Atwood portrays historical events – the early settlement of Canada and the reprisals carried out against French Canadians in the nineteenth century – as the events that act as constitutive elements of national identity or the experiences which serve as a warning against repeating such historical mistakes. I investigate how the poet opposes the colonial discourse by narrating the events of the Canadian past, which was the writer's conscious choice aimed at attracting the public interest to national history. Atwood's poems are psychohistorical: they

are based on concrete nineteenth or twentieth-century events (Atwood never fails to mention specific locations and to provide explanatory notes familiarizing the reader with their historical context) and depict the protagonists' emotions and anxieties presented as a combination of interior monologue and stream-of-consciousness techniques. In short, they do not take place in the objective physical or purely emotional realm, but in a third surreal dimension, which captures the reader's imagination and presents pioneer narratives as far from mundane or ordinary. In contrast to her works focusing on Canadian history, Atwood's poems on international events, including the Vietnam War and the regime of terror in El Salvador, are devoid of any specific identifiable markers. In particular, I examine Atwood's understanding of the poet's role, which is to create a historical record and convey a message of warning.

Chapter III focuses on the significance of history and memory in Akhmatova's poetry. Mourning the victims of Stalin's repressions was relegated to the private sphere, but Akhmatova makes it clear in the foreword to *Requiem* that she is determined to create a communal experience in her poem. She presents herself as the bearer of cultural and social memory who records her own experiences and those of her people. I argue that the complex interplay between power structures and the political implications of the poets' works cannot be reduced to the simple formula of resisting the dominant ideology. While opposing political hegemony, the author internalizes some of its elements; for example, Akhmatova excludes non-Russians from her poetry,

namely her works written during the Second World War. In contrast, she subverts the official Soviet version of history and interprets the revolution of 1917 as a rupture in Russian culture. In the depiction of her current political events, she makes explicit references to the famous members of the nobility, Russian epos, and uses Christian motifs – the discourse itself belongs to the epoch before the interruption.

In Chapter IV, "Revisioning History and Creating a Nation: Lina Kostenko's Poetry," I examine how Kostenko contributes to creating the unified idea of a nation in her historical poems and communicates a strong anti-colonial message opposing the Soviet policy of Russification and erasing cultural and linguistic differences among various national and ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. I investigate the ways in which the depiction of historical events in *Marusia Churai* is informed by the political situation in the 1970s when the book was written, in particular Kostenko's focus on Ukrainian national history and the secret repressions against Ukrainian intellectuals. In her depiction of Cossack leaders, Kostenko's objective becomes twofold. She fills in the gaps of national history, reshaping the field of colonial discourse, and she presents Cossacks as an ethical construct encompassing the moral criteria against which the actions of her contemporaries should be measured. I also analyze the role Kostenko assigns her protagonist Marusia Churai, the female poet who embodies the national collective consciousness and occupies an important place in the male domain of writing about historical events. Her death becomes

symbolic, giving autonomy to her works that now function independently from the author who had "the courage to lose one's own life," in the words of Jacques Derrida (70-71). This concept brings us to the following argument in my analysis: the changing functions of Kostenko's texts and the different place they occupy in the discursive field during the period of colonization and after Ukraine obtained its independence.

Chapter I. History, Memory, and Women's Poetry: Writing the National Past

Since the 1960s, many conventional assumptions about the writing of history have been challenged. Relativists call into question historians' ability to know the past and represent historical events with any degree of accuracy; some of these claims are based on Michel Foucault's theories of power and ideology. According to the French philosopher, "in societies like ours, the 'political economy' of truth […] is centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement" (*Power* 131); therefore, all individuals operate within a certain ideological system and pursue inquiries using the instruments of the discourse created by the structures of power. We do not have access to real events but only to the discourses about these events. As Hutcheon states, "The meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems, which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts.' This is not a 'dishonest refuge from truth' but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs" (*Poetics* 89). Postmodern critics do not reject the idea that certain historical occurrences took place, but they question our methods of knowing, analyzing, and representing them.

Postmodernism also questions agency and the reliability of epistemological tools available to historians. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and

Margaret Jacob contend that relativists view "the individual self as an ideological construct, a myth perpetuated by liberal societies whose legal systems depend upon the concept of individual responsibility" (202). Historians' perspectives are also shaped by the political, cultural, and social conditions of their time. All inquiries about the past have their roots in the present, and scholars of different generations create different accounts of the same historical events. Moreover, language itself is invested with ideology (that of patriarchal society) and shapes the ways of understanding, analyzing, and producing viable interpretations. There is no direct correspondence between the signifier (the word) and the signified (the object out there), and this difference creates a possibility of misrepresentation or change in the meaning. Jacques Derrida questions the ability of a language to act as a referent to the real world:

> Reading cannot legitimately transgress the text towards something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that world, outside of writing in general. (158)

Relativists view history as a narrative where historians use different methods of selection, emplotment, and interpretation to create their accounts of the past. According to White, the historian "characterise[s] the field and its elements in

his own terms (rather than in the terms in which they come labeled in the documents themselves)" and "prepares them for the explanation and representation he will subsequently offer of them in his narrative" (30). In Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale,* Pieixoto, one of the scholars who reconstruct the story of Offred's life, challenges a traditional approach to the writing of history, recalling Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." As he observes, "The past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day" (324). Relativists maintain that historians are never free from the ideology of their time and operate within the arbitrary system of a language; the very possibility of human attempt to understand and reach out to the world has been put into question.

Representing Historical Events: Limitations and Possibilities

Many empiricists agree with relativist assumptions, but nevertheless find that historians' interpretations are limited by evidence and that there is a discernible link between the past event and its consequence in the present – in short, different pasts produce different futures (Confino 12; Ricoeur 298). First, evidence acts as a check on certain interpretations and limits the range of questions that can be asked about the past. Second, some interpretations offer more viable and coherent historical explanations than do others. As Alon

Confino contends, "Interpretations are unstable, but not all have the same claim to fairness, evidence, firmer foundations, and reasonable historical thought" (16). Third, historical events produce real consequences for the present which exist outside of our imagination. Reinhart Koselleck names this effect "the experience of history," which he presents as "two long-range events that will end by merging together and, through this, will open a space of experience that formerly could not have been formulated" (10). Paul Ricoeur describes this phenomenon as something more than an epistemological territory, an authentic relation to the world, comparable to that which underlies physical experience (298). Although our understanding of the past is limited and inevitably shaped by historians' ideological positions, there is still a tangible connection between historical events and their impact on the present.

Historical discourse reflects and comments on real world events: language is not entirely arbitrary but was developed through interaction with the world. Similarly, as Richard Evans notes, "Historical discourse or interpretation has also evolved through contact with the real historical world in an attempt to reconstruct it. […] This contact is indirect, because the real historical world has disappeared irrevocably into the past. It has to be established through a reading of the documentary and other fragments which the real world of the past has left behind" (112). History writing involves inherent dualism as authors depict past events and reconstruct them imaginatively, "bringing the past to life" for the reader, simultaneously questioning available texts and evidence. They apply

available interpretations and doubt them, being aware of epistemological limitations. Martin Wiener states that "historical fiction mobilizes and interrogates historical imagination" (620). Thus, historical writing is intrinsically subversive or ambivalent, striving to provide as valid an interpretation as possible, acknowledging the indeterminacy and the impossibility to give an objective account. The most valid interpretation is yet to be achieved, and the absolute is endlessly postponed, but indefinitely sought after. Speaking metaphorically, the closure becomes the Holy Grail of history writing as different political and social circumstances reshape the essence of historical inquiry.

Historical events affect the present in different ways, and people have a choice of continuing a certain historical practice or preventing it from happening in the future. Davis identifies three different kinds of history and shows how they "contribute to decisions about current actions" (104). *Generational history* is that taking place in Belmonte, Spain, after the Civil War; the decision made by the generation whose fathers fought against their countrymen is "never again." *Genealogical history* is that of the Zuwaya people rebelling against their colonizers, and the past is idealized and remembered. *Nationalized history* is created by state power. In the case of Libya, for instance, the Institute for the study of the Jihad in Tripoli is one of the main instruments of historical policy aimed at state and nation building. As Davis notes, "[T]he connection between text and event is a real one; […] it is not only the relations of production, and the

control of history resources, but the future histories they may produce that excite moral judgement" (116-17). People's decisions are informed by the past, and historical events become active agents in the field of discursive practices, changing and reshaping contested ideological assumptions and shifting the position of power.

For history writing to be validated, it must make a connection with the public. History is not merely a reflection of ourselves; it is an invitation to look outside ourselves, a communal practice. "In order to make for effective narrative," Wilfred McClay asserts, "the vanishing point must connect in some way with a larger public purpose" (25). Historical facts themselves limit the number of possible interpretations and allow only for more plausible cause-effects connections historians have to uncover under multiple layers of texts. Still, facts gain social meaning only when they are presented as a narrative or, as Richard Evans explains, "History only becomes history when it is tied to a metanarrative" (225). At this point, it becomes increasingly important to know who has the privilege of telling the story and fashioning identity and what factors motivate them to provide particular perspectives. For example, to create a sense of a shared past and accommodate the legacies of the multi-national Soviet state, contemporary Russian history textbooks state that "during their participation in the defense against foreign invaders, the people from the East Slavic lands felt their kinship and were proud to say 'We are of Russian descent!'" (Ismailov and Ganieva 381). The Russian influence is presented as

hegemonic while other branches of the East Slavs, Ukrainian and Byelorussians, are not mentioned. In this vein, one more significant factor determines the viability of certain interpretations, namely the ability of the public to exercise moral judgment and apply ethical criteria when analyzing historical accounts. Carl Becker maintains that "by deepening the sympathies, by fortifying the will, history enables us to control, not society, but ourselves – a much more important thing; it prepares us to live more humanely in the present and to meet rather than to foretell the future" (148). It is certainly possible to have multiple perspectives on historical events, but the moral criterion is one more dimension that limits the number of possible interpretations.

We can view the past as a rupture or continuity, and it can be a warning not to repeat this historical practice or to continue this pattern of life. Geoffrey Cubitt gives an example of different reactions to such a significant historical rupture as the French Revolution. For some historians, in nineteenth-century France, the French Revolution was the decisive moment in the foundation of the country's modern nationhood; for others, it was an unfortunate breach in national history that had to be repaired (202). There is one underlying feature common in the cases of rupture and continuity, and these disparate historical events. The nature of the event itself leads to its acceptance or rejection in the future. This issue acquires moral significance and puts into question the neutrality of the historian. The Holocaust, Stalin's repressions, and, more recently, Yugoslavia and Rwanda are some of the most tragic events in the

history of humankind. At this point, memory becomes "a nexus of morality" (Confino 154). It is questionable if the historian's position must be neutral and detached in the process of writing about such events. As Frank Ankersmit observes, "The melancholic, neurotic remembrance of the Holocaust may and must help us to prevent another discharge of these terrible potentialities of modernity" (113). Preserving historical records contributes to the moral choices of the future generations, while forgetting – as an unconscious or wilful act – can lead to unrectifiable tragedies.

History is as much about the past as it is about the present, and it comprises versions of the past that are different but not mutually exclusive. History is "permanently incomplete, under construction, guaranteed to be revised" (Confino 16-17), depending on what questions different generations of historians will pose when conducting their inquiries. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob assert that historical objectivity can only refer to the relationship between persons and these fascinating things [objects] cannot reside outside of persons (260); the authors define a historical account as "an interactive relationship between an enquiring culturally shaped investigator and the passive objects under investigation" (260-61). Thus, the relationship between historians and past events is dynamic and constantly changing, and multiple versions of history are offered by people of various cultural, political, or social backgrounds, genders, or ethnicities. These perspectives may be different, but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive or untrue.

Atwood claims that historical records are inaccurate and often present different cause-effect sequences, but they can still shed light on certain aspects of the past and contribute to identity formation. In her afterword to *Alias Grace* she notes that she has "not changed any known facts, although the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally 'known'" (*Alias Grace* 464-65). In this novel, the author herself is on a quest to uncover historical facts that prove to be elusive and unattainable; Dr. Simon Jordan wants to find out if Grace had committed a murder and possibly clear her name. He encounters the unreliability of records and the multiplicity of interpretations, and the story of Grace remains unexplained and undeciphered. Moreover, Grace herself suffers from amnesia and split personality. She believes she is Mary Whitney, her friend who died of a botched abortion. When her *alter ego* resurfaces, Grace cannot remember her actions as Mary, and her own past is concealed from her. Memory itself is unreliable and can be perceived as a self-correcting mechanism that changes past experiences to alleviate psychological trauma or accommodate present events. Olney contends that memory is "an adaptive function, with a self-adjusting and self-defining plasticity about it, turning back to the past so as to position itself and us for what is to be dealt with in the future" (343).The message the reader obtains is that past events are buried under a variety of records and interpretations, which makes a task of uncovering them a daunting but not impossible one.

Inevitably, historians create their own perspectives, and any interpretation of historical events is imbued with present-day interests. Atwood's understanding of history is informed by a pragmatic approach based on the premise that each generation uses history to accommodate its own political and social claims and presents a coherent, logically organized narrative explaining contemporary events. In *Alias Grace*, Doctor Jordan projects his own views on the Kinnear-Montgomery case and is convinced that Grace is innocent because he wants to save her from her unfortunate plight. Burkhard Niederhoff asserts that Atwood is "less interested in the truth (or falsehood) value of historical and biographical reconstruction than in its effects on people's lives" (81-82). In Kostenko's novel in verse *Berestechko*, hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky appears to hold pluralistic and all-inclusive views and proclaims his respect for different ethnic and cultural groups, including the Polish nation. He also sympathizes with the Jewish people, who had been persecuted and discriminated against for centuries. Undoubtedly, it is the twentieth-century writer who makes these statements and creates a distinction between nations and their rulers. Khmelnytsky is betrayed by his allies, Crimean Tatars, and his army suffers a devastating defeat, which will ultimately lead him to conclude a treaty with the Russian Tsar. Volodymyr Panchenko points out that the hetman's statement that all political circumstances were in his favour and his question "Why did we lose?" echo the words of Yevhen Malanyuk, who wondered why the members of the Ukrainian National Army of the 1920s, armed with

"undefeatable ideas," were defeated and sent to forced labour camps (211). Therefore, the writers regard the past not as a purely abstract phenomenon that excites epistemological debates, but as a tangible presence, a concrete force that participates in current political and social processes and shapes present-day discourses.

We all practice history when we enter social relationships. "Insofar as every individual occupies social roles," writes Elizabeth Tonkin, "it is memory of others in those roles that guides each occupant" (104). She further maintains that "social relations imply both continuity and discontinuity in time […], and their practice enters into memory which is required if the social practices are to endure and survive" (111). Memory is a constitutive element of the social dialectic, and, in this sense, we all are historical agents acting and being acted upon. Pierre Bourdieu introduces the notion of *habitus*, "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions […] integrating past experiences" that is a product of history and also produces history (82-83). Social history has increasingly attracted historians' attention and shifted the traditional balance from military and political history. As Herb Wyile asserts, social history focuses on "gender, class, race and ethnicity, and culture" and has replaced "a public, political history largely defined in Eurocentric, upper-class, and male terms" (*Speculative* 5). This new kind of history represents "an arena in which classes, cultural groups, and individual men and women struggled to control the values that shaped their collective lives" (Conrad and Finkel xii). As the accepted version of

history always legitimizes the power structure, racial and ethnic minorities, working class individuals, and women often have been excluded from the master narrative. Many historians, novelists, and poets have dedicated their efforts to writing about groups in liminal or minority positions, thus changing or revisiting the established narratives and negotiating the place of the misrepresented and the underprivileged in a contested field of social history.

Historiography, historical fiction, and historical poetry have proliferated in the last few decades. These phenomena originated in response to the debates on the nature and character of historical representation and as a counter move to historical amnesia that started to prevail in the twentieth-century writing. Atwood states, "The nineteenth-century novel would be unimaginable without a belief in the integrity of memory […]. As for the twentieth century, at least in Europe, it has been on the whole more interested in forgetting – forgetting as an organic process, and sometimes as a willed act" (*In Search* 10-11). This, she argues, is why it is necessary to "take a long hard look backwards" and "place ourselves" to gain a better understanding of the current issues by referring to our past experience (*In Search* 27). Undoubtedly, historians, novelists, and poets recognize the limits of historical representation, reject its mimetic function, and accept the inevitable imperfection of history writing. While complete accuracy in representing historical events is unattainable, there is a real link between the past and the present which offers us choices of possible futures (after all, if the Nazis had won the Second World

War, the official version of history would be rather different, as Confino notes (14), and people's choices would be different, too). The past is often used to accommodate our present concerns, and though the dialectic of this relationship changes infinitely and perpetually, we learn (or we do not, if we choose) from continuities or ruptures of history, and mould our actions as a response to them (or, again, we do not, if we prefer not to).

Relativism provides us with the tools for questioning the production of knowledge and our means of understanding the real world. However, in my study I will adopt the model by Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, who, as noted above, view historical objectivity "as an interactive relationship between an enquiring culturally shaped investigator and the passive objects under investigation" (260-61). These scholars recognize the "discursive irregularities" that govern historical writing (Wyile, *Speculative* 31), but offer the dialectic model of historical inquiry allowing change, negotiation, and acknowledging the dynamic relationship between the past and the present, the contemporary inquirer and the past events and records. Such model, on Roland Barthes's terms, allows many "exits and entrances" (31) and opens possibilities depending on the nature of the inquiry. However, the number of the answers is not infinite, as they are limited by the evidence as well as the plausibility and legitimacy of possible interpretations. Fully realizing the limitations of all inquiries about the past, historians should still aim for accuracy or, in the words of Walter Benjamin,

"even the dead will not be safe" (73), and we will have to live with the past we remember and, as a consequence, the future we create.

The National Past and Its Uses

A shared past, along with location, common origins, and frequently language, is one of the most important attributes of nationhood. "Memory," writes Jonathan Vance, "locates the community in time and space, giving it an appreciation of its own past as well as a sense of its future" (9). The past acquires a symbolic role when people look back at the events that were formative in the development of the nation, be it the settlement of a new land, defending their country against invasion, or freeing themselves from the colonizers. Geoffrey Cubitt notes, "The social memory processes […] have an essentially integrative function: by foregrounding aspects of the past with which the disparate members of society can feel connection, and by moulding these aspects into a coherent vision of the society's past development as a collectivity" (223). Historical events are used to instil national pride, create emotional appeal, and develop a sense of continuity.

Different political groups contest the space of the national narrative, and use certain historical events to mould the collective consciousness, reclaiming and appropriating the past to pursue their present day political objectives. Volodymyr Kulyk analyzes the processes of representing and "reframing" historical events in contemporary Ukrainian media and concludes that "the

media forges relationships with the past not only, or even not primarily, by promoting factual knowledge and 'intellectual understanding of cause and effect' but also/rather by reshaping imagination and empathy" (289). Writers use specific narrative techniques to place more emphasis on particular historical events and mention other historical occurrences only briefly, if at all. For example, the newspaper *Segodnia* focused mainly on the tsarist or Soviet periods, while *Hazeta po-ukra¨ins'ky* (Ukrainian Newspaper) associated with the struggle against the Russian/Soviet rule over Ukraine, namely the Independence War of 1917-1921 and the UPA activities in the 1940s and early 1950s. It also mentioned rather frequently the pre-tsarist (medieval and Cossack) periods. One of the most contested narratives in Ukrainian national history is the Second World War. The same political event generates almost completely different historical narratives. From one perspective, two totalitarian empires competed for dominance, members of the UPA are viewed as fighters for independence, and the commemorative day associated with this struggle is 14 October (UPA day), and not 9 May or Victory Day, figuring prominently in the Soviet version. The latter approach is based upon the dichotomy of us versus them, Nazis, while the former presents the battle of Stalingrad as a bloody mash and a violent confrontation. Most importantly, the choice between these two historical narratives is determined by the present-day political affiliations of the readers, and in turn, contributes to reshaping their collective consciousness. Akhmatova's poems focusing on the Second World War coincide with the

official Soviet master narrative, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter III, and unequivocally categorize the two sides as us and the enemy, the Russians versus the Germans, blending different nations together as the Russian people. The war is portrayed as a unifying event that threatened a sense of national identity facing an imminent destruction by Nazi Germany.

While some work is being conducted towards reclaiming the Ukrainian national narrative, recording it into the archive, and deconstructing the colonial, totalizing version of historical events, another unproductive boundary is created. As Karina Korostelina explains, instead of the totalitarian regime, the Russians are blamed as an ethnic group and Ukrainian political activists are consistently depicted as victims and martyrs, whose plight was always tragic (6). The attainment of independence is frequently portrayed as the final event, resolving most of the long-lasting issues of the colonial legacy; however, it is only the beginning for the country that had been a nation without a state for centuries and should accommodate different national and ethnic groups within its boundaries without excluding or marginalizing them.

Ukrainian history was a forbidden subject in the Soviet era, the only exception being the unification of Ukraine and Russia in 1654. Kostenko's poems invoking the national past and thus opposing the totalizing ideology imposed by the state were unofficially banned. In present-day Ukraine, these literary works focusing on the origins of the Ukrainian people, the liberating wars of the seventeenth century, and Cossack glory legitimize the official master

narrative. In this case, the popular and the official versions of history coincide, while during the Soviet period the colonizer attempted to eliminate national distinctions and mould different ethnic groups into "the Russian people," silencing the dissenting voices. The literary works representing significant events in Ukrainian history that were considered subversive now contribute to nation building, still facing the same daunting challenges.

This unifying, integrative concept creates the basis for the functioning of a political community. Homi Bhabha calls this phenomenon "the pedagogical function," "convention, a vision of historical past" (305). Along with the pedagogical function, the performative one makes possible the existence of a nation: everyday people's lives and practices with the marginalized constituting their significant part. Groups in liminal or marginal positions are gaining their voices; according to Bhabha, these groups "create counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (300). Such an understanding of the performative function works in accordance with social history, which often deals with those who were excluded from official accounts: racial and ethnic minorities, working class, and women. Therefore, the subject is being split and traditional history has been revisited.

In my study I will analyze the concept of national history that involves a complex relationship between the pedagogical and performative functions of

writing the nation, to use Bhabha's terminology. The former works as a unifying idea and solidifying approach creating the accepted (even canonical) version of the past; the latter challenges this master narrative and constantly reshapes it. People's everyday struggles and choices contribute to the creation of national history, often adding new perspectives and questioning the established narratives. Atwood, Akhmatova, and Kostenko write about the everyday lives of women during significant historical events; thus, the performative enters the pedagogical, and the poets' stories add new meanings to the master narratives, altering and contesting them.

The Canadian, Russian, and Ukrainian poets employ a conscious strategy of uncovering forgotten historical events and filling in the blank spots to reconstruct the fragile national identity and represent it as a unifying idea, often to the point of communicating this message in an overly didactic manner. As mentioned above, Kostenko broke a longstanding taboo when she wrote about Ukrainian history during the Soviet era. Nowadays the emphasis on national historical events seems to coincide with the official master narrative, but paradoxically, a stronger sense of national identity still needs to be created in present-day Ukraine where Russia's imperial influence is invariably strong and threatens the idea of Ukraine as an independently functioning state. Literary works portraying significant events in Ukrainian history are one of the main elements contributing to shaping the collective national consciousness. In her historical poems *Marusia Churai* and *Berestechko*, Kostenko presents a unifying

cultural myth, a narrative imbued with subjectivity and created with a certain political and cultural objective. However, such approach is necessary to counteract residual elements of colonial mentality – one is left to wonder if "residual" is an accurate tem if this influence is strong and persistent. As Edwin Yoder explains, the past is "the matrix through which we understand the present, and present moods and preoccupations determine the ways in which we perceive (or misperceive the past)" (xii). In Kostenko's poems, the national idea acquires a compensatory function while other stable social and ethical notions had evaporated, and a sense of national identity and belonging remains the only constant in an age of crumbling certainties.

National identity, in particular language and history as its two main constitutive elements, becomes a moral category as opposed to strong influences from the outside when colonial mentality and foreign culture are being aggressively imposed on the Ukrainian nation (and Ukrainian politicians refuse to learn Ukrainian and continue speaking Russian as if they still lived in the Soviet era). Kostenko holds an idealistic view and presents national identity as a holistic idea, a cohesive force which is meant to hold together a nation suffering from a long history of colonial legacy and torn apart by geopolitical and cultural differences. Steven Mock states that writers portraying historical events "openly engage in an act of creation to generate a product suitable to the nation's contemporary needs" (99). It is a necessary myth which plays its role at this particular moment in history, but its significance is purely symbolic. This

national narrative is necessary as it fulfills its present-day purpose of situating Ukraine as an independent and unified state in the collective imagination; however, such a construction certainly cannot act as a substitute for other social and moral determinants which create a well-functioning society.

Literary, artistic, and other practices contribute to social memory and national history and build up a multilayered and complex structure:

> A wide variety of practices – literary, cultural, ceremonial, artistic, monumental – combine, then, to structure the past of a particular nation or community as flexible and multitextured – but not entirely formless – fabric of associations. Different individuals within society will engage with a fabric on different levels, and perhaps with different parts of it, drawing out of it their more specific mental patterns. (Cubitt 216)

Sometimes the public (official) and private versions of history agree on the treatment and explanation of a certain historical event and its consequences: celebrating a victory in the war or mourning the losses of those who defended their country. Then the public symbolic actions (official records, monuments, and other) are in accordance with private experience. When the two differ, a more complex kind of interaction emerges. However, historical narratives are never linear and singular (and not so often celebratory or harmonious). They are full of ruptures causing gaps between public and private social memories,

contestations among different groups participating in historical processes, and the voids created by fractures and discontinuities.

Atwood, Akhmatova, and Kostenko view history as a series of fragmented experiences narrated by the polyphony of voices. History does not represent a direct cause-effect connection but acts as a dynamic field where different factors interact. Magali Michael believes that Atwood employs a "patchwork technique" in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *Alias Grace*, presenting a combination of texts and documents and offering "spatial, unstable, disunified mode of representation as a means of validating the enterprise of writing history—albeit in an alternative way (422). As I further explain, Michael's term is also applicable to Akhmatova's poems of memory. The poets' works enter into a complex relationship with the hegemonic master narrative, situating themselves among oppositional discourses and making claims to representing the subversive version of history or coinciding with the official account of past events.

The patchwork technique enables the authors to reflect the unreliability and plasticity of memory, the non-linear character of their narratives, and the gap between private and public versions of history. In her poem *Requiem*, Akhmatova contrasts the chorus of voices belonging to all those women who lost family members to Stalin's repressions and her own voice, changing spatial and time coordinates, namely the prison under the Kremlin wall, the Fontanka House, where she contemplated suicide, Siberian labour camps, and Golgotha,

where the Virgin Mary mourned her son's death and Christ's disciple "turned to stone" (2107). Shifting her focus from her own suffering to a larger narrative, in which the entire Russian nation becomes an unwilling participant, the author records the disruptive and silenced account. In *Journals*, Atwood depicts her protagonist's life as a terrifying kaleidoscope of feelings, impressions, and glimpses into the new world, including her landing in Quebec and experiencing alienation from her new country for the first time, saving her children from a burning house, and suffering the loss of her son. Although these events are profoundly personal, paradoxically, they are similar to the hardships and challenges faced by other Canadian early settlers.

The poet literalizes this strategy when Moodie cuts out her face from the portrait and where her eyes used to be, the alien landscape appears. The protagonist's persona becomes a blank terrain, where the memories of the Old World have been erased or relegated to the sphere of the subconscious, and the new experiences are to invade and inhabit Moodie's psyche. To portray the intricacies of this psychological transformation, Atwood blends genres and juxtaposes her poetry and Charles Pachter's artwork in the 1980 edition of *Journals*. David Staines claims that the artist's works "seek not to reproduce Atwood's images visually but to move inside her poems to locate an image that encapsulates some of the complexities of her text" (Foreword xiv). Employing similar strategies, the Canadian and Russian poets explore public and private memories and delineate the space where the two overlap and enable the

resurgence of the communal and the national. Atwood creates a sense of historical continuity and participates in the process of reshaping national identity, focusing on the experiences of early settlers. Akhmatova depicts a national tragedy which disrupts private and social connections and obliterates not only people's lives, but the records of their very existence as a conscious strategy employed by the totalitarian state.

Such ruptures in national history usually evoke two kinds of reactions. Individuals make a concerted effort to remember this event in order to prevent it from happening again or forget it for the sake of more or less harmonious national narratives. As Ernest Renan asserts, national history requires forgetting as much as remembering (11). For example, it is unclear if Germans should view the role of the Nazis in the Second World War as a page in history to be turned over or as something to remember and grieve. In the aftermath of Stalin's repressions, victims' relatives were repeatedly required to denounce their family members, and individual memories differed significantly from the public version of history. As Catherine Merridale contends, the official Soviet narrative commemorated those who had died defending their country in the Second World War (excluding women and non-Russians); the records of deaths of the victims of Stalin's repressions were unavailable (63). Akhmatova writes, "I'd like to name them all by name, / but the list has been confiscated and is nowhere to be found" (*Requiem* 2108). Individual memories became a structure in which the

repressed alternative histories were kept alive and a medium through which family secrets were passed on to the next generation.

Undoubtedly, social memory is an important tool in the power struggle. Those who write the master narrative legitimize their current actions, exercise their power, and shape the contemporary history of their nation. This is why it is important the public act as a check on history. Ricoeur explains, "The conviction of the citizen alone justifies the fairness of the penal procedure in the courts and the intellectual honesty of the historian in the archives." Making historical choices often means assuming moral responsibility and recognizing "the inhuman as the absolute contrary of 'liberal values'" (333). The question of whether the subaltern can speak or if groups in marginal and liminal positions can represent themselves gains new meaning. When they do, they challenge the master narrative and add new perspectives, writing the underprivileged and the marginalized into the archive. They negotiate their place in the national narrative, using this crucial lever of power. As John Berger proclaims, "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" (133). Instead of using binary oppositions based on gender, ethnicity, and other factors, we can speak of proliferation and dissemination of alternative voices and histories interacting within a multitextured national narrative without excluding each other.

The Canadian, Russian, and Ukrainian poets write for a specific intended audience and consciously contribute to shaping the collective consciousness of

their nations. Atwood creates her version of Moodie, writing for Canadian readers and addressing the long-silenced concepts of Canadian history during the period of the resurgence of Canadian culture in the 1960s, following the centennial celebrations. The historical Moodie is a reporter whose purpose is to amuse and slightly horrify the British audience with the tales of living in the bush, while warning them against settling in a place utterly unsuitable for English aristocrats. Atwood writes for her fellow citizens, and her protagonist's connection to the New World is stronger, more immediate and complex. Akhmatova dedicates *Requiem* to women whose family members were imprisoned or sent to labour camps:

> И ту, что едва до окна довели,
>
> И ту, что родимой не топчет земли,
>
> И ту, что, красивой тряхнув головой,
>
> Сказала: "Сюда прихожу, как домой."
>
> […]
>
> О них вспоминаю всегда и везде,
>
> О них не забуду и в новой беде. (220-21)

> The one they almost had to drag at the end,
>
> And the one who tramps her native land no more,
>
> And the one who, tossing her beautiful head,
>
> Said: "Coming here is like coming home."

[…]

I will remember them always and everywhere,

I will never forget them no matter what comes. (2107-08)

Both Akhmatova and Kostenko make explicit claims that it is their conscious intention to fill the historical void. The Ukrainian poet asserts that the great book of her nation has not yet been written (Kostenko, *Marusia Churai* 93). Ivan Dzyuba considers *Marusia Churai* a national narrative and notes that the task of writing this book has been accomplished (205). Most importantly, in spite of all the hardships and adversities their protagonists face, the three authors portray the spiritual re-invention of the lost self, be it the last poem of hope after the scenes of torture and executions in Atwood's collection of poems *True Stories*, focusing on the regime of terror in El Salvador, the resurrection of Christ after the crucifixion in *Requiem*, symbolically paralleling the return of the heroine's will to live, or the spring in Poltava and people's resilience after the horrors of the siege in *Marusia Churai*. Sometimes this hope is merely symbolic, and it is inevitably tainted with a sense of loss and grief, but the authors are persistent in their depiction of yet another chance, another possibility of a different future enabled by the historical experience of previous generations.

It is difficult to overestimate the role of history in shaping a nation's present or future (or the future of a certain social class, race, or ethnic group within a nation). According to Frantz Fanon, the worst is happening when the colonizer robs the colonized not of his present, but of his past (37). Fanon

discusses the emergence of nations mainly in political terms after new African states obtained their freedom from the colonizers. Writers, activists, artists contributed to shaping national consciousness and, in its turn, the latter stimulated changes in literature and art. Donna Bennett states that for Canada to perceive itself as a postcolonial state means "coming into identity." Referring to the process of naming the nation into existence, Robert Kroetsch writes, "In a sense, we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real" (63). Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin define Canadian postcolonialism as "generally monolithic in its assertion of Canadian difference from the canonical British or more recently threatening neo-colonialism of American culture" (36). In response to this point of view, Bennett creates a new model of Canadian postcolonialism which "invites us to see – and gives us a new way of seeing – the play of tensions within Canadian culture and that of any external centre" (127). This "collection of cultures within English Canada, not so much a mosaic as a kaleidoscope" enables us "not only to influence what we see when we look through the glass, but also to affect the placement of the other elements in the array" (127). Narrating national history becomes a vital element constituting national identity and signifying its departure from colonial status.

During the Soviet era, Ukraine underwent a process of denationalization. Though the Soviet government repeatedly emphasized the importance of the Ukrainian language, history, and culture, Russian was the

language of government institutions, educational establishments, and industry; Russian history and culture occupied a larger space in the schools' curricula than Ukrainian. Yet, as Sharon Wolchik and Volodymyr Zviglyanich point out, "The resilience of languages and ethnic consciousness has outlasted the Soviet Union" (xi). The possible way out of the postcolonial chaos and reconstituting national identity, as George Luckyi notes, is correcting past lies (778). One of the most articulate spokespeople for this point of view is Kostenko.

To conclude, a shared past is an important element in building national identity. It often acts as a symbolic marker, by which formerly colonized or otherwise oppressed countries assert their independence. The category of nationness is constituted by the pedagogical (the nation's past and the unifying solid idea) and the performative (everyday people's lives and practices with the marginalized being its significant part). The social history of the underprivileged, those obliterated from the accepted version of the nation's past, gains special importance. The national past is a site of complex interactions between collective and individual memories, which are formed, recorded into the archive, or erased in relation to various historical processes such as rupture, continuity, or discontinuity. One of the major tasks for historians, fiction writers, and poets is to record alternative histories contesting the master narrative and reflecting these struggling forces on the site of narrating the nation.

Poetry as a Site of Memory: Dichotomies and Paradoxes

Poetry is born within a certain historical context; however, this genre always transcends it, giving passage to ideas that are valued not only by the poet's contemporaries but also by future generations. Poets are inevitably influenced by their social, cultural, and political backgrounds. After all, it is impossible to exist outside ideology and to free oneself from contemporary discourse – even Symbolists who advocated for pure art devoid of any social or political statements created this agenda in opposition to the ideological constructs of their society, and the lack of political statement is a statement in itself. As Stan Smith contends, all poetry is "a response, in a particular cultural and historical nexus, to an experience shaped and transformed by the network of social relationships" (3). He also asserts that poetry is never merely an "apologia for the existing order of things. Rather it is the complex record of a struggle, both within and against that order, where the aesthetic impulse and the poetic voice wrestle with the very historical forces which give them birth, occasion and pretext" (20). It is a product of the historical circumstances it reflects, but at the same time it produces new meanings and facilitates change.

Poetry goes beyond the particular historical context that accounts for its emergence and conveys meanings dealing with larger philosophical or psychological categories. While it does not produce claims to accuracy, it creates an emotional appeal, "using stories of the past to shed light on aspects of humanity that are presumed to have resonances across time, space and place"

(Pinto 192). When Atwood writes about the early Canadian settlers, "confined to animal skin coats" and dying of scurvy (*Selected* 103), settlers appear to the reader as real people who suffer and overcome their everyday hardship and performing mundane tasks. Akhmatova tells of women whose husbands and sons are imprisoned, executed or exiled, giving a testimony to the endurance of human spirit and solidarity in times of grief. When Kostenko depicts sixteenth-century Ukraine torn apart by wars and employs the leitmotif of devastated cities and burning books, she speaks about the loss of national history and, by implication, its influence on national identity. The three poets address real historical events, but their ideas are not confined to a particular historical time or location. Their poems extricated themselves from the temporal boundaries and are awaiting larger readership, that of today and tomorrow.

The three writers believe that their literary works possess certain autonomy. They become social practices that interact with their environment and thus reflect and re-present it, containing the latent content, concealed messages and even the perspectives or interpretations the poet is unaware of or unwilling to admit. In her poem "Solipsism while Dying," in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Atwood depicts the surreal process of the poems being freed from the author's body. She describes the world around her, internalizing it in her final attempt to understand her adopted country. Paradoxically, Moodie does not integrate into the new world, but her poems do. When she names the alien

landscape, her words acquire an existence of their own and Moodie's mind no longer exercises control over her body:

> The eyes produce light.
> The sky
> leaps at me: let there be
> the sun-set
> Or so I thought, lying in bed
> Being regretted. (*Journals* 50-51)

Moodie becomes one with her new land and acknowledges it in the last segments of her interior monologue, almost against her will. Her words of anguish tell more about her attempts to reconcile with the New World and feel at home than the refined Victorian poet ever intended.

In Kostenko's *Marusia Churai,* the singer-songwriter dies of tuberculosis, but the tragic events of Ukrainian history and the Cossacks' sacrifices and honour will survive in her songs. In fact, these two processes – real life events such as the siege of Poltava, liberation wars, famine in the Volyn region and the Cossacks' heroic deaths – and their re-creation and symbolic re-enactment in Marusia's songs parallel each other, often becoming intertwined and almost interchangeable. The poet fictionalizes historical events, simultaneously historicizing everyday people's lives. Erasing boundaries between past events and their depictions in Marusia's songs and dumas, Kostenko emphasizes the importance of texts, even oral records, to the process

of shaping the collective consciousness. However imperfect or subjective, such accounts are as important as historical events themselves as they are all we have left from the past. The alternative is the imminent loss of culture and the epistemological void that eventually will have to be filled with stories and voices.

Poetry faces a difficult task to transcend not only its historical context but also language itself, in particular the discourse constructed by the institutions of power. Cary Nelson discusses American poetry about the Vietnam War: "We all know that particular words can be tainted by associations they acquire in public usage. Serviceable, bureaucratic words like 'pacify,' 'relocate,' 'reconnaissance,' become attributes of disguised violence. Phrases like 'peace with honor' are riddled with pretence" (9). Poetry struggles to subvert this discourse from within, often succeeding, but is unable to free itself completely; thus, it is always contesting the power of discourse trying to evade or overcome it and allowing for "the other voice," as Octavio Paz calls it, to speak. Poetry emerges when the poet hears this other voice, which, paradoxically, simultaneously belongs to today's world (with the poet being a prisoner of her/his historical circumstances) and that of yesterday and tomorrow. As Paz notes,

> It is otherworldly and this-worldly, of days long gone and this very day, an antiquity without dates. […] It is their own, someone else's, no one else's, no one's, and everyone's. Nothing

> distinguishes the poet from other men and women but those moments – rare yet frequent – in which, being themselves, they are the other. (151)

Paz comments on this unique feature of poetry belonging to this very day and, at the same time, to the past and the future. Poetry gives passage to other voices, serving as a link between different generations. T.S. Eliot famously speaks about the poet's "historical sense," which "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with the feeling that the whole of literature from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous experience and composes a simultaneous order" (2171). Eliot compares the poet's mind to a catalyst where all the elements – those of the past and those of contemporaneity – meet and the new, original work of art is created. Poets retain historical and cultural memory and embrace tradition, while creating their own innovative works subverting and interrupting it. Paradoxically, the best way to acknowledge the literary works of the past is to internalize, appropriate, and then reject them; however, to be able to rebel against tradition and the social and cultural codes informed by the experiences of the previous generations, one must make a conscious effort to learn from the past and create his/her unique work of literature embedded in the present. The interdependence of the historical sense and innovation as well as the acceptance of past social norms and their rejection make poetry a material, dynamic

practice, which enables readers to make moral choices. Their decisions to continue a certain social or cultural practice or to interrupt it are inevitably informed by the past. Even the Italian Futurists, who intended to destroy history and liberate their country from its dangerous graveyards of "museums, libraries and academies of every sort" (Marinetti 5), formed their decision based on the experiences of the past generations, even if their final statement was "never again."

The inherent feature of historical poetry of having roots both in the past and in the present results in a dichotomy or even a paradox. It is timeless and reflects every passing moment of life, recording, depicting, and recreating it with precision and vividness. It is common knowledge that poetry has been praised for its attention to detail and for conveying its heroes' "state of being" through these minute fragments of life. Atwood writes about the bronze clock "brought with such care from over the sea" (*Poems* 20); the time on the clock becomes *frozen* after its owners die in the uprising of 1837-1838. Akhmatova personifies Russia "writhing under the tires of the Black Marias" (*Requiem* 2103); Kostenko speaks about the Cossacks' wives seeing off their husbands to war and clutching the stirrups of their horses. These details reflect the poet's present or portray her country's past where objects from people's everyday life become symbolic markers of historical time. Joseph Conrad describes the ability of a writer – this point is true both for fiction and poetry – to "snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life."

The task of the writer is "to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood" (147). The poet depicts the "here and now" of her/his time or recreates the past, giving people, as Guy Vanderhaeghe notes, "a sense of the texture of life" (26) and contributing to the repository of social memory.

Besides having its roots both in the past and the present, poetry features another dichotomy. It is a subjective genre in which the poets speak about objective historical events. The latter are presented through the eyes of the lyrical "I," thus juxtaposing the private and the public, and giving an individual perspective on historical events. Impartiality and emotional involvement are intrinsic characteristics of history writing, which "achieves its greatest power at those moments when it is trying to manage the creative tension between engagement and detachment, fully honoring both sides of that dualism" (McClay 26). This inherent dichotomy manifests itself even more explicitly in historical poetry, portraying emotions of the protagonists involved in significant and often tragic historical events, such as the Regime of the Red Terror in Russia, French Canadian uprisings in Quebec in 1837-1838, and devastating wars in seventeenth-century Ukraine. Kermode notes that poems are "very private in their handling of the public themes. They can protect us from the familiar; they stand apart from opinion; they are a form of knowledge" (*Poetry* 67). This knowledge is different from the historian's accounts but no less valid in helping us understand the past. Atwood, Akhmatova, and Kostenko position

their protagonists among other women who faced similar tragedies. According to new historians, the personal is always political, and "texts' meanings cannot be abstracted from the historical context in which they are produced and consumed" (Wiener 621). Scholars belonging to this school emphasize the importance of uncovering latent messages, subcontexts, and ostentatious omissions. This is certainly a valid course of action that has proved to be useful for analyzing literary works from a new historical perspective; however, in the three authors' poems reverse strategies are used. The historical context of their poems is foregrounded and emphasized; it is not a backdrop against which the events in the heroines' lives unfold. It is the very force that shapes these events, and in turn, is being shaped by their creative agency. Moodie is one of the immigrants who disembarked in Quebec and feels fragile, ephemeral, and out of place in the New World. Atwood refers to the same historical events in *Alias Grace* – immigration to Canada and crossing the Atlantic. However, both protagonists' experiences are dramatically different. While they undergo a psychological trauma and feel dislocated (to the extent that they both suffer from the split personality disorder, at least in Atwood's version of their life stories), their choices and narrative perspectives are shaped by social and class differences.

The author purposefully emphasizes the interactive relationship between the categories of the personal and the historical. Grace has to cope with her mother's death during their passage to Canada under horrifying conditions,

and her mother's death is a direct result of those conditions. Her main motive for murder might have been her jealousy of Thomas Kinnear's mistress and her desire to occupy a more privileged position. Having lost a fortune in Great Britain and been forced to immigrate, Moodie still retains some of the privileges granted by her social class and nationality. The Moodies bought a plot of land and were able to hire help to farm and to build their house; her husband was appointed sheriff of Belleville, which put an end to Mrs. Moodie's horrifying and enlightening adventures in the wilderness. Last but not least, the historical Moodie had the means to tell her story and even publish it (certainly, in that time period women's biographies were considered anecdotal and by no means serious or respectable accounts – this issue is discussed separately later in my study). Still, the Victorian writer can tell her own story, a privilege the servant girl Grace Marks does not have. It would be a gross exaggeration to claim that Moodie's success as a member of upper class society in Toronto and her partial integration as well as Grace's demise and her life in a penitentiary are direct results of their class differences. Nevertheless, social status remains a major contributing factor among others such as colonial influence and the exclusion of women from archival history. The protagonists' personal experiences, including settling down in Canada, cultivating the land, and even playing a mysterious role in the Kinnear-Montgomery murder, become contributing factors to the process of writing class, postcolonial, and feminist histories. As Wiener notes, literary interpretations should not be confined to "the procrustean bed" of a single

approach (622), but instead multiple perspectives should be taken into consideration when engaging in literary analysis.

Canadian, Russian, and Ukrainian poets employ the same strategy, juxtaposing the categories of the personal and the historical and often erasing boundaries between these notions. Political games people play produce disastrous results in private spheres. In times of war and political disruption, familiar notions, always regarded with reverence, lose their sanctity. Some expectant mothers are "perfect and intact," but many are not because "It's a matter of food and available blood," and "Children do not always mean hope" (*Poems* 70). In her collection of poems *The Circle Game,* Atwood states that children learn about power games from adults and continue the vicious cycle, turning power games within a family into wars on a global scale. Alan Atkinson underscores the importance of emotional engagement with historical events: history "depends on an assumption of shared humanity. […] Historians who fail to register the importance of feeling, whether explicitly or not, cut themselves off from the roots of their discipline" (23). In the genre of historical poetry, although focusing on concrete past events and situating them in a specific historical context with abundance of detail and evidence, more emphasis is placed on the first element in the dichotomies of "emotional/detached" and "personal/political." Akhmatova not only writes about her son's imprisonment and her own grief but positions her narrative among many similar tragedies and

creates a humanistic appeal, alluding to Christ's crucifixion and to archetypal mother's suffering:

> Магдалина билась и рыдала,
>
> Ученик любимый каменел,
>
> А туда, где молча Мать стояла,
>
> Так никто взглянуть и не посмел. (*Lyric* 220)

> Mary Magdalene beat her breast and sobbed,
>
> The beloved disciple turned to stone,
>
> But where the silent mother stood, there
>
> No one glanced and no one would have dared. (*Requiem* 2107)

The siege of Leningrad during the Second World War, when thousands of people died of hunger in the city, which was cut off from the rest of the country, acquires even more somber connotations when Akhmatova describes children's deaths. Kostenko also creates the dichotomy of childhood/war, which becomes a contextual binary opposition. She states that "Мій перший вірш написаний в окопі" (*Selected* 31) ("My first poem was written in the trenches") and depicts her childhood with an all-pervasive sense of nostalgia for an idyllic time when "no one was yet killed in the war." She makes the connection between violence during the war and its consequences for the future even more explicit in her

poem "The Pastoral of the Twentieth Century," when children died after the bombs buried in the field for decades exploded.

Poetic representations of the past render the message that those people were "like us" and appeal to the reader's emotions. Common people act as historical agents who defend their countries in time of war, resist political persecution, or settle new territories. Some of them become collaborators or opportunists, and poets represent their actions from an ethical perspective. In *Marusia Churai*, Kostenko focuses on different generations of Cossack leaders. Baida Vyshnevetsky defended Ukraine from foreign invaders and was executed by the Turks, while his grandson Iarema was fighting against his fellow Cossacks. The protagonist's father participated in national wars of liberation, died as a martyr, and became a national folk hero – Ukrainian travelling bards *kobzari* narrated his story in their *dumas.* Other Cossacks refused to enlist, and Ukraine was pillaged and devastated by the Polish army. Kyiv was burnt to ashes, cultural artifacts were destroyed, and Churai survived the long siege of her native town of Poltava. Kostenko discusses the moral implications of her characters' actions. They appear to be inconsequential and infinitesimal if viewed individually; however, they lead to devastating consequences for the entire nation.

When portraying historical events, poets present their readers with a moral choice. The latter must decide if they should take pride in the historical event or prevent it from happening again. In Atwood's "Historical Notes" in *The*

Handmaid's Tale, the historian Pieixoto fails to sympathize with Offred's fate, and long after the collapse of Gilead, his contemporaries live in a patriarchal society. Certainly, that society is more civilized than the nightmare of a totalitarian state, but its citizens are still facing unresolved social issues. The reader senses that the core of these problems is their inability to relate to Offred's suffering. Pieixoto repeatedly states that he is objective, but his objectivity borders on indifference and refusal to acknowledge the link between the past and the present. Though expressed through the medium of fiction, Atwood's point could be applied to historical poetry. In depicting individual lives in time of change and creating an emotional appeal, it asks for the reader's active involvement. It is as much about the present and about today's citizens, as it is about the past and the people inhabiting it.

The individual (or subjective) element of poetry that finds its expression in a wide spectrum of feelings, such as sympathy, grief, awe, astonishment, or even horror and anger acts as an advantage rather than as a disadvantage of historical poetry. While it might not be accurate in the sense that historians aspire it to be, this genre is more likely to leave an impact on the reader and to evoke an emotional response. The audience will relate to a certain historical event and inevitably compare it with its own circumstances by accepting or rejecting it, manifesting a desire to follow this pattern of life or choosing to adopt a different course of action. Confino comments on this ability of art to "help out" history and enrich our understanding of the past:

> The historical discipline itself is crucial but insufficient to understand the past, for some experiences can only be captured by artistic representations such as poetry, sculpture, painting, literature, and film. This is particularly true for extreme historical events – and for the Holocaust, which is the extreme of the extreme – that call into question our cognitive, imaginative, and emotional abilities to comprehend the world. (9)

In its affinity for dichotomies and juxtaposition of the disparate concepts and forms of reflecting upon the self and the world, historical poetry unites the global and the specific. Aristotle observes, "Poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars" (16). In contrast, many contemporary writers and scholars reject "the universal truth" and emphasize the specific. According to Linda Hutcheon, "The particular, the local and the specific replace the general, the universal, and the eternal" (*Poetics* 99). Poetry depicts the locale where certain historical events occurred. It resists homogenizing tendencies which lead to erasing regional and national distinctions. Historical poems portray every detail, fraction, and figment in such a way that makes these events real and urges the reader to believe the poet and relate to the participants. Wyile maintains that "The roots of history and historical fiction are so often local" (*Speaking* 20). Common people become voluntary or involuntary participants in historical events, subjects and agents, "achieving action and being acted upon" (Tonkin

106). Their actions produce real life, tangible effects for the future generations: by focusing on the specific and the particular, poets emphasize the direct correlation between past events and their consequences in the present.

It is impossible to depict the historical event "as it really was," as Leopold von Ranke outlined the task of the historian (though, again, the latter should aspire for accuracy). However, the poet can provide the historical context in which it took place and recreate the specific locale where people like us were fighting their battles, to use these words both literally and metaphorically. Mikhail Bakhtin believes that the Italian street with its "microscopic" and "random tolling of everyday life" depicted in Goethe's *Italian Journey* signifies "a creative humanization of this locality, which transforms a part of terrestrial space into a place of historical life for people" (34). Bhabha states that such a locale "becomes the site of writing the nation," where "the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process" constituting the performative function of the national narrative (as opposed to the pedagogical, which stands for the idea of the nation "as one") (297). This historical/national space becomes the place where the former and the latter meet and create a coherent whole. Poetry has the power to portray this locale, these individuals, and these historical forces in such a way that a reader feels like a witness or a participant – due to the fact that this complex structure was redeemed and recreated.

Poetry is primarily perceived to be about the experiences, self-reflections, and emotions of an individual, and in the dichotomies of the private/ the public, the individual/ the historical, and the local/the global the main emphasis legitimately falls on the first part. However, poems are written for an audience, a community, the world. As Michael Ryan asserts, poetry is "not just the product of individuals writing individual poems about individual experience" and it should be viewed as a "communal enterprise" (33). Poetry does not produce any profit (or very little), and it has still survived for centuries, having outlived the discourses of usefulness or purpose of poetry. Its death has been predicted many times, and it has occurred many times, if we are to believe the critics. Plato called poets liars and excluded them from his ideal republic; poets have written numerous defences of poetry such as those by Philip Sidney and Percy Bysshe Shelley, to name a few. Somehow, it is still alive and even practised by many (poetry readings, festivals, and websites are only a few forms of its existence and interactions with the audience). It remains marginalized in comparison with fiction and nonfiction, but it is not dying or is likely to die in the near future.

Many poets and critics believe that poetry is one of those activities practised by humans from ancient times, and if we do not cease to be human, it will survive because poetry mainly means self-reflection of every individual and humanity as a whole (Atwood, "Why Poetry?" 11; Paz 159-60; Ryan 33-34). According to Paz, poets are "creators of images" and "images of their creations"

(159). Atwood views poetry as "an uttering, or outering of the human imagination. It lets the shadowy forms of thought and feeling out into the light, where we can take a good look at them and perhaps come to a better understanding of who we are and what we want, and what the limits to those wants may be" ("Why Poetry?" 11). It informs us about our past, acting as a reflection of human imagination and telling us what kind of people we might become.

Poetry provides a link between the past, the present, and the future. The genre renders the particularities of everyday life, being rooted in the local which, in turn, is a space where historical events and national narratives emerge. It is a self-reflection of an individual and humanity which provides us with a medium to question and understand ourselves. It is an "anachronistic" kind of art (using Ryan's term) that survives in the modern world, to add one more to the dichotomies and paradoxes poetry so readily creates.

Women and History:

Theorizing Agency and Re-Creating the Subject

Katherine Binhammer and Jeanne Wood chose Virginia Woolf's final line from *Mrs. Dalloway,* "For there she was," as the subtitle for the collection of articles on women's literary history they edited. The two scholars explain that these lines transform the main character "instantly into history, suspend her in an ambivalent space between presence and absence. They make her the object of retrospection, pointing us back into the text as a kind of invitation to discover

her again in this textual past" (9). The statement "For there she was" reasserts and reaffirms a strong female presence in a specific social and historical context although her creativity was often denied and her voice silenced. Since the 1970s, books on women's history proper and women's literary history proliferated. A lot of research has been done to include the forgotten histories of women into a general history, revisit the established stories, and uncover, unmask, and record the history of oppression. As Laurel Ulrich points out, "The expansion of women's history over the past thirty years is impressive. If Gerda Lerner is right in claiming that the core of women's oppression has been an inability to access their own history, then this explosion of resources may presage more lasting change" (226). Many critics reassess the subject of feminism, which is women, and argue that this term is insufficient, as it does not reflect categories of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality. Judith Butler suggests understanding the subject of feminism as an open coalition where "identities will be instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure (16). This category is inherently political and will never be closed. One of the major premises feminism shares with new historicism is that literary texts act as a means of distributing social power and therefore become material practices that participate in reshaping current political discourse.

While acknowledging the achievements, many critics view the current situation of feminist writing as a "permanent combat," as Julia Kristeva puts it (125), and warn against taking the improved condition for granted since until recently women were excluded from standard histories (Ilič 145). Men were active participants in public life, while women's domain was the private; women were defined primarily by their relationship to men and, to use Carolyn Heilbrun's term, rendered "storyless" (125). Relations of power and inequality determine whose voice is recorded. As Hélène Cixous maintains, "Knowledge is the accomplice of power: that whoever stands in the place of knowledge is always getting a dividend of power," rendering the current task of a feminist writer to show how "all thinking until now has been ruled by this dividend" (322). However, hegemonic ideology is not stable and unified, and it allows for the local sites of resistance to emerge and challenge the master narrative, making the agency of underprivileged or excluded groups possible.

The figure of a woman is often used to represent the nation symbolically, while real women have been denied historical agency and the ability to participate in a public discourse. Wendy Webster analyzed entries in Great Britain's *Dictionary of National Biography* and obituaries in the London *Times*. In the DNB since 1882 to 1901, only 3.5 per cent of entries were on women (125); only in the 1950s were women incorporated into national biographies. Women were deprived of the chance to tell their individual stories and contribute to the history of their countries. To show how women used

history to argue against narrow definitions of womanhood, Ulrich explores the individual stories of three women writers: Christine de Pizan, Elizabeth Stanton, and Virginia Woolf. These authors asserted their place in history "by reading against the grain of existing narratives and by writing new ones of their own. All three breached the equality / difference divide. Their stories told from a female perspective changed presumably universal notions of human behaviour" (Ulrich 37-38). Women's contributions and involvement were revisited and made visible in economic and political realms traditionally regarded as masculine domains. If history is viewed as a power struggle in which competing forces assert their place, literary production becomes one of the main ways to claim this space in the current discourse. It is increasingly important to ensure that women's stories are articulated and take their place among other groups challenging hegemonic ideology.

Women have acquired voice and agency, and written "histories of their own" that will be preserved in the annals of civilization. Nowadays histories of women exist, but, as Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser point out, the full integration of women's history into all kinds of historical writing is still needed, and we should find new tools to subvert the dominant narrative of orthodox history (x, xii). Buried and forgotten stories should be retold and rediscovered, and women should be shown as active historical agents who can narrate their lives and their stories. In turn, these stories should be integrated into a general

history negotiating their place in a contested field of discourse and undermining/reworking/diffusing the structure of power.

Atwood, Akhmatova, and Kostenko create protagonists whose circumstances are similar to those of their fellow citizens, but there is one difference: the former possess a voice, the ability to tell their story. Poetry has a restorative and unifying role, helping the lyrical "I" to rebuild the pieces of her disintegrating consciousness. *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* contains its eponymous subject's stream of consciousness in which Moodie tries to make sense of her new world, violating the boundaries of "the internal/the external," and is able to connect to her adopted land in times of tragedies – the drowning of her son and – symbolically, before her own death. Akhmatova undergoes various stages of grief after her son's sentence, namely denial, the descent into madness, pondering suicide, and finally, her spiritual rebirth. In Kostenko's novel in verse, Marusia's personal tragedy and psychological re-integration parallel that of Ukraine. As the singer-songwriter returns from her pilgrimage to Kyiv and endures the siege and hunger, the liberation war comes to an end and the enemy retreats from her native town of Poltava. Each protagonist has to relate her experience to re-center her split self as the authors of slave narratives narrated their stories to reclaim their humanity.

Debates over the new epistemological tools and the theoretical framework of contemporary feminism attract much attention, in particular regarding its split subject and the construction of gender as a corporeal site of

meanings, revisiting binary oppositions, and redefining the central terms of the discourse of oppression. For Simone de Beauvoir, gender is a cultural project, not a fixed biological determinant. Butler further elaborates that the constraints that produce culturally intelligible sex are political structures, and, paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of agency that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed (*Feminist* 371). She views overcoming binary oppositions not through transcendence, but through innovation. Michel Foucault states that the notion of sex is an artificial unity, the construct of power functioning as "a unique signifier and as a universal signified." He suggests a proliferation and assimilation of binary oppositions including multiple differences, not restricted to the polarity between the sexes (*History* 154). Therefore, "male/female" is no longer regarded as a dichotomy but an infinitely open category, the intersection of multiple social and cultural factors.

Luce Irigaray views the female subject not in terms of binary oppositions, but of disruptive excess, because "within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject" (796). She rejects "every dichotomizing" and opens a different discourse unmarked by the oppressor/the oppressed structure:

> Its function would thus be to *cast phallocentrism, phallocratism*, loose from its moorings in order to return the masculine to its

> own language, leaving open a possibility of a different language. Which means that the masculine would no longer be "everything." That it could no longer, all by itself define, circumvene, circumscribe, the properties of any thing and everything. That the right to define every value – including the abusive privilege of appropriation – would no longer belong to it. (797-98)

The possibility of diffusing and proliferating binary oppositions lies with including new parameters into the subject of feminism (in particular, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation) and leaving this category infinitely open, i.e. subject to constant change, reconstruction, addition, and revisiting. Cora Kaplan describes the subject of feminism as split, fluid, and unstable (245-46), and Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson consider it "a plural and complexly structured conception of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others" which extrapolates not only from the experience of the white, middle-class, heterosexual women, but alters the awareness of the movement in terms of class, race, and sexual orientation (269-70). According to Cixous, "the subject exhibits itself as palimpsest, memory, parchment" (172), allowing for revisions and alterations, and the emergence of new meanings, nuances, and alignments always bearing the imprints of cultural and historical specificities.

Within the evolving and sometimes conflicting concepts of feminism, which are often revisited and redefined, the idea of women gaining voice,

narrating their stories, and expressing their creativity remains as important as it was three decades ago. As Cixous maintains, "First she would have to speak, start speaking, stop saying that she has nothing to say! Stop learning at school that women are created to listen, to believe, to make no discoveries" (*Feminist* 322). The critic made this impassioned plea in 1981, but her argument has not lost its actuality. Traditionally, women's poetry has been praised for being "feminine" and dwelling in the realm of feelings and romance. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, was typically admired "because of her understanding of the depth, tenderness, and humility of the love which is given by women" (Taplin 417). However, if women poets attempted to discuss philosophical and political issues, they were labelled as coarse, unfeminine, i.e. betraying their gender. Kaplan ironically calls it "almost a gentleman's agreement" among nineteenth-century women poets not to share their opinions on political and economic subjects (181). She notes that when Barrett Browning enters the sphere of public writing and touches on the forbidden subjects of patriarchal discourse, she uses the phrase "I write" four times in the first two stanzas of Book I of *Aurora Leigh*, asserting her ability to participate in the intellectual conversation of her time.

Remarkably, the residual structure of this discourse on feminine/masculine writing and the issues male and female authors address exists even today. Atwood discusses the style and language of reviews and comes to the conclusion that "the most books in this society are written by men,

and so are most reviews" ("Paradoxes" 104). She classifies a syndrome of praising women's work as "She Writes Likes a Man," where "the assumption is that women are by nature soft, weak, and not very talented, and that if a woman writer happens to be a good writer, she should be deprived of her identity as a female and provided with higher (male) status" (104). Moreover, the language itself bears connotations where "good" equals "male" and "bad" female; the author suggests developing critical vocabulary devoid of references to this biological difference.

Obviously, the past still affects the present; one of the ways to free ourselves of its grip is to redefine the boundaries of the term "woman writer" and emphasize the role of women as subjects and agents. Again, lyrical poetry allows for multiple possibilities in achieving this task, as it can harmoniously combine the private and the public, effacing/erasing the divide between these two realms. The three authors handle political and philosophical questions in a very private manner, thus appealing to the reader's emotions and sense of justice, empathy, and, overall, humanity. Atwood has produced numerous anti-war poems, where the recurrent theme is the juxtaposition of our safe world with that of the war, negating the assumption that "It happens somewhere else, not here" and "It can never happen here." Akhmatova views herself as one of many Russian women who had to survive a revolution and two world wars in less than half a century. At the same time, she is conscious of her difference. She has a voice and intends to narrate her experience she shares with others. Kostenko

creates a series of poems on the history of the Ukrainian nation where the protagonists are historical women figures or characters of Ukrainian folklore (for example, Marusia Bohuslavka, the legendary figure of the sixteenth century, who was believed to have been captured by the Turks, sold to the harem of the Turkish sultan, and been able to free Cossacks from captivity) (Rodriguez 660). The Canadian, Russian, and Ukrainian poets create female characters possessing historical agency. They simultaneously contribute to building and writing the nation, re-inscribing and redefining gender boundaries.

There has been a proliferation of historiographic and fictional writing aimed at inscribing the category of women in a general history. The master narrative has been revisited and alternative histories writing women into the archive have appeared. However, a more complete integration of women's history is still needed, and new epistemological tools and theoretical conceptual framework are required, namely revisiting the cultural construction of gender as a site of agency and resistance as well as reinvesting the subject with new possibilities and multiple categories which infinitely postpone its closure. Creativity is an important way of asserting female agency – in particular, lyrical poetry with its insistence on the position of the lyrical "I" and the integration of the public and the private offers new possibilities of telling women's histories, re-living, and remembering them.

Chapter II. The Historical Poetry of Margaret Atwood: The Politics of Representing, Recreating, and Witnessing

A common past is one of the key formative elements of national identity. It is a repository of social knowledge, which informs individuals of moral and ethical choices, codes of behaviour, and cultural patterns, since "It serves to enlarge your own, personal experience and to orient contemporary issues, values, and goals" (Bailyn 7). The past explains the present situation and contributes to possible futures. Responses to historical events can vary from national pride and the glorification of past achievements to the conscious decision to make a different moral choice. We find ourselves in "the hermeneutic conundrum," in the words of Elisabeth Fox-Genovese (88). Historical inquiries are complicated by the impossibility of precisely representing the past, scarce and insufficient evidence, inevitable subjectivity inherent in writing, and ideological implications, among other factors. However, Fox-Genovese maintains, "those constraints neither justify our abandoning the struggle nor our blindly adhering to the denial of history" (88). In fact, as Atwood observes, it is crucial for a nation to understand "who and where and when we are by placing a long and hard look at the past" (*In Search* 4). According to her, knowledge of the past is a matter of survival that determines the future of a nation.

By focusing on historical events in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canada, Atwood challenges the master narrative, opposes hegemonic colonial ideology and depicts women as active historical agents. She explores the formative elements of Canadian national identity, such as survival as one of the main patterns in Canadian literature, the identitarian ambivalence of the early settlers, and the duality of their position in Canada. Atwood's protagonists foster love for their new motherland and remain loyal to the Old World. While subverting the colonial and patriarchal discourses, the author creates another master narrative which is necessary for nation building and becomes the dominant discourse itself. After all, as Susanne Gierds states, "Any national identity is an intellectual construct and as such not only malleable, but reflective of particular sentiments and needs at the time of their construction" (2). That is not to say that the past does not produce real-life consequences for the present and the future – there is a tangible, discernible link. Historical accounts serve as "an aide to social cohesion" (Pine, Kaneff and Ryan 9), and they are as important in building the collective national consciousness as the events themselves.

Atwood mapped her Canada and explored unique Canadian cultural archetypes in her *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* published in 1972. In her introduction to the 2004 edition of the book, she notes that she should not have to write this book now as it has been proven that distinct Canadian literature exists and departed from its original pattern of survival (11).

There has been a proliferation of imaginative historical writing on Canadian themes (novels and poetry, in particular) since the 1960s: Atwood herself, Rudy Wiebe, Guy Vanderhaeghe, Leonard Cohen, Michael Ondaatje, Robert Kroetsch, and many other writers have addressed the questions "Where do we come from?" and "Where is here?" at the intersection of postmodern and postcolonial discourses.

One of the focal points of these changes from the survival mentality to an unprecedented interest in Canadian history and culture has been exploring national literary traditions and finding common ground. As Atwood notes, "Having bleak ground under your feet is better than having no ground at all ... a tradition doesn't necessarily exist to bury you: it can also be used as material for new departures" (*Survival* 9). Her theory that every culture has a system of beliefs and symbols derives from the work of Northrop Frye, who deplores the Canadian colonial mentality and compares it to "a frostbite at the roots of the Canadian imagination," resulting in "intellectual prudery," which prevents writers from original, daring thinking and exploring local themes (*Bush Garden* 134). Frye analyzes British and American influences on the Canadian national identity in the 1960s; Canada overcame many aspects of its colonial legacy in the last few decades (for example, in historical fiction and poetry, the focus has shifted from European history to local themes and events). As Rosemary Sullivan argues, "The survival mentality explored in the book is a colonial mentality – the nation cannot act because it sees itself as acted upon, it accepts

the passive role, and with perverse narcissism, perpetuates it" ("Breaking" 106). The essential step in renouncing the passive role and asserting a new, culturally independent self is writing a national narrative composed of a plethora of voices.

"The Hermeneutic Conundrum" versus the Value of History

In her poetry as well as in her criticism, Atwood creates the characters who would adopt a new vision, an original perception of the world, and construct their non-colonial self. Early in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie,* published in 1970, the heroine gains this new perspective:

> I take this picture of myself
> And with my sewing scissors
> Cut out the face.
> Now it is more accurate:
> Where my eyes were,
> Every-
> thing appears. (1)

Atwood states that her generation of English-speaking Canadians – those who were children in the forties and adolescents in the fifties – grew up with the illusion that there was not then and never had been a Canadian literature. There, in fact, had been one; they were just not told about it (*In Search* 15-16). She observes that European history was also regarded more exciting than its Canadian counterpart. For others on more troubled shores were the epic battles,

the heroes, the stirring speeches, the do-or-die last stands, the freezing to death during the retreat from Moscow, while everything was just quiet and well in Canada (*In Search* 18). Colonialism is not satisfied with depriving colonial nations of their past and rendering it insignificant or inferior. As Frantz Fanon asserts, "By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (37). Thus, the task of writing about national history acquires special significance.

When Atwood started writing in the 1960s, she discovered that "there was a whole subterranean Wonderland of Canadian writing that was going on just out of general earshot and sight. It was not large – in 1960 you were doing well to sell 200 copies of a book of poems by a Canadian ("Waterstone's Poetry"). National resurgence took place in the 1960s due to several reasons: the centennial celebrations in 1967, "the government's commitment to subsidize arts nationwide" (Dvorak 165), and most importantly, the sense of mission by Canadian writers to write about Canada.

Every nation defines itself in terms of the past, and by looking at the past, we place ourselves in the present. Atwood asks, "Where did the I of now come from? Nothing is made from nothing, or so we used to believe" (*In Search* 13). She accuses her contemporaries of historical amnesia and unwillingness to learn about the past. As Coomi Vevaina notes, "Like the narrator of *The Circle Game,* she seems to be telling the reader that she wants to break the 'prisoning rhythms' that we, in our 'normal' anaesthetized state, are barely aware of" (97).

As stated above, Atwood always felt that her generation learned more about the history of Great Britain and the United States than about its own. To counter colonial patterns of thinking, Atwood often focuses on Canadian themes in her writing: she addresses the ambivalence of early settlers in the poems "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" and “Migration: C.P.R.” Her characters try to inhabit the alien landscape and impose human order on nature, but instead become invaded by the wilderness. They try to reconcile the mythologies of the Old World with their new experience of living in unstructured space. They do look for the new beginnings, but the two worlds collide, creating a violent duality and splitting the mind. Atwood’s early settlers possess two voices, two identities, and are torn between the hatred of their adopted country and their love for it.

The protagonist in *Journals* certainly suffers from this dilemma and tries to adjust to living in the wilderness. As David Staines points out, Atwood is “the first writer in Canadian literature to evoke an artistic figure from the past” (16). Undoubtedly, Atwood’s character endures physical hardship, but her ultimate test is psychohistorical. She experiences the violent dislocation of a pioneer, trying to profess her love for her new land while the other voice running like a counterpoint claims allegiance to her beloved England.

Many of Atwood’s poems – be they *Four Small Elegies,* about uprisings in Quebec in 1837-1838, or the verse in prose “Marrying the Hangman,” based on a documented story that happened in Quebec in the

eighteenth century – are rooted in Canadian history. Atwood usually provides exact dates and locations, creating a meaningful historical record. To echo Fanon, the artist seeking the truth for her nation turns to the past of her country (42); the subject for the writer is her people (43). Robin Skelton notes that *Journals* "could not have been written anywhere other than Canada, as Candide could not have been written anywhere but in France: [...] The Canada she portrays is a state of mind, a poise, a questioning" (34). Each of Atwood's historical poems has a significant bearing on the present and offers a moral warning of a particularly disturbing and poignant nature. In *Four Small Elegies*, victims become victimizers: the volunteers who carried reprisals against the rebels were Scots from Glengarry, most of them in Canada because their houses had also been burned during the Highland Clearances, an aftermath of the British victory at Culloden (*Poems* 23). It is a historical poem, but its victim-victimizer theme serves as a universal warning.

In many of her poems (*Journals*, in particular), Atwood situates women in history and provides a female perspective on significant historical events, thus offering an alternative story to the master narrative and the version of the dominant group. She contributes to "archival women's history," in the words of Hutcheon (*Poetics* 110) and gives a voice to the marginalized. In the above mentioned "Marrying the Hangman," Françoise Laurent, sentenced to hang for stealing, persuades Jean Corolère, in the next cell, to apply for the vacant post of executioner, and to marry her. As Atwood explains, in eighteenth-century

Quebec the only way for someone under sentence of death to escape hanging was, for a man, to become a hangman, or, for a woman, to marry one (*Selected* 218). Laurent was sentenced to death "for stealing clothes from the wife of her employer. She wished to make herself more beautiful. This desire in servants was not legal" (*Selected* 216). She did escape death, but changed one prison for another, suffering from abuse in her married life. The eighteenth century narrative is juxtaposed with the story of violence the poet's female friend tells her. Suddenly the past is about the present, and the historical event acts as a warning. The leitmotif of this poem is "This is not fantasy, it is history," which means it happened and could happen again, and therefore, a warning is necessary. As Atwood states:

> Such stories are not about this or that slice of the past, or this or that historical event, or this or that city or country or nationality, although, of course, these may enter into it, and often do. They are about human nature, which usually means they are about pride, envy, avarice, lust, sloth, gluttony, and anger. [...] They are about love and forgiveness and long suffering and charity, they are about sin and retribution and sometimes even redemption. (*In Search* 38-39)

Although Atwood advocates for the necessity of learning about historical events and their intrinsic moral value, and in particular about the past of one's own nation, she often questions epistemological tools we use to approach this

intellectual task. As she writes in her novel *Robber Bride*, "History was once a substantial edifice, with pillars of wisdom and an altar to the goddess Memory, the mother of all nine muses. Now the acid rain and the terrorist bombs and the termites have been at it, and it's looking less and less like a temple and more and more like a pile of rubble, but it once had a meaningful structure" (462). The imposing edifice – that of the temple or the actual system of beliefs – has been shattered. Elaborating on this metaphor, we can add that both are constructed in a way that suits the architect. Any historical account is only a reconstruction from the scarce evidence available to us, and this process inevitably includes selection and interpretation by the historian.

Atwood uses a postmodern approach to history in *The Handmaid's Tale*, when it is made clear that Offred's story is a reconstruction in itself. Historians find "some thirty tapes" (we are never told how many exactly); they have organized them into an extremely intricate structure – forty untitled chapters arranged in fifteen labeled sections, with the heading "Night" used seven times. Moreover, Professor Pieixoto, one of the scholars who participated in this process, openly admits that "all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research" (Atwood, *Handmaid's* 314). As Arnold Davidson contends, "The very process of assembling a text or writing the history of any age from its surviving traces means creating fiction" (87). Undoubtedly, historical accounts contain ruptures,

discontinuities, and gaps, making the accurate/singular version of past events unobtainable.

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood states that she discovered three different versions of the famous Kinnear-Montgomery double murder and read many contradictory accounts of the crime; she writes that she has "fictionalized historical events (as did many commentators on this case who claimed to be writing history)" (464). We never find out if Grace actually committed a murder or not. She was represented in the newspaper accounts of her trial as a teenage temptress, a murderer, a devil, or a saint, an innocent victim of circumstance who fled with McDermott out of fear for her own life. Grace's story and her own voice are lost among a variety of interpretations, and, as Coral Ann Howells notes, "Grace has a vigorous resistance to being found out, though whether that is because she is guilty or because she resents being cross-examined by men in authority is never clear" (152). We do not know whose story to believe, and in this case, the historical truth eludes Grace's contemporaries and the subsequent generations of scholars.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*, Atwood certainly pays homage to the postmodern view of history. Witnesses' accounts and historical documents are not always reliable, and historians inevitably use selective and subjective approaches and adhere to their own ideological positions. In spite of all these inevitable imperfections inherent in the nature of historical enterprise, Atwood firmly believes that "The past belongs to us, because we are the ones

who need it" (*In Search* 39). In the words of Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, we need "the past to illuminate the problems of the present and the potential of the future" (216). It might be difficult to depict historical events, but this task is not insurmountable; moreover, it is necessary for the writer to uncover "the buried, the forgotten, the discarded" (Atwood, *In Search* 19) to ensure that the link between the present and the future does not get severed and the correct moral choice is made. Contrary to Davidson's assertions that any act of history writing is invariably fictional, Atwood contends that the poet's role is to "search for the actual" and tell about everyday acts of courage and perseverance. Leaving a historical record becomes a question of personal responsibility:

> Elsewhere, this poem must be written
> As if you are already dead,
> as if nothing more can be done
> Or said to save you. (*Selected* 265)

The poet not only juxtaposes the public and the private and subverts boundaries between these two realms, but her body metaphorically becomes the locus for the historical events she portrays (*Selected* 258). She definitely views poetry as a communal enterprise and argues that literary works have an existence of their own and communicate powerful messages to their addressees.

The Life of Ambivalence:

Nineteenth-Century Canadian History in Atwood's Poetry

In the poem "Migration: CPR," the protagonist travels west in search of an absolute beginning and a new life; she resists the restrictive patterns of thought and "wants to see the world in its first, prehistoric, form" and get back to "Mile Zero" (Sullivan, "Breaking" 109). The New World is imagined, mapped in her mind, and longed for; however, the subject uses the mythology of the Old World to internalize and inhabit her new space. She compares the train to Noah's ark, mountains to the first whales, and trees in Canadian West to the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, though the heroine "knew, no / apples grew there" (*Selected* 27). Paradoxically, and even in spite of her intentions, the protagonist still adheres to the old ways of thinking and familiar metaphors: "The patterns imposed by the brain are both feared and clung to" (Helwig 33). The fishermen sit all day "mending / and untangling their old nets / of thought" both in the old and new worlds, creating the structural framework in the poem and the landscape of the heroine's mind.

Having brought the old patterns of perception with her, the main character also faces a tragic revelation when she discovers that people have already been there and finds initials of lovers on the bedstead and names scratched on the tree trunks. Ultimately, as Sullivan maintains, "The western myth does not work for Atwood's traveller [...]. What Atwood is protesting is the humanization of the world – nature has become sociable, and aspect of

culture" ("Breaking" 109). The old and new worlds collide, and the protagonist's psyche becomes a location where old mythologies and new geographies compete for dominance. Moreover, there is no clear distinction between the internal and the external. The sea is anthropomorphized and refuses to stay in the harbour, and mists become inescapable. In spite of its acculturation, nature is all-powerful, pervasive, and works its metamorphosis on the subject.

Motifs of creation also recur in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer," whose protagonist tries to impose order on nature and build his own new world in a hostile environment that resists him. The land turns into water, a surreal country where everything is unfamiliar and alien to the main character. He is a new Noah, who would have done better if he "stocked his log house boat with all the animals" ("even the wolves," as Atwood ironically comments). He does not order or conquer nature, but instead, he is taken over by the wilderness, the primordial force, "the green vision, the unnamed whale" (*Selected* 50). Sullivan states that "The nightmarish experience of being invaded by the wilderness is something that recurs in Atwood's work" ("Breaking" 108). Like Moodie in Atwood's *Journals*, the pioneer tries to inhabit the alien space, and, like her, he does not fit in. The wilderness defeats external boundaries, conquering his ordered space and invading the character's psyche – hence the title. In Atwood's world, as Helwig notes, "unstructured / space is a deluge," but structured space is a trap (32). Another character, Captain Cook, states:

> Burn down
>
> the atlases, I shout
>
> to the park benches; and go
>
> [...] into a new land cleaned of geographies. (*Selected* 60)

The pioneer loses his battle, and his sanity with it, when he proclaims himself the centre and asserts and imposes himself onto it, instead of trying to integrate and adapt to his new world.

Atwood informs her society of the choices made in the past and influences the decisions affecting the future. Exploring the realms of the public and the private, the poet shows everyday heroes creating the history of her country. She invests her protagonists with agency, undermining the myths of people's inability to change the course of historical events and the passive role of women. Using Hayden White's terminology, we can state that Atwood casts her poems in a tragic mode. Her protagonists survive agonic tests, and there is a sombre reconciliation at the end. There has been a gain in consciousness for the spectators of the contest and this gain is thought to consist in the epiphany of the law governing human existence (White 9). Her characters have to overcome obstacles (both external and internal), and make moral choices that have real-life consequences.

Atwood wrote *Journals* after she had read two books by the nineteenth-century pioneer: *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853). The tragic test of Atwood's protagonist is learning how to

survive in the Canadian wilderness and find a new home in the alien and often hostile space. When her family lost their money, they had to immigrate to Canada; the new reality was the cold, hard work on a farm in the bush and the lack of social interaction with "the refined society" Mrs. Moodie was so used to. She does not fail to align herself with other persons of "respectable connections" for whom "emigration is a matter of necessity, not choice" in the opening paragraph of *Roughing It in the Bush* (xv). Moodie cannot be considered a common woman of her time because she is well-educated and occupies a privileged social position in comparison to the majority of immigrants in that period. However, due to her family circumstances, she experiences the lot of the humble and has an ability and willingness to write about it.

The historical Moodie's attitude to living in her new country gradually changes and contains conflicting, sometimes irreconcilable viewpoints. At first, she admires the grandeur of Canadian nature as a place where people can apprehend God. She laments her fate and tries to warn her British audience against shipwrecking their fortune, bringing her old conventions and "prejudices on issues such as work, class and gender roles" (Dvorak 157). Moodie preserves her attitude of superiority and haughtiness and ridicules her lower-class neighbours. As Marta Dvorak asserts, "Her lofty, declamatory style is interpolated with transcriptions of the authentic speech of the writer's uneducated neighbours, in which the errors in pronunciation and grammar are emphasized the better to mock their pretensions to social equality" (156).

However, there is another, more sincere voice, that of a woman who has to toil on the farm to provide for her children; who endures her neighbours' criticism of her attempts at "Canadian housewifery"; who paints pictures "upon the large fungi, that grow plentifully upon the bark of the sugar-maple" to buy her children shoes (Moodie, *Roughing* 215); who saves her five children from a burning house and manages to keep them warm until her husband arrives with a rescue party. Moodie's test is to survive in the vast alien space, try to inhabit it, and become an integral part of it. This is the aim she aspires to and is never able to achieve completely. She comes to speak fondly of her dear forest home, where she learned the lessons of endurance, hardship, and courage. At the same time, she calls her former dwelling a prison house from which she escaped when her husband obtained the position of Sheriff of Belleville.

Memoirs and biographies were considered a private genre used to relate one's personal experiences. Even when authors write about themselves, they produce texts under specific historical, social, and political circumstances, capturing a moment in history. Moodie does depict mundane events, but she also fills in the gaps, and everyday occurrences become manifestations of significant historical events or social changes. The class hierarchy was less rigid in Canada than in Great Britain, and the Moodies, who lost their fortune, had to face the same hardships when settling down in their new country as individuals of less "gentle birth." Atwood's protagonist's interior monologues portray her day-to-day challenges vividly and present abundant detail. The stories of her

neighbour's daughter jeering at her burned bread (the privileged woman never had to accomplish such tasks by herself before) or planting her own garden become subsumed in the larger narrative of losing her privileged status and conquering the hostile terrain both physically and psychologically. The historical Moodie's self is restrained and self-possessed, whereas Atwood's heroine suffers from a violent case of split identity. Vanja Polic notes, "The self that Susanna Moodie portrays in the sketches is a deliberately construed self, a self-conscious and self-censored revelation of a private self" (166). The nineteenth-century protagonist is bound by Victorian conventions, while Atwood's character is Gothic Mother Nature with "chapped tarpaulin skin" (6) and a face "like a crushed eggshell / among other debris" (17). Moodie's purpose is to entertain her audience in Great Britain and to teach a moral lesson. Atwood aims to recreate the lives of the first women pioneers and to portray the events of Canadian history which did not generate any noticeable interest before, to put it mildly.

Limited in many aspects by her upbringing and the conventions of her class, Moodie still leaves a comprehensive account of her life in the bush as a nineteenth-century pioneer, a wife, and a mother; she narrates the story of her survival and redemption, which appeals to any reader who had to adapt to a new country, learn new codes of behaviour, and work hard to pass any test requiring endurance and perseverance. Moodie's prose is often praised for its unusual frankness concerning her experience, its perspicacity of observation, and its

precise and detailed character portrayal (Toye 530; Thacker 180). Atwood's poems in *Journals* are surrealistic, psychological, and immersed in Moodie's psyche. The real events – fire and plague, children's deaths, departure from the bush – are only starting points that change and transform in the character's consciousness, her dreams, and even after her death in her poetic monologues from underground. As Al Purdy asserts, "In spite of hard physical details [...], these poems make a strange slightly-off-from-reality impression on the reader; Moodie's nineteenth-century prose does not have this ingredient. The poem's impact is in this strangeness: as if Atwood were from Mars and Moodie an Englishwoman of 'gentle' birth" (39). The protagonist suffers from "cultural schizophrenia," dividing her allegiance between England and her new adopted land. The boundaries between the real and the imaginary are blurred and redefined, shattering and disintegrating her psyche.

The Journals is divided into three sections: *Journal I* (1832-1840) begins with the Moodies' arrival in Canada and ends with Susanna's departure from the bush to the town of Belleville. *Journal II* (1840-1871) describes the family's years in Belleville. *Journal III* (1871-1969), in the words of David Staines, "takes her through an estranged old age, into death and beyond" (Foreword xii). Paradoxically, Atwood's Moodie is both an English lady who adheres to class conventions and writes refined verses and a Gothic victim who is inhabited by the wilderness and becomes her own horrifying ghost. Her skin is "thickened / with bark and white hairs of roots" (17), and the human artefacts

she brought from England – exquisite china, Indian shawl, pieces of letters – are all torn and decayed. She is transformed into a mother of "a primordial and metaphoric universe where nothing is destroyed ... it simply assumes another shape, another form" (Foster 8). She becomes an integral part of nature she resisted, eluded and objectified – only to become a locale, a space subsumed by the wilderness.

Moodie experiences a duality in her relationship with the environment she resists, tries to inhabit, and metaphorically recreates. As Sherrill Grace argues, Atwood's double vision is rooted in old subjective-objective dualities – we both see, and, in seeing, create our world and our art – and in Atwood`s concept of the self as not a fixed ego, but a place where things happen, which is changed by things happening in it (16). The first poem of *Journal I* depicts Moodie and her family disembarking in Quebec. The protagonist feels that she does not belong there and compares herself to "a word in a foreign language":

> this space cannot hear
>
> […]
>
> The moving water will not show me
>
> My reflection.
>
> The rocks ignore. (2)

She is a dislocated immigrant, a stranger, and the realities of the Old World – a book, a bag with knitting, the incongruous pink of her shawl – do not fit into the new landscape. Marge Piercy notes that Atwood encompasses a depth of the

personal and social, the historical realized as living pain (58). The immigrants are almost unreal and turn into ephemeral, dancing, weightless sandflies on the hard solid rocks of their new country. As Purdy contends, the Moodie conveyed by Atwood is scared to death of life, but is nevertheless a real person (41). He further asserts, "'After we had crossed the long illness that was the ocean': Victorian-literary Moodie would not say that, but Atwood-Moodie might and did [...] I see sickness of the spirit and endurance. I believe" (Purdy 42). She is conspicuously out of place – both physically and emotionally, and she would never completely assimilate and adjust to life in Canada, in spite of her tireless, numerous attempts to convince herself that the opposite was true.

The place where the main character and her family settle is perceived as "a large darkness," where they hear "malice in the trees' whispers" (5), and the world around them is composed of trees, branches, roots, and tendrils. Moodie herself and her husband are being changed by the wilderness around them, and these transformations are uncontrollable. She is afraid to look in the mirror, and he is compared to the wereman returning from the forest:

> He may change me also
>
> With the fox eye, the owl
>
> Eye, the eightfold eye of the spider. (10)

They depend on being seen by each other and their gazes have the power to transform themselves and initiate metamorphosis. In such a way, they almost become part of the wilderness surrounding them, but at the same time Moodie

feels like an invader who undermines the primordial order which existed for thousands of years. When she walks in the forest, everything moves back into its place after her next step. She is not accepted by the landscape and knows she has to perceive her world differently. She wants to read "the sky's codes," needs "wolf's eyes," and knows "fears hairy as beasts" (5). As Piercy maintains, "Her animals too are something else in their alien and irrational aliveness, as is the landscape itself. Both are at once themselves and transmitters of energy, the doorways to another level of reality at once alien and inner" (60). Atwood ironically comments in *Survival* that animals in English literature often wear zippered suits, speak perfect English, and "are assigned places in a hierarchical social order which is essentially British" (*Survival* 73). In contrast, Canadian stories are often told from the point of view of the animal (74). In the *Journals*, Brian the Stillhunter says that he dies each time he shoots an animal. Atwood's Moodie observes that her husband and other men plant crops and impose order on the wilderness; she senses they do not accept the present, aspire to the future and stability brought by defeating nature, and deny the ground they stand on. However, Moodie herself lets the wilderness invade her and later becomes the Gothic mother figure.

Her world is built upon the oppositions "human-animal," "inside-outside," "winter-summer," "forest-city," but those oppositions are often unexpectedly interchanged and broken, conveying the heroine's bewilderment, loss, and a split state of mind. In the poem "The Two Fires," Moodie praises the

human architecture of the house, square closed doors, proved roofbeams for protecting her family and the fire for giving warmth. Then "the first kind of fire" is suddenly transformed into a destructive force, and the inhabitants barely escape from the burning house. The children dream of green trees, but then they are carried by their mother to the winter forest. Moodie learns the lesson that the human-made/artificial is not always reliable and she perceives that "each danger becomes a haven" (15). Contrary to her expectations and beliefs, the white chaos becomes salvation. The harmony is violated, and the protection and safety turn out to be illusory; people find themselves at the mercy of the forces of nature.

When Moodie describes disembarking in Quebec, it is still warm, but in her mind she already sees omens of winter in the landscape around her. As noted above, the oppositions "inside-outside" and "human-animal" are violated too. Moodie's husband is the wereman coming back from the forest, and she is not sure what he will see when he opens the door (10). These shifts and interchanges culminate in the poem "Departure from the Bush." The new settlers were supposed to inhabit the land; instead, the protagonist says, "In time the animals / arrived to inhabit me and their eyes (green or amber) glow from inside me" (10). She progresses from being "foreign" to the country to "almost learning the lesson" after living in the wilderness for several years. Landscapes attempt to speak to her and she finds herself on the verge of understanding their encoded messages; however, the key word here is "almost." When Moodie leaves for Belleville, her final words are: "There was something they almost taught me / I

came away not having learned" (19). As Atwood notes in *Survival*, in Canadian literature nature is often portrayed as a "hideous monster" (1972, 58). Like in many Canadian David-and-Goliath stories, Goliath, who is Nature herself, the evil giantess, wins according to the expectations. Nevertheless, Atwood explains that nature does not have to be a destructive force if people are willing to adapt and view themselves as an integral part of it, relinquishing their attempts to subjugate and conquer it. She states, "Nature is a monster, perhaps, only if you come to it with unreal expectations or fight its conditions, rather than accepting them and living with them" (*Survival* 1972, 66). Although guilty of unrealistic expectations of her residence in Canada, Atwood's Moodie makes a conscious effort to understand the animated landscape full of encoded messages and foster a new sense of belonging.

Several years later, when she moves to Belleville and is accepted by "the refined society," she goes on a journey to Toronto, with companions, of course (she is no longer alone waiting for her husband to return from the forest) and visits a "lunatic asylum." Atwood has Moodie ascend three floors and observe the patients on each of them. On the last floor, her own repressions and fears manifest themselves, and, once again, the landscape becomes alive and starts talking to her and the rocks "sigh and turn over" (49). Gottfried Leibnitz explicates the philosophy of the Monad in terms of "a house with its division into two floors, one in individual weightlessness, the other in a gravity of mass" (13). As Thomas Peterson writes, "The lower floor of this baroque model is the

public and collective space; the upper floor is the private, the 'upstairs' of the edifice of consciousness." Atwood's Moodie tries to adapt and achieve reconciliation with her new country, but as earlier, in spite of all her efforts, she finds herself waiting for the answers without receiving them: "The air was about to tell me/ all kinds of answers" (49). The meaning is constantly deferred, and epiphany is never gained by the protagonist.

Nevertheless, Moodie achieves partial reconciliation with Canada through tragedy. *Journal II* describes the death of her son by drowning in a river. Having lost her child to the new land, Moodie becomes attached to it and proclaims that she "planted him in this country like a flag" (22). Again, the opposition "internal/external" is employed:

> He, who navigated with success
> The dangerous river of his own birth
> Once more set foot
> On a voyage of discovery
> Into the land I floated on
> But could not touch to claim. (22)

The external world is perilous and threatening. It is the ocean they have to cross and the river her son drowns in. However, it is through this tragedy that Moodie identifies herself with her new land after a long time of being physically in Canada and psychologically in Great Britain. Earlier she felt so displaced and dislocated that she compared the soil beneath her feet to the ocean. The same

phenomenon takes place in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer," but its subject does not find solid land and gets invaded by the "green vision, the unnamed whale" of the wilderness (*Selected* 50). Atwood's Moodie finds home in Canada and achieves integration although it remains incomplete – she suffers from a violent duality and dislocation.

Moodie possesses two voices and experiences two kinds of life. Deprived of her social status and its inherent privileges, she has to overcome the hardships of settling down in a new country and is toiling to feed and clothe her family. One self has manners, paints in watercolours, and composes uplifting verse:

> The other voice
> Had other knowledge:
> That men sweat
> Always and drink often,
> That pigs are pigs
> But must be eaten
> Anyway. (39)

Atwood's refined protagonist has to undergo moral and physical trials and pass the tests of remarkable courage. Though the historical Moodie often adopts a didactic tone in her memoirs *Roughing It in the Bush* and makes it clear that she probably does not deserve these hardships but accepts them with the humility becoming to a Christian, this stance does not diminish the value of her

experience as a pioneer who has to confront an alien terrain and take care of her family, struggling with severe climate, poverty, and psychological dislocation.

For the historical Moodie, art serves a twofold purpose, acting as a healing agent reminding the poet of her former self and preventing her identity from further dislocation. She also wants to tell stories "founded upon real incidents, which [...] represent high moral excellence struggling with the faults and follies common to humanity" (Klinck 14). Though different in their depiction of the same historical events, mainly lives of the first Canadian pioneers, the nineteenth-century Moodie and Atwood share the same purpose. They inform the reader of moral and ethical choices their characters have to make, thus contributing to a larger national narrative.

In *Roughing It in the Bush; or, Life in Canada* (1852) Moodie considers it her mission to warn English noble families against shipwrecking their fortune and coming to reside in the backwoods of Canada (330). In the book's sequel, *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853), the angry narrative voice of the first book gives way to that of a resigned citizen of a new world:

> The sorrows and trials that I experienced during my first eight years' residence in Canada have been more than counterbalanced by the remaining twelve of comfort and peace. I have long felt the deepest interest in her prosperity and improvement. I no longer regard myself as an alien on her shores, but her daughter

> by adoption – the happy mother of Canadian children – rejoicing in the warmth and hospitality of a Canadian Home! (280)

Staines maintains that Moodie embodies the ambivalence of a new settler who has no choice but to confront an alien and frequently hostile terrain (Foreword ix-x). Although the historical Moodie professes her love for her new Canadian home, Atwood detects reserved undertones, another voice running through the immigrant author's book. In spite of Moodie's declaration of love, Canada "is still not a place for an English gentleman," or, presumably, gentlewoman (*Journals* 52). As Purdy points out, "Atwood makes Moodie come to love the country. But I don't think Moodie ever really did. But Atwood does, and that's probably the most love lifting out of these pages of print [...]. I don't believe the double love, only Atwood's" (42). The historical Moodie finds stability and even happiness in Belleville, and successfully continues her career as a writer while Atwood's Moodie lives a dangerous life of a pioneer suffering from a psychological trauma that becomes one of the definitive aspects of her personality. McCombs comments, "You can take the woman out of the wilderness, but you cannot take the wilderness out of the woman" (12). Torn between her two irreconcilable identities, the protagonist in *Journals* possesses a more sincere voice than her nineteenth-century counterpart.

The opposition of culture and nature also refers to the restraints of a male-dominated society and the protagonist's attempts to transcend rigid gender roles. Atwood portrays Moodie's efforts to overcome social conventions, using

the language of patriarchy. Diana Relke explains that female writers learned to create subtexts and subtle meanings because they could not challenge the hegemonic discourse directly. Atwood's language, with its ambiguities and elliptical constructions, reflects this phenomenon (47-48). Moreover, Atwood's Moodie becomes the object of the male gaze, when she emerges in confined spaces, including a mirror and a photograph. When Moodie identifies herself with a vast landscape and is almost liberated from patriarchal restrictions, her husband informs her that they a leaving for Belleville, where the Victorian poet faces the same conventions she was about to overcome. However, as Relke further elaborates, Atwood creates the death-rebirth metaphor and resurrects Moodie's persona: "Atwood has brought Moodie through her search for self and beyond, into an identity that transcends gender and even species distinctions" (65). When Moodie reappears as a ghost in Journal III, she is portrayed as a creator and Mother Nature, who escaped the roles and limitations imposed on her by the dominant ideology.

"Solipsism while Dying" is the protagonist's last attempt to embrace and internalize the world around her, subverting the dualities of "inside/outside" and "wilderness/ordered space." This is the poem about her efforts to find her place of belonging:

> The ears produce sounds
> what I heard I created. (voices
> determining repeating

histories, worn customs)

[…]

The hands produce objects

The world touched

Into existence: was

this cup, this village here

before my fingers. (50)

Finally, she accepts this world as her own: Belleville, Kingston, fields between, Toronto. It depends on her and, when she disappears, it will also disappear. Moodie returns as an old woman on the bus along St. Clair Avenue in Toronto (a popular route in the city). As a true master of metamorphosis and surrealism, Atwood creates a character who becomes the spirit of the country she once loved and hated. The protagonist says that she has her ways of getting through, and one of these ways is certainly through Atwood's poems. The twentieth-century author revived the interest in the Canadian national past and the figure of one of the first women pioneers. Due to Atwood's poems, our contemporaries rediscover and read Moodie's works.

The ending is ambivalent because the modern figure can experience the same violent duality and alienation from his/her land, as Moodie did. The resurrected protagonist addresses our contemporaries:

Turn, look down:

There is no city;

This is the centre of a forest

Your place is empty. (59)

In terms of the tragic narrative mode, Moodie has survived her agonic test, having endured all hardships and risen after the fall. However, she never achieves a complete reconciliation with her country, and even after accepting her circumstances, she is torn between her two voices and two identities.

Atwood addresses the issue of the lost historical memory in her poems *Four Small Elegies.* The British army and an assortment of volunteers carried out reprisals against the French Canadian civilian population around the settlement of Beauharnois, burning houses and barns and turning the inhabitants out into the snow. No one was allowed to give them shelter and many French-speaking Canadians froze to death. The men were arrested as rebels; those who were not home were presumed to be rebels and their houses were burned.

"Beauharnois," the first poem of the cycle, begins with the description of the symbolic bronze clock brought with such care over the sea. This clock ticked "like the fat slow heart of a cedar, of a grandmother" (*Poems* 20), but now time is frozen. Probably, the family line is interrupted because young people perished. Time has stopped for these particular people in this place. Women and children are the weakest:

The women in their thin nightgowns

Disappear wordlessly among the trees.

Here and there a shape,

A limp cloth bundle, a child

who could not keep up. (*Poems* 20)

No one could give them clothes or shelter – those were the orders by the people in power. Atwood writes, "We didn't hurt them, the man said, / we didn't touch them" (*Poems* 20). Are those who witnessed injustice and did not prevent it – or did not get involved in any way – also guilty? Is indifference or cowardice as much a crime as committing the crime itself?

Those in power are described only in a few lines at the end of the second poem, though we know they were the cause of what happened:

Again

Those who gave the orders

Were already somewhere else,

Of course on horseback. (*Poems* 20)

The fourth poem in this section is entitled "Dufferin, Simcoe, Grey," the names of three counties in Ontario, settled around this period. If the first three poems take place in 1838, the last one is set in 1977, the year when *Four Small Elegies* was written. It is about inhabitants of these three places, whose "nets rot, boats rot, and farms revert to thistle," although they can compose beautiful elegies about the past (*Poems* 23). Foreigners and summer people who come and go do not understand these elegies, and the past takes revenge on the present. The settlements are dying because the message failed to reach the addressee and the lesson of the past is not learned.

When writing about historical events, Atwood addresses the issue of representation, focusing on the acts of everyday heroism that require perseverance and willingness to overcome physical hardship. There is nothing heroic or enchanting about this kind of history as opposed to its perfected or commercialized version. In her poem "Comic Books vs History," Atwood depicts Canadian explorers who do not look heroic. They are confined to animal-skin coats and die of scurvy, but they conquer new territories and achieve everyday victories turning the wilderness into a new country; they map their Canada literally and metaphorically. Atwood compares Canadian "real-sized explorers" to American comic book heroes, who are so powerful, flawless, and unreal:

> On the blackboard map your country
> Was erased, blank, waiting
> To be filled with whatever shapes
> We chose:
> Tense
> Needle turrets of steel
> Cities
> Heroes
> Lived there, we knew
> They all wore capes, bullets
> Bounced off them;

from their fists came beautiful

orange collisions. (*Selected* 102)

Real heroes, in contrast, were not so impressive. As Atwood continues:

Our side was coloured in

With dots and letters

But it held only

Real-sized explorers, confined

In animal skin coats.

They plodded, discovered

Rivers whose names we always

Forgot; in the winters

They died of scurvy. (*Selected* 102-03)

Canadian explorers have nothing heroic about them at first sight – the usage of the epithet "real-sized" is ironic and significant. The verb "plod" does not bear any heroic connotations either, and the explorers do not fall in battle but die of scurvy. The reference to the names "we always forgot" is not accidental because people fail to remember their history or consciously choose to utilize it selectively. The poet wants to rediscover her national past and its everyday heroes and recreate them in poetry; however, little archival evidence has survived through the years, which makes the poet's task of writing about historical events even more difficult. The evidence is scarce and fragmented and always insufficient, but the poet's role is to recreate historical events from

fragments and pieces, so the people who contributed to producing history will be remembered in poetry.

Atwood resists the misrepresentation of her country by the Canadian tourist industry and, like in the previous poem, longs for the real. In the poem "At the Tourist Centre in Boston," she satirizes a simplified and commercialized portrayal of Canada aimed at generating profit and compares it to her individual memories of the country with people "climbing the trails" and "splashing in the water" (*Selected* 42). Instead, her country is trapped under glass with entire provinces reduced to their commercial symbols. The author states, "Quebec is a restaurant and Ontario the empty / interior of the parliament buildings" (Atwood, *Selected* 42). This representation is designed to produce a perfect, impeccable version of reality where the smiling family poses and the mother is cooking "by a smokeless fire, her teeth white as detergent" (*Selected* 43). The picture is supposed to look appealing and inviting, but it is so lifeless and immaculate that it produces a surreal and even horrifying impression.

Atwood initiates the process of metamorphosis, and nature itself takes revenge for being entrapped in a false representation. If this simulacrum were true, the citizens would be gone and – of course, Atwood does not stop here and adds a scary element – they would be waiting for tourists and plan "odd red massacres" (*Selected* 43). The manufactured hallucination is unnatural and frightening. Elaborating on this fallacious logical premise, Atwood makes the entire distorted representation more complex and terrifying. If it is true, "Was

the sky ever that blue? Who really lives here?" (*Selected* 42). Atwood deconstructs this "cynical fiction," a place having nothing to do with the real country the poet loves, an image emptied of its original meaning, a signifier without the signified.

"We Are Hostile Nations":
Contemporary Political Events and Archetypal Violence

When Atwood writes about nineteenth-century Canadian history, she evokes historical figures and documented events, such as the uprisings in Lower Canada in 1837-1838. Atwood usually names the places where her heroes and heroines write their historical narratives: Belleville, Toronto, Dufferin, Simcoe, Grey, and other places that witnessed the events formative for the Canadian national consciousness. The poet also addresses contemporary political and social issues, namely the Vietnam War, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the tensions between English and French-speaking Canada in the 1970s when "the nation split like an iceberg" (*Selected* 233), and the erupting civil war and crimes against humanity in El Salvador in 1979-80. Now these events have become history. The leitmotif of Atwood's poetry is that those wars, cases of human right abuses, and acts of unbelievable cruelty inflicted by human beings on each other happened here and now:

> This did not happen last year
> Or forty years ago but last week.
> This has been happening,

This happens. (*Selected* 264)

Each of those events is easily recognized by Atwood's readers, but her poems do not abound in specific details. Though the poem "It Is Dangerous to Read Newspapers" is about the Vietnam War, with its "flaming jungles" and "exploding villages" (*Selected* 46), this war also takes place elsewhere and becomes everyone's responsibility. It is dangerous to read newspapers or to listen to the news because everyone shares collective responsibility and is implicated in all the pain and suffering. Nobody can remain a spectator, a passive observer without feeling guilty after learning about the atrocities. Though originating in her contemporary political issues, Atwood's poems transcend the particular and the national. In *Power Politics*, an archetypal man and woman are engaged in a struggle for power, and this struggle ("sexual politics"?) is repeated in the larger world, where nations are at war; in *Two-Headed Poems*, a family is a "fragile protest" (*Selected* 235) against the threat of nuclear annihilation; in *True Stories*, tortured and mutilated bodies are real, while the notion "struggle for power" remains abstract.

In her collection *Power Politics*, Atwood depicts the world where the lyrical "you" and "I" play war games and fists dominate over language. The attempt to assert superiority, to exercise power politics, over individuals or over nature, must end in disaster (Brewster 36). "You" is Atwood's muse and everyman, a politician and a military officer, who is responsible for creating history. Moreover, children learn about "the destructive games, public and

private, which we play in the attempt to control one another" (Larkin 52). The prevalent mode is that of destruction, and both adults and children play a circle game, the ultimate result of which would be a complete annihilation of the heroine's micro- and macrocosms unless this vicious cycle is broken. The lyrical "you" is the poet's inspiration and creative drive, and the processes of poetic creation and love are interdependent and flawed. Brewster maintains, "He is demanding, 'the sun in reverse' who absorbs the energy of the writer. Something has gone wrong with the whole creative force of the universe, the force behind both artistic creation and sexual love" (36). The poet describes herself and her lover as hostile nations, who "touch as though attacking," whose kindness to each other is a manoeuvre in a struggle for power. Their love, like the planet, with its "fading animals" and "the sea clogging, the air/ nearing extinction," may yet live, if they can give up their war games (Larkin 51):

> Put down the target of me
> You guard inside your binoculars,
> In turn I will surrender
> This aerial photograph
> (your vulnerable sections marked in red)
> I have found so useful. (*Power Politics* 37)

Thus, when Atwood writes about contemporary historical events, she juxtaposes the private and the public, creating the notion of responsibility for the wars and power struggles in the heroine's family and everywhere in the world. Atwood

points out that the title *Power Politics* was a phrase from a letter written by a friend, and the author saw the same phrase the next day in a newspaper. For her the poems exist in that space where the personal and the public overlap (Larkin 51). In the realms of individual and communal experiences, the protagonists' efforts to dominate resorting to any means are futile as their only result is a trace of devastation and a brief shift in the balance of power.

In the poem "Head against White," the lyrical "You" is an officer who is a "casualty / of war that took place elsewhere," the embodiment of a soldier who has been to the deserts and jungles (*Selected* 193). Unlike Atwood's poems about nineteenth-century Canadian history, her recent historical events are taking place on a global scale and are the personal responsibility of the lyrical "I" and "you," who is a soldier, a politician, a government official, and even a superhero who rises above the city "through [his] own split head" (*Power Politics* 5). His essence is war and authority; he is a public figure without a modicum of personal feelings left in him who conforms to societal expectations and does what is required of him: he fights. As Gloria Onley notes, "The theme of *Power Politics* is role engulfment: [...] The self is lost to the social role of romantic lover, warrior, wife, superman: fulfillment means incarnation with the archetype" (72). If the lyrical "you" chooses to repossess himself and restore his humanity, "his death will be sooner" and he will be "lying piled with the others" (*Selected* 124). However, it becomes possible for the protagonist in "Head against White" to repossess himself, regain his humanity, and experience a

symbolic resurrection. In spite of "the layer of trite histories press[ing him] down" (195), the mourned officer in the picture becomes alive and discards scars and medals.

In the poem "It Is Dangerous to Read Newspapers," the writer speaks against the Vietnam War. Like the hero in "Head against White," the writer is also threatened with the loss of her individuality, and her body metaphorically becomes the locus of military attacks and deadly weapons, "a stockpile of chemical toys." When Atwood was writing the poems for her collection *The Animals in That Country*, she was doing her doctoral work at Harvard and vehemently voiced her opposition to the war. In her poems "The Landlady" and "It Is Dangerous to Read Newspapers," Atwood contrasts her sheltered student life with the horrors of the war, reinforcing the notion of personal responsibility and individual choice not to participate in destructive games, prevent tragedies from happening, and thus create a different future. She establishes a symbolic connection between her own actions and the events during the war, which is about to become history:

> Each time I hit a key
> On my electric typewriter,
> Speaking of peaceful trees
> Another village explodes. (*Selected* 46)

Family becomes a unit where the same games of destruction are played by the adults who do not realize that their children might be learning more about power

struggles than it might seem at first sight. As Piercy asserts, "Children learn fear from the adults, learn defences and weapons, learn to keep others at a distance, learn to control, define, keep out, destroy" (56). Adults build their defences in an enclosed and confined space, a gothic room with multiple mirrors they cannot escape from; they are, writes Atwood, "neither joined nor separate". Their children dance in circles on the lawn, "but there is no joy in it" (*Selected* 16). The protagonist wants to break the circle; as Sullivan observes, the main purpose is to disrupt the narcissistic patterns of the circle game and understand others ("Breaking" 114). Atwood's poems become such an attempt at disrupting the repetitive, harmful process, establishing new lines of communication, and initiating a dialogue instead of a self-involved, self-centred monologue.

Happy family life is not portrayed as permanent or at least long lasting; rather, it is a brief glimpse of hope, a heroic attempt to celebrate when outside "geography is crumbling, the nation / splits like an iceberg" (*Selected* 233). "Solstice Poem" was published in 1978 in the collection *Two Headed Poems* and addresses national and global instability, namely the tensions between French and English-speaking Canada and the threats of the nuclear age. This poem was written in the aftermath of the turbulent events of 1970s, namely the October Crisis, when the *Front de libération du Québec* kidnapped British trade commissioner James Cross and Quebec Liberal politician Pierre Laporte, and executed Laporte, which led to the War Measures Act being invoked by Pierre Trudeau (Kröller 5). As Eva Marie Kröller points out, 450 people were arrested,

many of them prominent members of Quebec's cultural community (5). In "Solstice Poem," the protagonist's safety is only temporary. She does not want to be involved, but it is impossible to stay protected for a long time when there are wars everywhere. Her husband is a "onetime soldier," and her daughter is growing up in the world where it is impossible to be human and not to be destroyed. Non-involvement is not a choice – other women or children did not want to be involved either, but they became victims and casualties of the war. The Christmas tree is the poet's "fragile golden protest against murder" (*Selected* 235), and the only thing her family has is hope. Familiar expectations are also subverted in the poem "Christmas Carols," which offers an account of acts of unthinkable cruelty towards women and children during the war, when "Children do not always mean hope" (*Poems* 70) and the notion of motherhood is not always sacred.

Atwood not only juxtaposes the public and the private, the personal and the political but also amalgamates these realms when her protagonist literally experiences the separation from her beloved at different historical times, from the Middle Ages to the Second World War until the time when the poem was written and the threat of nuclear annihilation was imminent. The poet becomes an archetypal woman, who always waits while her husband goes to war and returns injured or dies. This part of the story never changes, but the accompanying details vary. She looks up from her embroidery as he rides to the mountains; she drives to the airport in her factory overalls and receives a

telegram three weeks later; finally, "there are only seconds / between the warning on the radio and the / explosion" (*Selected* 123). The situation becomes tragicomic when the historical man and woman follow the same patterns of behaviour throughout centuries, but the time between leaving for war and the message about the hero's death shortens dramatically. At first, it is several years, then eight months, then three weeks and, ultimately, seconds.

Atwood's characters act out the same tragic scenario faster and faster, seemingly lacking power to change it. As George Woodcock asserts, "Though the past permeates the present, the present hastens with ever greater speed into the future," adding that the "extraordinary metamorphic poem […] in *Power Politics* suddenly expands the private war between lovers into the universal war that is history" (128). Atwood compares history to Ixion, the wheel of endless repetitive punishment in Greek mythology. According to her, people make the same historical mistakes and are unwilling to learn from them. Unfortunately, in the modern myth Atwood's female protagonist becomes "a Penelope whose Odysseus never returns" (Woodcock 128). Like in her collection of poems *The Circle Game*, the poet claims that the vicious cycle should be broken.

History is not happening somewhere far, and it is only a matter of time before tragic political events unfold here and now. Somehow we believe that acts of violence and crimes against humanity occur in the margins of newspapers; it has become commonplace to say that we are desensitized to violence. Atwood ironically comments, "They shot him. That was expected"

(*Selected* 257). The poet makes her lyrical "you" a participant who does not believe that it is happening to him/her. Moreover, her character is responsible for these horrible events because he/she let them happen by failing to empathize, to get involved, and to facilitate possible changes. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred always thought that acts of violence occurred somewhere else (in the newspapers, on TV, but not in her life). Atwood states that citizens allowed the totalitarian turnover to happen because they were indifferent and participated only in a few protests. In the words of Aunt Lydia, "Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (*Handmaid's* 66). By distancing themselves from political and social problems and refusing to rectify them, the characters allow these issues to become grave and eventually face the detrimental consequences of their non-involvement.

Geographically, these wars and crimes against humanity are taking place in Latin America in the late 1970s. In her collection of poems *True Stories*, Atwood reinforces the idea that the crimes were not committed hundreds of years or even decades ago – they happened last week, they are happening at this very moment. Atwood learned about the cases of abuse and torture in the course of her Amnesty International work, ten years of travelling throughout the Caribbean, and from such friends as the poet Carolyn Forché, to whom she dedicates the poem "Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written" (Sullivan, *Red Shoes* 326). Forché travelled to El Salvador in 1979 when the first coup against the government took place. As Steven Ratiner

explains, “For a year she met with people from all around El Salvador, worked for the Archbishop Romero Church Group, [and] documented horrifying cases of human rights abuses”. When she returned to the United States, Atwood helped her to publish a collection of political poems *The Country Between Us*. In the poem dedicated to Forché, she states that the poet’s role is to witness and create a historical account for her contemporaries and future generations. However, people are still dying in spite of statistics, litanies, and our words; the least the poet can do is empathize and speak about it. The poet should write about these events as if he/she were immune: as if nothing could be done to save him/her, so the poet can tell the truth. Atwood states that in safe countries many people would not listen to the writer, and in unsafe countries the price for writing this poem will be an untimely death:

> Elsewhere, this poem is not invention.
>
> Elsewhere, this poem takes courage.
>
> Elsewhere, this poem must be written
>
> Because the poets are already dead. (*Selected* 265)

The poet’s task of witnessing in *True Stories* echoes the central idea of the collection of poetry Forché compiled and edited: *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*. As mentioned earlier, Atwood also warns her contemporaries against “historical amnesia” and advocates for the conscious act of remembrance. No matter how tragic the events depicted in *True Stories* are, how unbearable and horrifying the accounts, and how gruesome the facts,

Atwood still restores hope in the last poem of this collection. “Last Day” is about love, regeneration, and rebirth. In spite of her assurances that “this is the last day of the last week” and the ever-present sense of danger, there is a clear message that there will be a new beginning, a clean slate. As Atwood writes,

> [...] This egg
> in my hand is our last meal,
> you break it open and the sky
> turns orange again and the sun rises
> again and this is the last day again. (*Selected* 276)

In contrast to the much needed glimpse of hope at the end of this collection, the pervasive tone is one of horror and desperation. Some poems are written from the point of view of the victim while some are about the man who cleans the torture chamber and tries to convince himself that he is not complicit in these crimes; however, he might be the next victim. As Ann Mandel asserts, “The power of these political poems of Atwood’s comes from their insistence that torture is not abstract but physical, that bodies are flayed, beaten, burnt, sliced, torn [and] the will to power has more to do with bodily knowledge, desire, and control than with abstract justification” (248). Violence is often directed towards women, and Atwood describes chastity devices, rapes, and torture. Again, when there is war, there are no sacred notions, and the poet’s question sounds particularly grim: “Who invented the word *love*?” (*Selected* 261). As Michael Foucault writes in *Power/Knowledge*, “The political significance of the problem

of sex is due to the fact that sex is located at the point of intersection of the discipline of the body and the control of the population" (125). Atwood's poems elicit a strong emotional response from the reader, helping the poet to achieve one of her main goals – to advocate against indifference and refusal to deal with political issues unless individuals are faced with them directly and become victims themselves.

The feelings of love and care for the protagonist's family intensify as an opposition to death looming everywhere and appearing to be the dominant mode of existence. As Mandel maintains, "Every moment, every poem, is the poet's last, as every second may be the last for those she loves. Death is rooted in earth and grows up like mushrooms, to be eaten at every meal, which is also the last" (250). Even love poems are permeated with a sense of shared sadness and guilt, an individual responsibility for collective mistakes. The poet asks her lover:

> ... How can I justify
> This gentle poem then in the face of sheer
> Horror? (*True Stories* 34)

Unfortunately, "true stories" are not new, and the struggle for power and the violation of moral boundaries and human rights are old and recurrent themes in history. These stories might not seem true because it is painful to believe in them, and cruelty and death are almost "absurd in their horror" (Woodcock 140). The same idea – crimes against humanity are happening here and now – is

reinforced when the poet depicts modern crime. She meets a man who sells machines for torture at a party. He only sells them, distancing himself from his victims and referring to them as impersonal and faceless. The poem has a casual ending: "Why was he at that party?" Once again, the poet juxtaposes the ordinary and the everyday with the political and the historical. The moral and ethical decisions contributing to the functioning of our society are made on a daily basis by common people who act as subjects and agents facilitating change and choose not to remain indifferent.

To conclude, Atwood emphasizes the importance of narrating her country's past, thus locating her nation in the historical continuum and creating the link to the present and the future. Writing about Canadian history, she underscores the importance of building a distinct non-colonial identity and asserting a culturally independent collective self. The poet writes about historical events from a female perspective, offering an alternative voice and writing women in the history of her country. In her "psychohistories," Atwood explores the historical patterns of Canadian culture, such as the seemingly irreconcilable dualities and violent ambivalence of early settlers torn between their love for England and their attempts to inhabit the vast, alien, and often hostile space of the new country, demonstrating moral and physical courage in the face of hardship. In her poems about contemporary historical events, she juxtaposes the public and the private and often amalgamates these two realms. Her protagonists fight their power battles on a global, national, and personal

scale, destroying their relationships and the world around them. Atwood responds to crucial political events – omnipresent wars, the tensions within her nation and the threat to its unity, and cases of human rights abuses – with the underlying generic message. These power games are destructive and may prove to be fatal unless the vicious cycle is effectively broken.

Chapter III. The Ethical Dimensions of History:

Anna Akhmatova's Poems of Memory

Anna Akhmatova adopts a conscious approach to the use of poetry as an archive of memory. She constructs her own poetic identity, the mythology of herself as a writer whose role is to remember the political events she witnessed and narrate the history of her nation. Her poetry becomes a symbolic space where these tragic actions unfold, and acts as a discursive function generating new meanings and investing its protagonists with agency. Having survived the First and Second World Wars, the October Socialist Revolution in 1917, and Stalin's repressions, Akhmatova creates historical accounts that have an ethical dimension and offer alternative versions of history different from the dominant discourse. As Frances Pine, Deema Kaneff, and Louise Ryan state, "By keeping alive and reiterating counter memories, by producing and reproducing interpretations which challenge the hegemonic account, individuals and groups outside the official corridors of power offer alternative routes to legitimacy, and alternative, if often muted or hidden, criteria for shared identity" (4). Although Akhmatova transcends ideological and political barriers, she internalizes the elements of the dominant ideology by categorizing her protagonists (and her readers, for that matter) as the Russian people, erasing the differences between ethnic and national groups. For example, in the poem "Courage," which I further discuss in

more detail, Akhmatova states that her fellow citizens should preserve the Russian language during the Second World War (*Poems* 124).

Frequently disrupting the current political master narrative and reclaiming their space among oppositional discourses, Akhmatova's historical poems still operate within the limits of an established cultural tradition. The poet builds a poetic identity claiming to write for her people and to preserve cultural values in spite of political cataclysms, presenting poetic agency as a spiritual and purely symbolic alternative to the imposed mechanism of violence and terror. She views the Revolution of 1917 as a rupture in history and a threat to the very existence of Russian culture when the regime of the Red Terror claims the deaths of millions. Akhmatova believes that a poet has to become a national historian when official records are non-existent or intentionally erased. The Silver Age, with its proliferation of experimental and innovative art forms, becomes the contextual dichotomy of the cruelty and tragedies brought about by political repressions. Akhmatova narrates the myth of a poet who transcends chaos and creates a spiritual alternative to present-day destruction. In her poem "Prehistory," for instance, she "mythologizes history, presenting the reader with an invented past which reveals the point of origin of present reality. The ontological landscape is peculiarly confused, as Dostoevsky is cast as the creator of the world in which he was born" (Harrington 148).

According to the Russian literary tradition, it is almost expected of a writer to oppose the current regime, fight for political freedom, and ultimately

become the victim of the oppressive system. As the poet Maksimilian Voloshin writes,

> Темен жребий русского поэта:
> Неисповедимый рок ведет
> Пушкина под дуло пистолета,
> Достоевского на эшафот. (221)
>
> The lot of the Russian poet is grim:
> Inscrutable destiny is leading
> Pushkin to the barrel of a gun,
> Dostoevsky to the scaffold.

While this role is culturally and symbolically significant, it is also somewhat limiting and outlines only one path among the numerous possibilities offered by a poet's creative gift. Harrington further elaborates that Dostoevsky is "identified as a convict, a victim of state violence, and his mock execution on Semenovskiy Square after his arrest is mentioned specifically as having informed his art …. Dostoevsky's near-death experience prefigures the real deaths of twentieth-century writers at the hands of the state" (148). Kostenko employs the same strategy when she depicts the trial of Marusia Churai, alluding to repressions of Ukrainian intellectuals in the 1970s. Her protagonists, Cossack leaders, die protecting their country as many of the author's contemporaries were executed, imprisoned, or exiled.

The Silver Age and the "Real Twentieth Century": Historical Catastrophes, Disrupted Traditions

Akhmatova contrasts an idyllic, pre-revolutionary past with the chaotic and violent present, exploring the modernist notion of the poet as a creator, whose agency is the only alternative to destruction. As a young poet, at the beginning of the twentieth century Akhmatova contributed to the unprecedented cultural resurgence of the Silver Age of Russian poetry. The artistic achievement of this era is often compared to Pushkin's Golden Epoch and associated with the names of Alexandr Blok, Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, and many other prominent writers. As Boris Gasparov contends, "The Silver Age symbolically bowed down to its hallowed predecessor, a gesture in which a nostalgia for the unsurpassable harmony of the past was underlain by the awareness of the superior emotional energy and intellectual maturity of the modern" (1-2). Books of poetry became bestsellers, *Ballets Russes* gave its stunning performances, and a burst of creativity in the visual arts resulted in a plethora of avant-garde movements, most notably Cubo-futurism and Suprematism. Akhmatova started as an Acmeist, capturing and recording "the moments of history," the glamorous and decadent St. Petersburg of the Silver Age, over which "a silver moon hung frozen" (*Poem without a Hero* 165). She was born Anna Gorenko and initially used this name to sign her poetry, but her father, a naval officer, told her that she brought shame upon their name by

pursuing a literary career. In 1911, she adopted the pseudonym Akhmatova, the name of her Tartar maternal grandmother. Nancy Anderson views this decision as an act of defiance and states that Akhmatova "disowned the entire masculine side of her lineage" by making this choice (3). This pen name sounded distinctly foreign and exotic, attracting public attention and capturing readers' imagination. Before 1917, the dominant themes of her poetry continued to be mainly private, although she often juxtaposed her peaceful life with the tragic historical events before the First World War. Her chamber-like voice and lyric tones give way to epic motifs, and Akhmatova becomes a poet who participates in major historical events and creates a record for her contemporaries and future generations.

In 1912, Akhmatova, Nikolai Gumilyov, Osip Mandelstam, Sergey Gorodetsky, Mikhail Zenkevich, and Vladimir Narbut established the literary movement Acmeism, which focused on present-day reality, as opposed to Symbolism, with its emphasis on the mysterious and the inexplicable. Symbolists considered ordinary life to be mundane, boring, and lowly, while the guiding principles of Acmeism were precision, clarity, and "equal attention to all facets of life, small, minute, or great" (Pavlovsky 27)[1]. The name of the school is derived from the Greek word *acme*, the highest point of development or achievement. Acmeists viewed themselves as architects ordering chaos by means of art and (re)creating moments of individuals' existence – their everyday

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the translations are mine.

life or the significant historical events they participate in – turning chaos into a cosmos; therefore, a stone becomes a recurrent symbol in Mandelstam's poetry, and a house is a leitmotif in Akhmatova's works. N.G. Poltavtseva comments on Akhmatova's ability to capture a particular segment of life, "naming it into existence" (47). The members of this movement adopted a prose-like style and the realistic mode of writing. Akhmatova continued the tradition of Pushkin's and Dostoevsky's prose with her attention to the everyday, meaningful detail, and her portrayal of St. Petersburg in the 1910s. Although she eventually outgrew Acmeism, she never renounced its fundamental principles and remained faithful to them.

Akhmatova published her first collection of poetry, *Evening*, in 1912, and her second volume, *Rosary*, in 1914, quickly becoming popular as a poet of unrequited or unhappy love and leading many women authors to imitate her style. Her husband Nikolai Gumilyov, a famous poet by that time, supported and encouraged her, which, as Anderson points out, was remarkable for that period (12). She would often read her poetry at The Stray Dog cabaret, and she was so expressive that Mandelstam compared her to the famous actress Rachel playing Phaedra in his poem dedicated to Akhmatova (117). Benedikt Livshits describes nights at this bohemian café: "The program varied, from Pyast's 'On the Theatre of the Word and the Theatre of Movement' to 'musical Mondays,' Karsavina's dancing or a banquet in honour of the Moscow Art Theatre... The main substance, however, was not the planned part of the program but the

unscheduled happenings which lasted all night" (qtd. in Woroszylski 137). For Akhmatova herself, these evenings will later come to symbolize her youth, her talented, extravagant and rebellious friends, and the whole epoch of the Silver Age, which was abruptly interrupted by the First World War and the October Revolution. As she writes,

> Да, я любила их, те сборища ночные,-
> На маленьком столе стаканы ледяные,
> Над черным кофеем пахучий, зимний пар,
> Камина красного тяжелый, зимний жар,
> Веселость едкую литературной шутки
> И друга первый взгляд, беспомощный и жуткий. (*Lyric* 188)

> Yes, I loved them, those nightly gatherings –
> The icy glasses on the little table,
> Over the black coffee a fine, fragrant steam,
> The red fire's roaring, winter heat,
> The merriment of caustic, literary jests,
> And a lover's first glance, terrifying and helpless. (*Complete Poems* 611)

The speaker's bohemian life was marked by a sense of an impending catastrophe. The footsteps of "the real twentieth century" – "not what the calendars say" – (*Poem without a Hero* 166) echoed in the events of Bloody

Sunday, when the workers participating in a peaceful demonstration and carrying icons were shot at and a hundred were killed. Another event of those years that changed the lives of the Russian people was the Battle of Tsushima (1905), during the Russian-Japanese War, in which the Russian Navy suffered a crushing defeat and numerous casualties. As Anderson argues, this "Russian naval disaster [...] further undermined tsarism's already declining prestige and underscored the rise of Japan as a new, non-European world power" (201) and was one of those tragedies which predated the collapse of Old Europe in 1914.

Akhmatova did not depict any major historical events in her poetry before 1917. She was famous mainly for her love poems and was erroneously criticized for them when she started addressing political events in her writings. Since the mid-1920s, she was fiercely censored and eventually silenced altogether, so many people who did not have access to the retyped poems circulated among the Russian public would have a misguided notion of her as a poet with diary-like verses – a version of her younger self, which ceased to exist having been superseded by the writer who chose to record the history of her country in her poetry. Akhmatova writes about this shift in her creative oeuvre:

> Из памяти, как груз отныне лишний,
> Исчезли тени песен и страстей.
> Ей - опустевшей - приказал Всевышний
> Стать страшной книгой грозовых вестей. (*Lyric* 117)

Like a burden henceforth unnecessary,

The shadows of passions and songs vanished from my memory.

The Most High ordered it – emptied –

To become a grim book of calamity (*Complete Poems* 451)

Historical themes emerge later in her poetry when she is able to look back at the past and speak about the events significant for her generation. For example, the Battle of Tsushima reappears later in her poem *The Way of All the Earth,* written in 1940, in which she recollects the moment when she first heard of this disaster, which signified the beginning of the end of the Russian empire. *Varyag (Viking)* and *Koreets (Korean)* were the battleships that sank: "Там ласточкой реет/ Старая боль..." (*Lyric* 322) ("An old pain arises / Winged like a bird") (*Way* 146). Akhmatova contrasts this atmosphere of impending doom and forthcoming historical catastrophes with the beauty of artistic achievement and the freedom of creative expression flourishing in the cultural capital of Russia, St. Petersburg, during the Silver Age.

Although Akhmatova starts addressing historical themes at the outbreak of the First World War, her early poems bear the imprint of the cultural epoch, possessing the Acmeist quality of capturing and thus celebrating day-to-day existence. She also blends and juxtaposes the present, the past, and the future – the feature that becomes dominant in her late poetry, in particular *Poem without a Hero*. In her poem "My heart beats calmly, steadily," Akhmatova writes about her time, her contemporaries, and her love: "Ведь под аркой на Галерной /

Наши тени навсегда" (*Lyric* 71) ("Under the Galernaya Arch, / Our shadows, for eternity") (*Complete Poems* 355) – this fleeting moment is recreated in her poetry with precision and clarity. After this ritualistic act of remembrance, she does not fear the forthcoming long years. This meeting belongs to the past, but it has a life of its own in memory and poetry, agency, and the future. When she looks back from the future, this particular time bears a premonition of the events that are about to happen. Paradoxically, it is a moment from the past which has a distinct quality of an unmediated presence, of here and now. The past is reflected in the future, and this moment is inscribed onto the present forever; the three time dimensions mirror one another infinitely and indefinitely, creating a fourth timeless space, a cultural continuum. Significantly, these poetic events take place in St. Petersburg, under the Galernaya Arch, near Letniy Garden, and under the cold smile of Emperor Peter the Great. Akhmatova writes about the major historical events of the twentieth century, and she travels freely in the dimension of time, but the central locale of her poetry always remains St. Petersburg/Leningrad.

As mentioned above, the Silver Age was an epoch of drastic contrasts, namely cultural life at the peak of its development, bohemian excess, and a sense of an imminent political upheaval. The nobility led a life of luxury, the royal family celebrated the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty in 1913 with a series of spectacular cultural events and military parades, while the majority of the population lived in abject poverty and was quickly losing trust in

the tsar in his traditional role as a leader and protector due to numerous losses in the Russian-Japanese War and violent methods of doing away with any political dissidence. Elaine Feinstein describes the celebrations of the royal jubilee in St. Petersburg, which were taking place against a backdrop of rapidly growing social unrest:

> Everything was done to impress foreign and provincial visitors. Electricity illuminated the Winter Palace, the golden spire of the Admiralty arch, other columns, arches, and double-headed eagles. The rich dressed with flamboyance. At one opera house, in 1913, for a performance of Glinka's patriotic *A Life for the Tsar*, the boxes blazed with jewels and tiaras. For the nobility, most of whom lived on or near the Nevsky Prospect, there were balls and banquets. Everywhere military music celebrated the absolute rule of Nicholas II, and the magnificence of his empire. (2)

In her poem "Russian Trianon," written between 1925 and 1940, Akhmatova depicts peaceful scenes of Tsarskoe Selo (literally translated as the Tsar's Village, as it used to be the residence of the imperial family and is famous for its palace and beautiful parks) and the historical events that shook Europe in 1914-15:

> И рушилась твердыня Эрзерума,
> Кровь заливала горло Дарданелл,

Но в этом парке не слыхали шума,
Хор за обедней так прекрасно пел (*Lyric* 193)

The fortress of Erzurum was crumbling,
Blood flooded the Dardanelles,
But in this park the noise was not heard,
And the choir was singing so splendidly.

The characters in the poem prefer to live in blissful oblivion when catastrophic events are taking place in a different locale (for example, the Dardanelles, where the Allied forces led an unsuccessful military operation against the Turks to ease the pressure on the Russian Army, or the city of Erzurum on the Caucasian front, which was then part of Turkey and was captured by the Russian Army in 1916). If the tranquility of Tsarskoe Selo was far away from the horrors of Russian-Turkish warfare, in the fourth stanza Akhmatova refers to the First World War, which had a much larger impact on Russia and caused losses unprecedented in modern history:

Прикинувшись солдаткой, выло горе,
Как конь, вставал дредноут на дыбы,
И ледяные пенные столбы
Взбешенное выбрасывало море —
До звезд нетленных – из груди своей,
И не считали умерших людей. (*Lyric* 194)

Pretending to be a soldier's wife, grief was moaning,
The dreadnought reared like a stallion,
And the roaring sea was throwing its icy waves
From its bosom to the immortal stars,
And nobody counted the dead.

The setting of the first stanza resembles a painting by a court artist portraying elegant ladies walking in the park of Tsarskoe Selo, but then the narrative focus shifts, giving way to a fresh, unmediated young voice relating the poet's fascination with "winter lights, darkness, and languor." In turn, this narrative voice is superseded by that of the older poet giving a panoramic picture of the warfare Russia was engaged in during the years of 1914-1916. Ending the poem on a tranquil and solemn note, Akhmatova invokes the cultural figure of the past, the shadow of young Pushkin leaning over the volume of Apuleius. In such a way, Akhmatova again blends her private memories with the public realm of Russian culture. She grew up in Tsarskoe Selo (Anderson 3), where Pushkin attended the lyceum, a privileged school for the nobility, and his presence in the park is a leitmotif in her literary works. In the poem, the nineteenth-century writer's name becomes symbolic of the preservation not only of human lives, but of the cultural and moral categories by which her contemporaries should abide.

Unlike other poets, who perceive the First World War as a test of their patriotism and courage, Akhmatova regards it as a pointless murder of millions of Russian people. In "July 1914," she depicts a Russian village where "Над ребятами стонут солдатки, / Вдовий плач по деревне звенит" (*Lyric* 105) ("Soldiers' wives are wailing for the boys, / The widows lament keens over the countryside") (*Complete Poems* 429). The poem contains folk and religious motifs which place this tragedy among other wars and political upheavals the country suffered throughout the centuries. Instead of rain, blood is shed on the fields, and the holy cripple prophesies "глад, трус, мор" (famine, earthquakes, and death). The poet uses archaic words that, together with parallelism between the realm of nature and the protagonists' emotions, evoke Old Slavic epic poems written centuries ago (for example, *The Song of Igor's Campaign* of 1185). Akhmatova states that Russia will be saved because the Mother of God will spread her white veil over people's sorrows. As Roberta Reeder explains, "The gesture refers to the Russian Orthodox holiday of Pokrov, which commemorates the legend of the Madonna appearing to Andrew, a saint in a church in Constantinople. By extending her veil over the congregation, the Madonna conveyed that she would forever be protector and intercessor of her people" (71). People's suffering is compared to that of Christ, and the poem ends on a tragic but poignant note.

Historical events are used to create an emotional appeal through placing a significant emphasis on the notions of national pride, cultural traditions, and

continuity. Employing Old Slavonic terms, including “супостат” (enemy), Akhmatova states implicitly that Russian soldiers defended their country for centuries and they will obtain victory in this war:

Только нашей земли не разделит
На потеху себе супостат:
Богородица белый расстелет
Над скорбями великими плат. (*Lyric* 105)

But the enemy will not divide
Our land at will, for himself:
The Mother of God will spread her white mantle
Over this enormous grief. (*Complete Poems* 429)

The poet’s approach, reflecting and enabling the master narrative, poses the danger of producing empty political rhetoric. Unquestionably, the poem contains several recognizable elements of the constructed national myth and political discourse, in particular the binary opposition of Russian warriors versus the invader portrayed as the other causing distress and devastation, a sense of unity in times of disaster, and Orthodoxy as a cornerstone of the tsarist Russia. In spite of these factors, the poem reclaims the space of the personal and the psychological, transcending concrete historical circumstances.

The main focus of “July 1914” is not on the soldiers fighting in the war, but on the wives and widows left behind and suffering a profound emotional

loss. Akhmatova blends the categories of the personal and the collective, situating the events in the most ordinary setting, a village during harvest time, and juxtaposing abstract concepts such as a sense of cultural continuity with the feelings of mourning and bereavement. The scholars belonging to the French Annales School believe that one of the main objectives of historical inquiry is to "document, describe, and analyze the history of human experience as it was lived, at the most mundane level" (Childers and Hentzi 138). Although the poem contains cultural connotations and religious references and the poet follows narrative conventions of Old Slavonic literature, the main message of personal grief and unrectifiable damage caused by the war overcomes national boundaries and canonical restrictions.

In her poems written during the First World War, Akhmatova creates an idealized shared past to instill national pride and to establish a sense of unity and continuity, casting the archetypal role of a soldier and employing extensive references to the communal practice of the Orthodox faith: "Он божьего воинства новый воин, / О нём не грусти теперь" (Lyric 107) (He is a new warrior in God's army, / You should not mourn him) (146). She alludes to the Russian tradition of granting sainthood to military leaders, dating back to the early stages of the Russian state. For example, Alexander Nevsky, a Russian Prince who defeated the Germans in 1242, was subsequently canonized. However, her poems transcend pre-established cultural practices and limitations by creating humanistic appeal, namely empathy, shared suffering, and

remembering the victims. Although cast in a familiar cultural mode, her poem contains a sense of an irrevocable personal loss. The lyrical "you" in the poem is consoled by the belief that her husband will be remembered for his sacrifice. It is difficult not to read this poem with tragic irony, and the reader is left to wonder if such consolation is sufficient and does not constitute a purely symbolic gesture. In spite of the author's message, the personal is not subsumed by the categories of the national and the political and the master narrative of heroism and bravery is disrupted. The text itself negotiates a new meaning and transcends its historical and cultural limitations.

Akhmatova's attitude toward the war was very different from her husband's. Gumilyov volunteered on the first day of the war, "looking for a chance to prove his own physical bravery and much influenced by Nietzsche's aphorism that war and courage do greater good than charity" (Feinstein 51). He created the self-image of a poet, a craftsman, a warrior, and a Christian. He did receive two St. George's crosses for bravery, but he also witnessed murders by weapons of mass destruction and saw soldiers die of disease and cold. In her poem "That August Was like a Yellow Flame," Akhmatova depicts the moment of seeing off her beloved to the war. For him, it is a glorious occasion, and it is his voice in the poem that says: "Настали / Для меня великие дни" (*Lyric* 187) ("Now begin my momentous days") (*Complete Poems* 609). What she hears is that she will be alone in an empty house and a transformed locale, in an alienating cityscape. The resplendent capital of St. Petersburg is turned into a

military base. As always, Akhmatova recreates the atmosphere with precision and clarity:

На дикий лагерь похожим
Стал город пышных смотров,
Слепило глаза прохожим
Сверканье пик и штыков. (*Lyric* 187)

This city of splendid vistas
Began to resemble a savage camp,
The eyes of the strollers were dazzled
By the glint of bayonet and lance. (*Complete Poems* 607)

In spite of the abundance of military and architectural details such as the city's bridges, gray canons, imperial standards, the poem produces an effect of emptiness. There is no statement that she believes he is fighting for a noble cause – just loneliness, isolation, and fear that he might not come back.

The recurring haunting nightmares in Akhmatova's poetry are the loss of her beloved and of her memory. The first happened when Gumilyov was falsely accused of plotting against the Soviet government, imprisoned, and executed. Her second husband Nikolai Punin was sent to Stalin's labour camps in Siberia, where he died. The other issue – the accessibility and reliability of memories – is complex and ambiguous. The omnipresent nightmare is forgetting, which would later become a political strategy employed by the state.

In her poem "The White House" (*Lyric* 119), a clear road into her past turns out to be deceptive, and the lyrical "I" cannot find its place of belonging, which, as the poet puts implicitly, is the past. The poem begins with a description of a public event, a military parade in 1914 in St. Petersburg. The speaker recollects every minute detail – every branch and silhouette – of this specific locale and historical time. When she tries to find her way to the house she has been to many times before, the place itself proves to be illusory with its folk connotations of a glass porch, ivy, and a door ring. The winter day is crisp and clear, and every detail is meticulously documented up to the dissolving sound of bagpipes. However, the protagonist is cut off from her memory: "[…] из памяти вынул / Навсегда дорогу туда" ("[…] torn from my memory forever / The road that leads there") (*Complete Poems* 457). The reader is left with a distinct feeling that this loss of her past, her place of belonging causes immense grief to the lyrical "I."

In her later poetry, Akhmatova often refers to her past and her memory as tormenting her, but being left without them seems like a terrifying alternative. Without her memory and her past, the crucial element of the self is facing a void, a ghost-like emptiness reinforced by elusive folk-like descriptions of the house and the real petal-like snow masking the metaphorical memory lane. Thus, this poem is a precursor to many later works depicting the writer's complicated relationship with her memory and the succeeding incompatible historical epochs she lived in. As Kees Verheul maintains, "In the vocabulary of

Akhmatova's poetical world, which is determined from the start by an awareness of the intricate relations between the various categories of time, the word *память [memory]* and related words, such as the verb *вспоминать [recollect]* and its negative counterpart *забыть [forget]* should occur with particular frequency" (8). To counteract oblivion and loss, Akhmatova makes a conscious effort to tell her future readers about the events she witnessed and her contemporaries, the Russian lost generation, in her poetry.

Between 1920 and 1924, Akhmatova wrote a series of poems entitled "After Everything" – the revolution of 1917, Gumilyov's arrest and execution on trumped up charges in 1921, and the Civil War in Russia in 1918-1920. In the first poem of the series, "Petrograd, 1919," her beloved St. Petersburg becomes a "wild capital," where she and her contemporaries are confined to "the bloody circle," the reign of Red Terror introduced by the Soviet Regime. Upper- and middle-class citizens were taken off the street and executed without any charges. Akhmatova's lyrical "I" becomes "we," and she starts speaking for her generation as she writes in her late poems, "De Profundis" (*Lyric* 287). In "Petrograd, 1919," she makes it clear that she and many of her contemporaries prefer their city to freedom, choosing to stay in spite of imminent death, and the city itself will become a monument to them.

Hunger, death, and shootings are everyday reality in Petrograd in 1921. As Akhmatova recollects, "The city did not only change but became the antithesis of itself. But young people loved poetry almost as much as they do

now in 1964" (qtd. in Haight 72). In her poem "Everything Has Been Plundered, Betrayed, Sold Out," the poet creates another antithesis, which, paradoxically, reaffirms life and restores hope: the world of death and poverty is contrasted with the realm of art, inspiration, and culture:

> И так близко подходит чудесное
> К развалившимся грязным домам...
> Никому, никому неизвестное,
> Но от века желанное нам. (*Lyric* 174)

> And how near the miraculous draws
> To the dirty, tumbledown huts...
> No one, no one knows what it is,
> But for centuries we have longed for it. (*Complete Poems* 581)

Akhmatova and Mandelstam read their poetry at the literary evenings at the Academy of Arts organized for the benefit of the wounded. To get there, they would hire a carriage and ride "amidst the fires" and "listening to gunshots coming who knows from where" (Haight 286). Notably, Mandelstam employs the same juxtaposition of art, the sacred word, beauty and the darkness of the Soviet night. Akhmatova's poem offers hope and rebirth in spite of dehumanizing conditions and catastrophic historical circumstances, while Mandelstam composes the last hymn to poetry before someone will "blow out

their candles," which can have only one interpretation, the calm acceptance of death.

The city itself, St. Petersburg, which used to be the centre of Russian culture, is transformed into the place that became the epitome of violence:

В кругу кровавом день и ночь
Долит жестокая истома...
Никто нам не хотел помочь
За то, что мы остались дома,

За то, что, город свой любя,
А не крылатую свободу,
Мы сохранили для себя
Его дворцы, огонь и воду. (*Lyric* 150-51)

Day and night in the bloody circle
A brutal languor overcomes us.
No one wants to help us
Because we stayed home,
Because, loving our city
And not winged freedom,
We preserved for ourselves
Its palaces, its fire and water. (51)

The author and her fellow poets (Nikolai Gumilyov, Osip Mandelstam and others), whom she identifies as the lyrical "we," choose to maintain their allegiance to the city that becomes a culturally and politically charged signifier representing continuity in the face of political disruption. Fully aware of the loss of freedom – and possibly their lives – implicated in their decision, they refuse to leave Russia. Both Akhmatova and Mandelstam portray Pushkin and Dostoyevsky, whose numerous literary works center on St. Petersburg, as idealized cultural icons and symbolic figures. Mandelstam, witnessing the regime of the Red Terror and mourning the numerous lives it claimed, views Pushkin's works as the cultural beginning, the point of origin and their present-day reality as an abrupt historical interruption, and possibly, the very end of their cultural narrative. He situates his poem "To Cassandra" in an explicit historical context: "И в декабре семнадцатого года / Все потеряли мы, любя" (Mandelstam, *Complete* 143) ("In December of 1917/ We lost everything, while loving") (95). Mandelstam compares Akhmatova to the mythological figure of Cassandra, predicting that the former will be executed because she is telling her story, which is drastically different from the accepted political discourse. In a similar vein, Akhmatova constructs a poetic persona who accepts the inevitability of historical changes and makes a conscious choice to follow cultural tradition and stay with her people:

Иная близится пора,

Уж ветер смерти сердце студит,

Но нам священный град Петра

Невольным памятником будет. (*Lyric* 151)

A different time is drawing near,

The wind of death already chills the heart,

But the holy city of Peter

Will be our unintended monument. (52)

When portraying Petrograd in the early 1920s and her own and her contemporaries' decision not to leave in spite of the omnipresent danger, Akhmatova evokes Biblical motifs in the poem "Lot's Wife," offering, to say the least, a very unorthodox interpretation. Lot's wife becomes almost a heroine as she gives away her life for only one look at Sodom, where she spent her life and raised her children. She, like the lyrical "I" in Akhmatova's previous poems, preferred her city to freedom. In the poem "That City I've Loved Since Childhood," the poet admits with sadness and grief that St. Petersburg has been transformed and her past is almost inaccessible. Explicitly alluding to death, she states that this place has been visited by the violinist without a nose. However, it is her city, and she greets it as if it were her beloved with whom she is reunited after a long separation.

The identification with her readers and her nation becomes a recurrent motif in Akhmatova's poetry of the 1920s. In the poem "To the Many," Akhmatova calls herself "голос ваш, жар вашего дыханья" ("your voice, the

warmth of your breath") (*Complete Poems* 619). She vows to stay with her people even when she is misunderstood and ruthlessly criticized. Her beloved, "the best of your sons," was given to her by her people, but the line "Нельзя непоправимее любить" (*Lyric* 192) ("it's impossible [...] to love more abandonedly") (*Complete Poems* 619) is addressed not to him, but to her readers. The author claims that she is paying a very high price for her fame, and that all she wants is to be forgotten. For Akhmatova, art fills the void created by private losses and is often a direct outcome of personal tragedies when her beloved, her son, her friends – famous Russian poets – are taken away by the historical forces of "the real twentieth century."

Remembrance as a Moral Category

The poet had the right to say: "Я была тогда с моим народом, / Там, где мой народ, к несчастью, был" (*Lyric* 213) ("I was with my people then, / There , where my people, unfortunately, were") (*Requiem* 2102). Akhmatova wrote *Requiem* between 1935 and 1940, when she shared the fate of millions of Russian women whose husbands and sons became victims of Stalin's repressions. She spent seventeen months in the prison lines of Leningrad after her son had been arrested. As Joseph Brodsky points out, "The power of *Requiem* lies in the fact that Akhmatova's biography was too common" (xxx). Jessie Davies writes, "The population of the prison camps grew from six million in 1937 to ten million by 1940-42" (74). In the preface to *Requiem*, Akhmatova

notes that this poem is about the victims and their families, for them, and was written at the request of those who recognized the poet in a prison line: "she mourns the mourners," as Brodsky describes this process of grieving, witnessing, and remembering (xxx). She burned *Requiem* and then reconstructed it from memory. Another work she wrote – a play in the form of a tribunal –was also destroyed but could not be restored.

The theme of a public trial and the burning of books later re-emerges in the works of many other writers, including Kostenko's *Marusia Churai*. Akhmatova read *Requiem* to her fellow writers, and many of them copied it by hand (Struve 23). Needless to say, it was dangerous to share it even with close friends. After all, Mandelstam read his poem about Stalin only to eleven people he completely trusted and was arrested a few days later. His wife, Nadezhda Mandelstam, said that she trusted only her husband and Akhmatova. In her poem, Akhmatova counteracts forgetting as a state policy, a mandated sociocultural code. The children of Stalin's victims were encouraged to renounce their parents publicly, in this final act obliterating even memories of the latter as if they had never existed in the first place. The same mandatory forgetting scenario was played out on the literary scene giving a completely new meaning to Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence." Emerging writers directly criticize or depart from traditions established by the previous literary generations, thus building their own paradigm of analysis, perception, and creation. Michael Wachtel argues that a process of forgetting and rediscovery

that normally takes generations or centuries occurred in the Soviet Union in the space of two decades. Prominent Russian writers emigrated, fell victims to Stalin's repressions, or were silenced. Wachtel mentions "a poem by an East German writer who visited the USSR in 1955, which consists only of a long list of contemporary Russian poets interrupted by the refrain 'Und lebt die Achmatowa noch?' [And is Akhmatova still alive?])." Though this poem was written fifteen years after *Requiem* was finished, it captures the tragedy of Akhmatova's forced silence and marginalization, and her importance and popularity as one of the leading Russian poets in spite of – paradoxically – not being published for decades. Resisting the state policy of forgetting pre-Soviet culture, dissident writers, and even family members who were exiled or executed, Akhmatova makes memory and remembering the central themes of her poetry. In *Requiem*, the poet mourns her own loss and depicts similar tragedies shared by others, symbolically creating a community of women whose family members perished or were sent to Siberian camps. By employing frequent references to the Orthodox religion and its communal spirit, famous Russian writers who addressed the Russian people during earlier political upheavals, and alluding to tragic events in early modern Russian history, Akhmatova elevates the tragedy she experienced and witnessed to a mytho-poetic plane, ultimately creating a monument of remembrance.

From the very first lines of *Requiem,* Akhmatova makes it clear that she is writing for millions of Russian women who experienced a similar fate. In fact,

the request to portray this unimaginable horror was not metaphorical or symbolic, but very literal. The poet was asked to describe this experience by a woman whose family members were also imprisoned. As Susan Amert observes, it is "an ironic reversal of the Stalinist *sotsial'nyi zakaz"* (35) because writers were supposed to create "for people" and glorify the present political order. In her "Instead of a Preface," Akhmatova writes:

> Once, someone recognized me. Then a woman with bluish lips standing behind me, who of course, had never heard me called by my name before, woke up from the stupor to which everyone had succumbed and whispered in my ear (everyone spoke in whispers there):
>
> > Can you describe this?
> >
> > And I answered: "Yes, I can."
>
> Then something that looked like a smile passed over what had once been her face. (*Requiem* 2102)

The protagonist's psyche is shattered, and it is only her poetry and creative agency that enable her to rebuild her identity and commemorate her fellow citizens after undergoing trauma and facing a profound psychological crisis. The speaker reconstructs her disintegrating self and connects the pieces of her fragmented consciousness by means of narrating a story and relating her experience, which is tragically similar to that of millions. The restorative power of *Requiem* that initiates the process of rebirth and regeneration is embodied in

the symbol of a *pokrov*: "Для них соткала я широкий покров / Из бедных, у них же подслушанных слов" (221) ("For them I have woven a broad shroud / From their poor, overheard words") (Harrington 98). The poem itself becomes a shroud, which is woven of words, for the poet's "involuntary companions." Amert states, "The *pokrov* represents the burial shroud that both sanctifies and preserves in anticipation of a coming resurrection" (52). It should be noted that I use Judith Hemschemeyer's translation of *Requiem* in my dissertation, but in this case, Harrington's rendering indicates a cultural reference that is not mentioned in Hemschemeyer's text. She translates "pokrov" as a "mantle" (*Requiem* 2108), which captures the extended metaphor but does not reflect religious connotations. Akhmatova explicitly claims that even the words are not her own because she overheard them from other women. The poet offers symbolic consolation to fill the void created by the regime of terror.

In "Dedication," Akhmatova speaks for her community, which was created by tragic and unnatural circumstances and confined to a "savage capital." She uses the lyrical "we" instead of the traditional "I," thus blending and interconnecting the categories of the collective and the personal. The main characters' isolation and emotional stasis are juxtaposed with the life which is perceived to be normal and the poet and her "involuntary friends" are deprived of:

Для кого-то веет ветер свежий,

Для кого-то нежится закат -

Мы не знаем, мы повсюду те же,
Слышим лишь ключей постылый скрежет
Да шаги тяжелые солдат (*Lyric* 214)

For someone a fresh breeze blows,
For someone the sunset luxuriates –
We wouldn't know, we are those who everywhere
Hear only the rasp of the hateful key
And the soldier's heavy tread. (*Requiem* 2102)

The speaker tries to retain some hope against all odds though the oppressive atmosphere and sombre tone of "Dedication" convey the idea that she clings to her hope in vain. An allusion to Pushkin's "каторжные норы" (the "prisoners' burrows") is followed by the phrase "mortal woe." In his poem dedicated to the Decembrists, who rebelled against the tsarist regime in 1825 and were exiled to Siberia, the central message is that of hope and conviction that the rebels will be liberated. Akhmatova's characters want to hope, but they know that the chances of a positive outcome are infinitesimal.

Leningrad turned into the opposite of itself, a place for tragedy to unfold. Akhmatova's characters "rose as if for the early church service" as it was a customary cultural practice in Russia before 1917, when religion was banned and "trudged through the savaged capital*"* (*Requiem* 2102). As Anderson points out, "[T]he spirit of communal harmony (sobornost') that is the

ideal characteristic of Russian Orthodox worship (the 'early Mass' of line 11) is replaced by a forced unity of common grief" (182-83). From literary and religious motifs to the place itself and the emotional state of people inhabiting it, the traditional order of life is reversed. The focus of "Dedication" shifts from the communal to the personal when an unnamed woman learns about the sentence; in spite of this fate shared by millions, the protagonist is separated from her counterparts and isolated in her grief, her experience being profoundly personal. In fact, the entire situation is likened to a rape:

Словно с болью жизнь из сердца вынут,
Словно грубо навзничь опрокинут,
Но идет... шатается... одна... (214)

As if painfully wrenched life from her heart,
As if they brutally knocked her flat,
But she goes on… Staggering… Alone… (2102)

Changing her focus again, the poet wonders what future had in stock for her "chance friends of those two diabolical years" (2103). Most likely, they followed their husbands to Siberia, which invokes powerful literary characters – Nekrasov's *Russian Women*, who chose to go to Siberia with their husbands after the failure of the Decembrist uprising. If Akhmatova's protagonists are deprived of hope, their dignity and their moral choice – standing by their family

members and not forsaking them – cannot be taken away from them and deserve to be remembered.

In "Prologue," following "Dedication," Akhmatova speaks about the national tragedy. Convicts marched "in regiments" and Russia itself is personified "writhing under the tires of the Black Marias" (2103). Atwood refers to "those in power" who give orders and disappear always on horseback; here the symbol of power is a black police car and later – "the red blind wall" of a prison. If "Dedication" and "Prologue" focus on the shared experience of millions of Russian women, Parts I-IX portray the poet's changing psychological state and various stages of grief. As Anderson explains, "[T]he narrator contemplates extreme forms of escape from her own consciousness – the reduction of her personality to that of an automation (poem 7), death (poem 8), and madness (poem 9)" (182).

In Part I Akhmatova recollects the arrest of her second husband, Nicolai Punin:

Уводили тебя на рассвете,
За тобой, как на выносе, шла,
В темной горнице плакали дети,
У божницы свеча оплыла.
На губах твоих холод иконки. (215)

They led you away at dawn,

I followed you like a mourner,

In the dark front room the children were crying,

By the icon shelf the candle was dying.

On your lips was the icon chill. (2103)

All these events took place that morning. Punin was arrested at dawn while the children (his daughter and her cousin) were crying. He kissed the icon before leaving home, as many Russians would do at that time. However, Akhmatova creates the traditional setting of the Russian house and situates this poem in history by employing archaic words, including *gornitsa* (front room of the house) and *bozhnitsa* (rendered into English as "icon shelf," but the literal translation of this word is "God's place"). There used to be a place in every house where icons were displayed and people prayed; the poet calls herself *zhenka* (the old Russian word for "wife"). These historic connotations are further reinforced in the last two lines of Part I: "Буду я, как стрелецкие женки, / Под кремлевскими башнями выть" (215) ("I will be like the wives of the Streltsy, / Howling under the Kremlin towers") (2002). *The Streltsy* were an elite regiment created by Ivan the Terrible in 1550. They rebelled and were persecuted by Peter the Great in 1698. Their wives and mothers watched them being executed on Red Square. In such a way, the poet's personal tragedy is placed in a larger socio-cultural context. If her historical counterparts had the strength to survive through the unimaginable ordeal, so will she.

Part II is modelled on a traditional Russian song called *chastushka*. Its light rhythm, carefree tone, and folk images of the yellow moon with his "cap askew" are contrasted with the poet's grief expressed laconically in the last two lines. The protagonist is stripped of everything: "Муж в могиле, сын в тюрьме, / Помолитесь обо мне" (216) ("Husband in the grave, son in prison, / Say a prayer for me") (2104). The juxtaposition is reinforced by the literary allusion in the first line "Quietly flows the quiet Don" (2103), which evokes Pushkin's poem Poltava with its opening line "Quiet is the Ukrainian night," a passage famous for its lyricism. However, the reader's expectations are disrupted, and the message communicated is that of profound grief.

On revisiting the tragic history of her country, Akhmatova turns back to her personal past and recalls the happy years of her youth. Her young doppelganger, the "jolly little sinner of Tsarskoye Selo," would never believe she could endure such pain and grief. Tsarskoe Selo and the carefree days of her youth become, as Roberta Reeder puts it, "a place of non-return" (118), and the terrifying present shatters the individual and communal categories of morality. Akhmatova wrote an ode to Stalin in an attempt to save her son, which did not bring the desired outcome. She referred to this experience as "[flinging herself] at the hangman's feet." The lines "it's not clear to me/ who is a beast now, who is a man" (2104) capture the state of moral confusion and the blurred boundaries between ethical and unethical choices. Spying was a common practice, and many people thought that they would save their own families by betraying their

neighbours, friends, and colleagues. Thus, victims become implicated in the crime of violating another rigid binary opposition of "them" and "us," victims and victimizers.

On learning about her son's sentence after seventeen months of waiting in prison lines, the poet welcomes death or insanity because either will free her of unbearable suffering. As Anderson writes, "Madness would take away her pain, but pain is an integral part of her memories of her son. To lose one would be to lose the other, and the loss of her memories is too high a price to pay for relief" (190). The poet is tortured by her memory, but she is afraid to be deprived of it. Poem X depicts Christ's crucifixion and invokes the Christian understanding of suffering which does not occur in vain, but brings about redemptive qualities and has a cathartic effect. Sharon Bailey contends, "Akhmatova reacts against the destructiveness of the Terror by consciously developing a verbal strategy of remembrance" (325). The protagonist assumes the role of witness, which for a mother is more difficult than experience immeasurable pain herself. As Atwood says in her poem about death and torture during the political turnover in El Salvador, "Witness is what you must bear" (*Selected* 265). Akhmatova believes that she must witness this tragedy and leave a record, so that such events will not happen again.

In "Epilogue," the poet resumes the epic tones of "Dedication" and speaks for millions of women all of whom should be named. However, the lists of the victims were intentionally destroyed, which was an everyday reality in the

Soviet Union in the 1930s. Their names would be obliterated, and any memory of them would cease to exist. In Russian, the words *pomnit'* (remember), *pominat'* (mourn), and *pamyatnik* (monument) have the same root. By implicitly referring to the Orthodox tradition of commemorating the dead when writing the list of their names for the church service, Akhmatova contrasts the centuries-long practice of remembering and the terrifying reality of emptiness and non-existence. She fills the void and symbolically restores the list that has been destroyed. According to Grabes, "There is a moral responsibility, since we cannot betray the perhaps final and vague, yet existential, hope of the victims of Stalin, Hitler or Saddam Hussein, to be nevertheless remembered for once, sometime, somewhere" (347). Akhmatova was aware of her significance and popularity as a poet. She requests that her monument (*pamyatnik*) should be erected not near the Black Sea, where she was born, or in Tsarskoe Selo, where she spent her youth, but by the prison wall where she spent seventeen months. For Akhmatova, as Reeder writes, remembrance is "a moral category" and "an agent of retribution" (107). She performs the ritualistic act – purely symbolic yet imbued with agency – of honouring those people who retained their morality and humanity under the dehumanizing conditions of the Terror, refusing to be passive and silent victims forced into non-existence.

Hegemonic and Oppositional Discourses in Akhmatova's War Poems

In *Requiem*, Akhmatova subverts the hegemonic ideology and gives a voice to the victims of Stalin's repressions, whereas in her war poems her account of history coincides with the dominant discourse. There is still one major difference between the way in which the author depicts the war and the messages perpetuated in the Soviet media. She focuses on the losses brought about by the war – the deaths of young soldiers and civilians during the siege of Leningrad. Although her poems convey a powerful political message, she refers to all the nationalities and ethnic groups fighting in the Soviet Army as the Russian people who practice Russian culture and defend it from invaders.

In 1941, Akhmatova was evacuated from a besieged Leningrad to Tashkent in Central Asia, taking with her the first part of Shostakovich's seventh symphony. Saving a piece of classical music from the city which became the embodiment of death, the poet metaphorically reaffirms the victory of art over the cruelty and deprivation of war. In his poem "Overture," F. R. Scott juxtaposes a Mozart sonata and the rising power of Fascism, describing the music, though captivating, as "a trinket on a shelf, / A pretty octave played before a window / Beyond whose curtain grows a world crescendo" (Scott 83). Akhmatova views music and poetry as the expression of people's innate humanity directly opposing the destructiveness of the war.

At the beginning of the blockade, she addressed the women of the city over the radio: "The enemy is threatening death and disgrace to the city of Peter, the city of Lenin, of Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Blok" (qtd. in Hayward 21). In the poem "Courage," her main concern is the preservation of the Russian language. According to Akhmatova, imminent physical destruction is less dangerous than the obliteration of culture and history. She suggests that death is a worthy price to pay for saving the culture:

Не страшно под пулями мертвыми лечь,
Не горько остаться без крова.
И мы сохраним тебя, русская речь,
Великое русское слово. (*Lyric* 234)

Let bullets kill us – we are not afraid,
Nor are we bitter though our housetops fall.
We will preserve you, Russian speech,
From servitude in foreign chains. (*Poems* 124)

Many nations colonized by the Soviet Union had a different perspective on the Second World War, and believed that the Soviet empire was as oppressive (or even more so) than the German. Astrid Tuminez explains that after the Revolution of 1917, "Lenin underscored the need to eliminate Russian chauvinist nationalism and cultivate Russian internationalism" (176). Stalin denounced this policy, "expounded Russian nationalist rhetoric, … and relied on

Russian nationalist ideas to mobilize the population during World War II" (Tuminez 177). His reign of terror resulted in inhumane acts towards every nationality in the USSR, including the Russian people, who were not discriminated against in terms of language and culture, but their civil liberties – and often their lives – were taken away from them. For Akhmatova, the loss of her language would be the most unbearable tragedy; however, other nations in the Soviet Union were already deprived of this right. Many writers stated during the war that both empires were destructive and created dehumanizing conditions for all the nationalities within the USSR. Peter Potichnyj asserts that many Ukrainian authors during the Second World War "expressed the belief that in the cataclysmic confrontation of the two brands of imperialism, Nazi and Soviet, both would perish and that all subject peoples of Europe and Asia […] would win a free and independent existence in their sovereign states" (166). For example, the main goal of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) was to reconstitute Ukraine as a unified nation: "Many Ukrainian writers some of whom played a leading role in the underground, thought the origin of the UPA was in a conscious, systematic effort of OUN to lead the Ukrainian people in the struggle to national freedom and independence" (Potichnyj 164). In Soviet history books UPA members were continually depicted as traitors who collaborated with the Germans. When these events were revisited after Ukraine obtained its independence, they became national heroes, whose main goal was to free Ukraine from Communist rule. In short, the accounts of the Second World

War are complex and generate a lot of debate in present-day Russia, Ukraine, and other members of the former Soviet Union. As mentioned previously, Akhmatova does present the official version of historical events during the war. Her poems commemorating Stalin's victims almost unequivocally elicit the same response, namely sympathy and shared grief. In contrast, the interpretations of her war poems will often vary, depending on the geographical region or even the age groups of people who learned about these events from their parents or grandparents or studied different versions of history in academic institutions. After 1991, alternative accounts and historical documents became available. The poet's view is informed by the hegemonic national perspective, but in spite of this fact, her poems – especially her works dedicated to the residents of Leningrad in time of the blockade – have a humanistic appeal.

During this period, the ban on Akhmatova's poetry was lifted, and she became one of the most popular poets in Russia. When she read her war poems at the Polytechnic Museum in Moscow in 1944, 3,000 people gave her a standing ovation. Akhmatova asserts, "Мы детям клянемся, клянемся могилам, / Что нас покориться никто не заставит" (*Lyric* 232) (We make an oath before our children, before graves / That nobody will subdue us). However, there are undertones and connotations that often break from Soviet rhetoric and convey an ethical message transcending political and ideological boundaries. Her poems from the series *Ветер войны (The Wind of the War)*, written between 1941 and 1945, are about the victims of the war – often young soldiers

and children – and the survivors who have to cope with the loss of their family members:

Важно с девочками простились,
На ходу целовали мать,
Во все новое нарядились,
Как в солдатики шли играть. (232)

They grandly said good-bye to the girls
And kissed their mothers in a hurry.
They dressed in everything new,
As if going to play soldiers.

The end of the poem is tragic: "Все они опочили там" (232) ("They all rest in peace there"). The poet laments the purposelessness and futility of the war abruptly cutting off young people's lives – the lives they hardly began living.

Akhmatova juxtaposes the categories of the individual and the collective, contrasting the mercilessness of the war with the realm of private relationships and emotions. The heroes of her poem "They grandly said good-bye to the girls" are at first described as sons and beloved, young adolescents whose role of acting as adults is definitely new to them, and then they become soldiers who die in the war (*Lyric* 232). In "To the Victors," the focus shifts in the opposite direction – from the historical past to the individual:

Сзади Нарвские были ворота,

Впереди была только смерть...

Так советская шла пехота

Прямо в черные жерла “берт”.

Вот о вас и напишут книжки:

“Жизнь свою за други своя”,

Незатейливые парнишки –

Ваньки, Васьки, Алешки, Гришки,

Внуки, братики, сыновья! (*Lyric* 236)

There was the Narva gate behind[1]

And only death in front…

The Soviet infantry went

Right in the black muzzles of “Bertas”[2].

Books will be written about you:

“Your life for the life of the others”,

Simple boys –

Vanki, Vaski, Alyoshki, Grishki,

Grandsons, brothers, and sons.

[1] Narva is a city in Estonia, near the Russian border, where the battle between the Soviet and German armies took place in 1944.

[2] A type of German gun.

The message is reinforced by the quote in the Old Russian language – "Your life for the life of the others" – which invokes generations of Russian soldiers who also sacrificed their lives centuries earlier. The poet refers to her protagonists, using common Russian names "Vanki, Vaski, Alyoshki, Grishki" and "grandsons, brothers, sons." Akhmatova commemorates young soldiers and underscores the importance of their sacrifice, but their individual names are not remembered. As Kelly Cherry comments, "Perhaps Tolstoy was right and history is made by the daily choices of ordinary people. Or perhaps, as some have said, history is made by history's winners. Perhaps, as others have said, history is made by historians. However history is made, it must be remembered by the ordinary individual" (36). In Akhmatova's understanding, common people who become involuntary participants in turbulent political events contribute to making historical choices. Leon Trotsky is supposed to have remarked: "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you."[1] Akhmatova does not depict soldiers as invincible and fearless heroes but emphasizes the injustice and senselessness of the war, writing for the families of the soldiers who died in battle.

The instability of the dichotomies of individual / national, personal / historical and the contextual opposition war / childhood make the poem particularly poignant. Akhmatova creates her identity as a poet whose role is to write about soldiers so that their names will not be forgotten: "А вы, мои

[1] As Thean Potgieter and Ian Liebenberg explain, this statement is frequently attributed to Trotsky, but he did not actually say it (287).

друзья последнего призыва! / Чтоб вас оплакивать, мне жизнь сохранена" (*Lyric* 236) ("And you, my friends of the last draft! / My life was saved to weep for you"). During the Second World War, the Soviet Army was ill equipped and its weapons were often outdated; all victories were achieved at the cost of millions of lives.

Employing the same strategy she uses in *Requiem*, the poet wishes to remember all the names, so their moral choice – giving their lives for others – will not be obliterated. In the atmosphere of post-terror, when human lives were devalued and moral boundaries blurred, Akhmatova creates a historical record and re-instills a fundamental belief in humanity. As Oksana Pakhlyovska asserts, people's ethical choices cannot belong only to the present (39). It is a recurrent theme in Akhmatova's poetry that future generations will learn from her contemporaries' experience and avoid committing the same historical errors; in this way, the past influences the present and informs individuals' moral decisions in the future.

***Poem without a Hero*:**

Re-negotiating the Memory of Her Generation

In *Poem without a Hero*, written between 1940 and 1962, Akhmatova contrasts two vastly different historical periods, namely the peak of Russian culture before 1913, with its excesses and surreal flamboyance marked by a sense of impending catastrophe, and the 1930s and 1940s, when the Russian nation had

to survive during Stalin's repressions and the Second World War. Masks, shifting and double identities, and numerous literary allusions abound in the first part of the poem around the famous literary and cultural figures of the Silver Age. The second and third parts adopt a solemn tone and focus on the siege of Leningrad during the Second World War and the reign of terror. The poet underscores the redemptive power of art in a time of historical catastrophes and the imminent threat of death; in spite of all tragedies and ordeals, the last lines of the poem are life-affirming. Russia, young and duty bound, shed the burden of past grief and is facing the future.

Poem without a Hero has a life of its own, which is reflected in Akhmatova's word choices, when she writes about the text which, she says, "came to her" and "sent messengers" over the course of twenty two years. The poem incorporates a polyphony of voices, a multitude of recognizable and yet elusive cultural figures of the Silver Age of Russian poetry, and references to British, Italian, and ancient Greek literature. Akhmatova establishes the theme of intertextuality from the very beginning of "Dedication" when she says, "А так как мне бумаги не хватило/ Я на твоем пишу черновике" (324) (And since my paper has run out, / I'm using your rough draft for writing) (*Poem* 150). In the first part, the shadows from the past, the year of 1913, visit the poet on New Year's Eve – a premise unthinkable for the epoch of socialist realism. Akhmatova invented ironic editorial notes herself, which seemed quite real. Her editor would say that this poem is too complex and focusing on poets and the

figures from the past is futile and unnecessary. The accident that triggered the writing of this work is a story about Vsevolod Knyazev, a young poet who committed suicide because of unrequited love for the famous actress Olga Glebova-Sudeikina. However, this trivial plot demands further interpretation in its socio-historical context. Sudeikina acts as a symbol of St. Petersburg's artistic bohemian life, and Knyazev becomes a young writer who does not wait to see "the real twentieth century" and chooses "the wrong kind of death". In fact, this young poet, who states in a clear voice, "I am ready for death" is not Knyazev, but Mandelstam, who said these exact same words in his conversation with Akhmatova before his arrest for the poem against Stalin, as her biographer Amanda Height recounts (104). Akhmatova narrates her own version of the past, using real-life events but also changing them and assigning them new meanings to provide her interpretation of the political and cultural situation in St. Petersburg at the beginning of the twentieth century.

According to Akhmatova, the most terrible punishment is to be forgotten. Akhmatova and Sudeikina could not locate Knyazev's grave after they attended Alexander Blok's funeral, and this physical absence metaphorically represents the loss of memory. Many of Akhmatova's fellow poets of the Silver Age would not be remembered or published between the 1940s and the early 1960s, when she was writing this poem. In fact, Mandelstam, Gumilyov, Sologub, and other poets that are now included in the canon of Russian literature were published only in the 1990s, more than half a

century after their deaths. Akhmatova says, "Кто над мертвым со мной не заплачет, / Кто не знает, что совесть значит / И зачем существует она" (*Lyric* 345) ("Who won't join my funeral lament, / Who does not recognize the word 'repent,' / And won't listen to conscience's call") (*Poem* 171). Like *Requiem*, *Poem without a Hero* is a work of remembrance, although it is more complicated and ambiguous in its message than its predecessor. The poet depicts the writers of her generation at the peak of their cultural achievement and their flaws, the most critical of which was a refusal to see and react to forthcoming changes, instead choosing to live in a surreal, bohemian world of the early twentieth century artistic St. Petersburg.

If the first and the second dedications focus on Knyazev and Sudeikina, the third one, which does not state a name, is widely believed to allude to Akhmatova's meeting with Isaiah Berlin, a prominent English literary critic and philosopher. He is the one with whom she "troubled the twentieth century" (*Poem* 152). Berlin met Akhmatova through mutual friends in Leningrad in November 1945, when he was a diplomat at the British Embassy. His parents had emigrated from Russia after the Revolution of 1917, so he could speak Russian fluently, and Akhmatova read *Requiem* and *Poem without a Hero* to him – both of these works would be published in Russia only decades later. The journalist Randolph Churchill, son of the British prime minister, came looking for Berlin at Akhmatova's place, as he urgently needed his help as a translator. As Lev Lurie writes, "The appearance of Churchill – who was certainly being

followed by the Soviet Secret police (as was, likely, Berlin) – broke up the literary meeting and eventually led to rumours in the press that 'a foreign delegation has arrived to persuade Akhmatova to leave Russia'" (53). By stating in *Poem without a Hero* that she and Berlin changed the course of political events, the poet meant that their meeting was a starting point of the Cold War. Berlin did not object "because she would have felt this as an insult to her tragic image of herself as Cassandra – indeed, to the historic-metaphysical vision of herself which informed so much of her poetry" (Lurie 54). To some extent, Akhmatova was right. Having learned that she received foreign visitors, Stalin initiated a process aimed at tightening domestic security and fortifying "the stone wall" between the Soviet Union and Western countries, making any kind of cultural exchange virtually impossible.

Berlin, reputedly the "guest from the future" in *Poem without a Hero*, appears in the Fontanka House, where, as Akhmatova believed, Parasha Zhemchugova (1768-1803) used to perform. Zhemchugova was a famous serf singer that Count Sheremetyev was in love with and who used to sing for Emperor Paul I. As Anderson writes, "Akhmatova wished to strengthen the link between her own residence and a site associated with Parasha, with whom Akhmatova strongly identified as a woman who was a gifted artist, whose social position was marginal, and who, like Akhmatova, was officially forbidden to practice her art (her doctors feared that singing would hasten the progress of her disease [tuberculosis])" (209). Many ideas in the poem are conveyed through

allusions and references situating this literary work within national and world culture.

In *Poem without a Hero*, Akhmatova embarks on a difficult and precarious journey, depicting her long-gone contemporaries and recreating the atmosphere of St. Petersburg in 1913 in the context of Russian cultural and literary tradition, including Pushkin and Dostoevsky. These guests come uninvited dressed as if for a Venetian masquerade – their identities are concealed or changed as Faust, Don Juan, Daperutto, John the Baptist, Dorian Gray, and others. She adds the historical events in Russia at the turn of the century and the artistic works of the lost generation of her friends and fellow poets to the thesaurus of world literature and culture. They had to face philosophical dilemmas comparable to those of Hamlet, and witness the events more terrifying than Salome's deadly dance.

The poet underscores the interconnectedness of the past and the present: "Как в прошедшем грядущее зреет,/ Так в грядущем прошлое тлеет" (330) ("As in the past the future takes shape / so in the future the past decays") (156). Her contemporaries are recognizable, but their names are never explicitly mentioned. For example, the character dressed as a milepost is Vladimir Mayakovsky, a Futurist who rebelled against conformity, severely criticized the First World War and its causes, and never failed to voice his independent opinion, often shocking the public. He is a historical figure and at the same time the embodiment of the artist as an "unacknowledged legislator of

the world," as Percy Bysshe Shelley calls poets (765). To reinforce this idea, Akhmatova includes the famous judicial figures of the past: "Хамураби, Ликурги, Солоны / У тебя поучиться должны" (Hammurabi, Lycurgus, Solon too / would have profited to hear you teach) (157). Alexandr Blok, one of the most prominent Russian Symbolists, also participates in the carnival. He is a character in disguise who might have seen the Commendatore come (a reference to Blok's poem "Don Juan"). Futurists and Symbolists glorified the Revolution of 1917. The former renounced tradition, hated the philistine values of the bourgeoisie, and welcomed historical change; the latter elaborated on the philosophical concepts of creative chaos and anarchy that would eliminate the old decaying order and give birth to a new world.

Both Mayakovsky and Blok welcomed the Revolution – in fact, the former was one of its most vehement spokespeople. The two poets, however, became utterly disillusioned with the ways in which the Revolution was changing the country and died an untimely death. Some other poets of the lost generation described by Akhmatova are portrayed as extraordinarily gifted, morally corrupt, and oblivious to the events foreshadowing the advent of tragic historical events. Everybody heard the footsteps of the new age coming, but refused to acknowledge them. An individual did not want to recognize himself "в зеркале страшной ночи" (340) (the literal translation is "in the mirror of terrifying night"). The motifs of mirrors providing false reflections, masks, hidden identities, and doppelgangers proliferate in the poem. Sudeikina, the

actress mentioned above, “the Columbine of the 1910s,” beautiful and carefree, is one of young Akhmatova’s doppelgangers. The poet’s other double, appearing in Part III, will be headed for interrogation during Stalin’s repressions of the 1930s. In his poetry, Mikhail Kuzmin depicted members of the Alexandrian society who pretended to be condemned to death every day and experienced every event with heightened sensitivity. Akhmatova’s contemporaries lived their bohemian lives in the surreal atmosphere of St. Petersburg, where the distinction between reality and mirage becomes blurred. The protagonist of Nikolai Gogol’s [Mykola Hohol’s] “Nevsky Prospect” comments on the elusive, seductive nature of the imperial capital:

> It deceives at all hours, the Nevsky prospect does, but most of all when night falls in masses of shadow on it, throwing into relief the white and dun-coloured walls of the houses, when all the town is transformed into noise and brilliance, when myriads of carriages roll over bridges, postilions shout and jolt up and down on their horses, and when the devil himself lights the street lamps to show everything in false colours. (452)

Holding dramatically opposing views on the role of art and Russia’s political life in the 1910s, the poets depicted in *Poem without a Hero* contributed in different ways to the cultural achievement of the Silver Age. As Akhmatova writes, “про это / Лучше их рассказали стихи” (331) (“And about this, it has been expressed in [their] verses better”) (157). The idea of poems living a life of their

own emerges several times in *Poem without a Hero.* According to new historians, literary works transcend social and temporal boundaries and the ideological constraints imposed on their authors. Akhmatova often addresses her future readers, who will be able to judge sympathetically and for whom this historical and cultural record is intended.

If Part I focuses on the poets of the Silver Age and cultural life of St. Petersburg in the 1910s, in Parts II and III the past meets the present, which is about to become history. Akhmatova relates her own experience during Stalin's repressions and the Second World War to millions of Russians who struggled to survive through the same ordeals. When she is evacuated by plane from the besieged Leningrad to Tashkent in Central Asia, she looks down at the road to Siberia so many people had to travel when sent to northern labour camps. She writes, "Торжествами гражданской смерти / я по горло сыта" (347) (I am fed up with the glory of civil death). The term "civil death" is used metaphorically. Akhmatova and other writers of her generation lived in an "internal exile." The concept of "civil death" in Russia is often associated with Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Fyodor Dostoevsky, who were exiled to Siberia for being involved with political radical groups and were "regarded as legally dead, in the sense that they were stripped of all personal, civil, and property rights," as Alan Wood explains (216). Akhmatova writes about her own tragedy and that of her contemporaries, "каторжанок, стопятниц, пленниц" (347) ("Any of those arrested, exiled, caged") (171). In the Russian text, the poet uses the word

"stopyatnitsy," wives of the exiled who were allowed to live no closer than one hundred and five verst (112 kilometres) from railway stations. She compares common Russian women from the small provincial town of Chukhloma to the Greek goddess Gekuba and the prophet Cassandra; in spite of the fact that these women's tragedies are viewed as almost trivial – so common they were – they are not lesser in scope than the misfortunes epitomized in ancient Greek epic poems and myths.

Akhmatova cannot save her son and her husband, but her voice is not muted and she speaks for her nation. Her contemporaries are displaced – many of them emigrated and many others were exiled to the North, and the writer herself did not have a stable home for many years. Therefore, her texts become her ultimate point of reference, the only permanent vantage point in the shifting and crumbling reality of the 1930s and 40s. Not allowed to mourn publicly and coerced into forgetting and forsaking their relatives, Akhmatova and all those who listened to her poems at private gatherings or copied them by hand transform her literary works into a symbolic site of mourning and remembering. Viewing the road to Siberia from the plane in 1941, she reverses the negative and terrifying experience. It is not the exiled who travel to Siberia, but young Russia that is on its way to save Moscow during the Second World War.

In *Poem without a Hero* Akhmatova juxtaposes the Silver Age, with its unprecedented poetic achievement, and the tragic 1930s and 40s. The tone in Part II and III becomes tragic and solemn, devoid of almost any allusions or

cultural references. Akhmatova blends lyric and epic genres, simultaneously erasing the boundaries between “we” and “I”. As the poet V.G. Vozdvizhensky writes, “Having started with the private story of 1913, [the poem] expands into a monologue of the artist ‘imprisoned by her epoch,’ and in the third part becomes a meditation on universal historical existence” (26). Akhmatova adopts a strategy of remembrance as a means of resisting the Terror and its dehumanizing power. The ultimate crime against morality and conscience, according to the poet, is forgetting. Her personal tragedy transcends the individual and becomes a communal experience, when the nation is united in common grief.

Chapter IV. Revisioning History and Creating a Nation: Lina Kostenko's Poetry

As dynamic elements of discourse, works of art enter the process of negotiation between the reader and the writer, and the text itself becomes a place of contestation where different political, social, and cultural forces operate. A work of literature should be viewed as a historical event which acquires its validity among other discourses by agreeing with other discursive statements, challenging, or negating them. As Michel Foucault contends, "The statement [...] is not in itself a unit, but a function that cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them, with concrete contents, in time and space" (*Archaeology* 86-87). The text becomes a construct that not only reflects historical events but acts as an agent that legitimizes or realigns power structures, changing in relation to the dominant political and cultural beliefs. In her novel in verse *Marusia Churai*, written in 1974, Lina Kostenko broke ideological taboos and conveyed a strong anti-colonial message, writing about Ukrainian history and the wars of liberation in the seventeenth century. Now this text is canonized and considered to have contributed to creating a collective consciousness and historical memory (Chumachenko 202). The author advocates for the importance of producing a national narrative: her protagonist, a female singer-songwriter, leaves such a record – oral, unstable, and existing outside the official discourse. The issue of a unifying national idea remains

relevant after Ukraine obtained its statehood; however, this rehabilitative work needs to be done in a pluralistic society, where other nationalities and ethnic groups are not excluded from the historical record.

Nowadays Kostenko is one of the most recognized and influential Ukrainian poets, someone whose works are published extensively not only in Ukraine, but across Europe and North America. She started her literary career as a member of the radical group of young writers that appeared in the 1960s, "the sixtiers," and her first collections of poetry – *Проміння землі* (*Earthly Rays*) and *Мандрівки серця* (*The Wandering Heart*) – gained immediate popularity. After "the political thaw" of the 1960s under Nikita Khrushchev was over, Kostenko, like many other Ukrainian intellectuals at the time, was subjected to severe censorship and was forced into silence. After her poetry was banned for sixteen years, she returned to the literary scene with her collection of poems *Над берегами вічної ріки (On the Shore of the Eternal River*, 1977) and *Marusia Churai* (1979). In the Brezhnev era, the historical topic frequently addressed by Soviet writers was the unification of Ukraine and Russia in 1654 under the Pereyaslav Treaty signed by hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky. Kostenko situates her text in the same era, but she "has in fact written the whole book without mentioning Russia or the tsar even once" (Struk, "How" 155). She uses silence as a subversive strategy, which speaks louder than vehement rhetoric.

Contesting Meaning and Realigning Historical Boundaries: *Marusia Churai* from New Historical and Postcolonial Perspectives

Marusia Churai is positioned among those works of literature that reshape the very institutional boundaries within which they operate. As Foucault points out, "The discursive event reorganizes, redistributes, displaces and produces a 'mutation' in discourse" (*Birth of the Clinic* 11). To counter the strategy of Russification and erasing of Ukrainian history, Kostenko not only incorporates many historical Cossack leaders (Ivan Iskra, Baida Vyshnevetsky, Samiylo Kishka, and others) but provides extensive references to Ukrainian history from the raid of Konchak in the twelfth century to 1658, when the city of Poltava, where the events of the novel unfold, burns during Colonel Pushkar's uprising against Vyhovsky, and Pushkar is beheaded (Struk, "How" 154). In fact, Kostenko's novel is as much about the historical context of the 1970s as it is about the distant past. The policy of linguistic russification was conducted – "the year of the publication of *Marusia Churai*, 1979, is the year when the Tashkent Conference took place, where it was decided that Russian would be the language of instruction in all daycare centres and kindergartens in the Soviet Union" (Kosharska, "Literary Theme" 112). The trial of Churai parallels the secret repressions of Ukrainian intellectuals in the 1970s; Kostenko introduces the theme of individual and political betrayal (i.e., loyalty to a country and a person) and elaborates on its ethical implications. In such a way, she selects historical facts and interprets them from a specific moral and cultural vantage

point. Friedrich Nietzsche notes, "Only by means of the power to utilize the past for life and to reshape past events into history once more – does the human being become a human being" (91). Kostenko turns to Ukrainian history to undermine the hegemonic ideology. As Milan Kundera explains this phenomenon, "When a big power wants to deprive a small country of its national consciousness, it uses a method of organized forgetting... A nation which loses awareness of its past gradually loses its self" (235). Kostenko creates a new category of historical time, where the past is viewed as a nexus of morality and represented in an ethical and cultural dimension.

While other characters in the text (for example, Cossack leaders) are referenced in historical documents, there is no written record of Marusia's existence. Many folk songs are attributed to her ("Ой не ходи Грицю та й на вечорниці" (Hryts, Don't Go to the Evening Dances), "За світ стали козаченьки" (The Cossacks Were Ready to March at Dawn), "Котилися вози з гори" (The Wagons Were Rolling Downhill), to name but a few). The song "Hryts, Don't Go to the Evening Dances" was used in many literary works, in particular "Marusia – malorossiyskaya Safo" (Marusia – the Little Russian Sappho) (1839) by the Russian playwright O. Shakhovskoy and her biography by O. Shkliarevsky in *Pchela* (1877) (Briukhovetsky 161-62; Struk, "How" 158). In a short preface to her novel, Kostenko informs the reader that the town of Poltava, where Marusia lived, was burnt to ashes in the war of 1658 and no records of the singer's life survived. The opening scene of the novel depicts

Marusia's trial, at which she is accused of poisoning the Cossack Hryts, her beloved, who betrayed her. Kostenko admits that different accounts of those events could have existed if only a single book survived: "І загула б та книга голосами, / і всі б щось говорили не те саме" (Kostenko, *Marusia Churai* 4). (That book would be filled with voices / And all of them would say something different). From the very beginning, she introduces the leitmotif of the novel – that of burning books and losing historical memory, stating that Ukrainian history is either obliterated or falsified. Maryna Romanets observes that "Kostenko's Neobaroque text creates a martyr-drama (both of Ukrainian history and of Marusia's way to her Self) that reveals the mechanisms of conversion whereby histories are erased but resurface as symptoms on the colonized body politic to be reread, reinterpreted, and rewritten" (318). Kostenko acknowledges multiple perspectives on the same historical event. The unification of Ukraine and Russia is not a brotherly union as portrayed by Soviet historians, but a political disaster that would subject Ukraine to the policy of colonization and multiple attempts at effacing its national identity. The poet not only writes about seventeenth-century Ukraine, but also alludes to the Soviet policy of political and cultural dominance.

Ukraine existed under colonial rule for more than three hundred years – in fact, for all its modern history. As George Grabowicz explains, "In the Ukrainian case, the colonial experience that we speak of must certainly include the entire eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and with but brief exceptions –

most notably the 1920s – the entire Soviet period, in effect the bulk of the twentieth century" ("Wages" 30). It was an exception in Europe where most countries obtained their statehood by the middle of the nineteenth century, but Ukraine remained a nation without a state and with a fragmented political identity: "In the last three centuries Ukrainian political and cultural existence was never unitary, never fully within one over-arching political and cultural system," Grabowicz elaborates ("Wages" 30). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries alone, Ukraine was part of Austria-Hungary, Russia, Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union. Among numerous negative effects of colonial rule, one of the most detrimental is "the unproductive opposition Europe/Ukraine [...] that emerged under the conditions of colonial alienation and isolation from the cultural processes of 'normal' Europe: in the pair of metaphors 'Prosvita – Europe,' the implicit respect for the cosmopolitan, modern, urban is contrasted with the local, ethnic, popular" (Pavlyshyn 44). The ballad "Hryts, Don't Go to the Evening Dances" was so famous and appropriated in so many literary works in the nineteenth century that it required a lot of courage to choose this story and create a unique work of art providing a perspective that emerges from the historical context of the 1970s, but also includes an ethical dimension which transcends the given period.

In accordance with well-established traditions in Ukrainian literature, Kostenko employs folk and ethnographic elements, appropriating popular culture in order to create a complex work of art. Pavlyshyn comments on the

same phenomenon in the works of Valeriy Shevchuk, who "takes the most popular material enjoyed by the reader and transforms it into a highly artistic, multifaceted, and sophisticated construction" (46). Kostenko appeals to her audience by using the popular and the familiar, ultimately contributing to the resurgence of Ukrainian national consciousness and exploring the intricate workings of collective social and historical memory. Even within the restrictions of the Soviet doctrine, Kostenko creates a valid account of historical events in seventeenth century Ukraine. She challenges "a deeply ingrained sense of dependence and derivativeness (vtorynnist')" (Grabowicz, "Wages" 31) that was an immanent feature of colonial legacy by shifting the focus to Ukrainian history, even local events – the setting is primarily the town of Poltava and rural areas with only some events taking place in Kyiv.

The novel quickly gained popularity and was praised by critics and readers. As Briukhovetsky points out, "The first edition of *Marusia Churai* was 8,000 copies, and it sold out in several days in 1979. A second edition of 100,000 also quickly sold out" (152). Many people copied this novel by hand or learned it by heart. Struk contends that "the novel's popularity is further attested by the stage adaptation at a theatre in L'viv and the voice and bandura rendering by Nila Kriukova and Halyna Menkush." He also notes that *Marusia Churai* relies on the traditional mode of expression, which ensures its public acceptability ("How" 148). Thus, Kostenko erases boundaries between high and popular art, and her message reaches a wide audience. It is a paradox in itself

that the work of literature that addresses the theme of preserving Ukrainian culture and portrays the seventeenth century wars of liberation was not published for six years after it was written, but then it was awarded the Shevchenko Literary Prize in 1987.

Kostenko articulates a strong anti-colonial stance, discussing the issues of mimicry and the loss of language in her poem "The Tribe of the Toda," a southern Indian nation. She gives a warning which can be interpreted in the context of Ukraine's struggle to maintain its relative cultural autonomy from Russia. As a result of the expansion of the East India Company, economic oppression leads to cultural dominance, and the colonized adopt social mores and the language of the colonizer. The younger generation speaks the language of the newcomers and is skillful in mimicking new social customs. Having lost many of their distinct cultural characteristics, the Toda are threatened with the obliteration of their national identity. However, even in light of the given political circumstances (the policy of Russification, to comment on the subtext), the adaptable youth who have excelled in the art of mimicry are still able to preserve their own culture. The poem can be read as a palimpsest, where the Ukrainian writer not only blames her contemporaries who let the colonizer dominate their culture but poignantly and poetically emphasizes the significance of social memory and language threatened by colonization.

Kostenko opposes the colonial Soviet policy of erasing differences among nations by emphasizing the necessity of creating Ukraine's national

narrative. Literally and metaphorically, this concept emerges throughout the novel. Marusia is pardoned by hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky for two reasons, namely her songs, which inspired Cossacks, who defended their country against invaders, and the glory of her father, who was executed by the Poles and became the hero of *dumas* performed by travelling *kobzars*. In his conversation with Khmelnytsky, Colonel Ivan Iskra compares Marusia to the voice of Ukraine:

> Коли в похід виходила батава,—
> її піснями плакала Полтава.
> Що нам було потрібно на війні?
> Шаблі, знамена і її пісні.
> Звитяги наші, муки і руїни
> безсмертні будуть у її словах.
> Вона ж була як голос України,
> що клекотів у наших корогвах! (23)

> When the regiment was leaving for battle,
> Poltava was crying in her songs.
> What did we need during the war?
> Sabres, flags, and her songs.
> Our banners, suffering, and ruins
> Will be immortalized in her songs.
> She was like the voice of Ukraine

Singing in our banners!

When Marusia was pardoned for the murder she did not commit (her only crime was to prepare poison for herself, which Hryts drank because he was unable to live with his betrayal), she goes on a pilgrimage to Kyiv and sees the land devastated by the Polish army and the capital burned and pillaged. In the course of her journey, she meets a deacon who states that the records of these historical events and people's suffering should be created. He compares the events in Greek mythology, which came to symbolize the epitome of the ruinous effects of war, to the tragic consequences of the wars in the 17th century: "Але говорять: 'Як руїни Трої.' / Про Київ так ніхто ще не сказав" (93) (They say, "It's like the ruins of Troy." / Nobody said anything like that about Kyiv). The deacon had written a manuscript depicting the events he witnessed, but it was stolen from him. The accounts of the history of Ukraine are either destroyed or taken away from its people. He mentions the horrifying Appian Way, which led to Rome and was lined with crucified bodies, whereas the entire territory of Ukraine became such a road with numerous villages where only a few people survived and husbands and sons did not return from the war:

А тут до самої Волині
лежать ці села удовині!
Хто знає, що тут відбулося?
Хто розказав це людям до пуття?

Неназване, туманом пойнялося.

Непізнане, пішло у небуття (94).

Up until Volyn

Lie widows' villages.

Who knows what happened here?

Who told people truthfully about it?

Unsung, these events disappeared as if in the fog.

Unknown, they vanished into oblivion.

The deacon examines the events and historical figures that are included in the literary canon. He states that mainly the lives of religious leaders, priests and monks are portrayed in the books published by Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, one of the most significant spiritual and educational centres in Ukraine. He challenges and redefines the notion of a martyr, claiming that hetman Nalyvaiko, who fought and died for his country, unequivocally belongs to this category. Moreover, those religious figures are part of the distant past of Ukraine. Nestor the scribe wrote the manuscript *Tale of Bygone Years* in 1113, while Cossack leaders are creating the history of their nation here and now. Kostenko employs the dichotomy of folk/oral art, which focuses on the struggles and suffering of the Ukrainian people, versus written records, which mainly narrate the lives of religious figures. As Khmelnytsky says, "Про наші битви на папері голо. / Лише в піснях вогонь отой пашить" (81) (There is nothing on paper about our

battles/ This fire is burning only in the songs). Once again, the leitmotif of the novel – the need to write Ukraine's national narrative – emerges when it becomes clear that contemporary events and national leaders are excluded from the literary canon.

The deacon not only makes a clear distinction between canonical themes and present day events but differentiates between two kinds of writers, namely those who stay within the confines of monasteries and those who witness historical events and experience them together with their co-citizens. Undoubtedly, the input of the first should never be underestimated; the main difference is that writers like the deacon himself are not detached observers but historical agents and active participants in the process of making history. The deacon refers to Nestor who produced one of the most extensive records of the history of the Slavic people in the twelfth century; however, he comments ironically that the monk was writing in his monastery, while the deacon was travelling, and that is why his manuscript was stolen. The latter resembles Hryhoriy Skovoroda, the eighteenth-century itinerant philosopher, who is often referred to as the Ukrainian Socrates.

While paying respect to the works of Nestor, the deacon criticizes his contemporary poets who "комусь щось пишуть на догоду" (93) ("write to please someone") and produce empty, insincere soliloquies, while authentic singers and songwriters – *kobzari* – are "crying" in the villages. In the twentieth-century context, Kostenko alludes to her fellow poets who produced the

literature of "social mandate" (*sotsial'nyi zakaz*), writing about the "endeavours" of the Communist Party and those who refused to address these themes and were silenced, persecuted, or repressed. In other words, Kostenko contrasts the opportunists and the sixtiers, who created an alternative to social realism and "vigorously objected to the simplistic Soviet view of life" (Čyževs'kyj and Luckyi 743-44).

There are many parallels between Marusia and Kostenko herself. One of the main similarities is the claim that the contemporary poet and her seventeenth-century counterpart represent the nation in its performative function, using Homi Bhabha's term. Kostenko compares Marusia to *kobzari*, and her fame as a songwriter exceeds the boundaries of her town and gains national significance. When Marusia is acquitted, the crowd is crying not only because people are aware that justice has been restored. They know of Hryts's betrayal and do not consider the protagonist a murderer; the main reason is that her songs became part of their lives when she portrayed the everyday existence of her nation and major historical events. The people of Poltava empathize with her as an artist, a musician, and, ultimately, their voice, as Kostenko puts it.

Marusia becomes a complex metaphor for the writer who is subsumed by her own text, which performs a greater role than the poet herself. Halyna Kosharska comments on Kostenko's unique approach to portraying historical events: "she does not describe battles but their consequences" ("Literary Theme" 113). Kostenko's main objective is to create an account of Ukrainian

history and preserve the memory of her people. As Jacques Derrida maintains, a writer should let the text have its own voice and "have the courage […] to die away from nature" (70-71). Marusia Churai becomes a poet who, "having absorbed the myth about the song which is 'word,' has written a book in which the poet is both its subject and its master," as M.T.Znayenko notes (173). The text acquires a certain degree of authority, "the relative autonomy – the specific properties, possibilities and limitations – of the cultural medium being worked" (Montrose 22). The seventeenth-century poet becomes part of her own text, which acts as a location of contesting historical forces and a site of collective memory.

A Symbolic Voice and a National Myth: The Interconnectedness of the Personal, the Generational, and the Collective

The novel's protagonist goes on a pilgrimage to Kyiv from Poltava, when the history of Ukraine unfolds before her eyes. Marusia symbolically represents the suffering of her land and its resurrection after the long years of devastation. While the focus in the first two parts of the novel is more subjective (we learn about her betrayal by Hryts, her gift as a singer-songwriter, and childhood recollections), the third part depicts an objective experience – she sees the ruinous effects brought about by the war with Poland. The individual and the social become inextricably linked, and her betrayal by Hryts parallels that of Ukraine by its own rulers, in particular Iarema Vyshnevetsky. Personal moral

choices result in the acts which ultimately influence a community and even a country. Generational history assumes national significance, when the actions of fathers and grandfathers – mainly Cossack leaders – are viewed as a nexus of morality for their descendants whose actions led to the devastation of their own country. Lastly, Marusia's spiritual and almost physical death, pilgrimage and rebirth act as an extended metaphor for the historical ordeals faced by her country and its numerous attempts at obtaining statehood.

The betrayal of a person and a country is viewed as a moral transgression. The first resulted in Marusia's suffering and death, and the second left Ukraine in ruins, when hetman Vyshnevetsky became disloyal to his own country. As Kovalevsky contends, "Marusia is the embodiment of Ukraine itself, the land, which is suffering from battles and betrayal even among her most glorious sons – Cossacks […]. It is Ukraine itself, not only Marusia, who is dying" (158). When Khmelnytsky learns about Marusia's motive for the alleged murder of Hryts, he equates personal unfaithfulness with treason though only the latter is punishable by the law: "Що ж це виходить? Зрадити в житті /державу — злочин, а людину — можна?!" (17) (How can it be? It's a crime to betray / a country, but one can betray a person?) The hetman acts as a father figure who saves Marusia from her imminent death and gives her a chance at spiritual and moral resurrection. Making treachery versus loyalty one of the central dichotomies in the novel, Kostenko raises the issue of "individual freedom as well as moral and ethical responsibility before oneself and one's

country," according to Kosharsky ("Literary Theme" 117). The interconnectedness of personal and political moral choices serves as a direct antithesis to the Soviet emphasis on the collective and the negation of the individual and the self, which were regarded as non-existent or unworthy.

Marusia's songs, and by implication, literary works in general, help draw a clear demarcation line "between loyal and treacherous characters" (Briukhovetsky 168). Bohdan Khmelnytsky values the importance of her ballads for the nation and compares Marusia's imminent execution to stifling a song, claiming that these actions are irredeemable crimes. In contrast, Gorban sees it as an irrelevant matter during her trial and asks rhetorically, "При чому тут пісні?" (24) (What do her songs have to do with it?) Bobrenchyha, who persuaded her son Hryts to propose to a wealthy girl, comments that a woman is not capable of composing songs that focus on Cossacks' glory, their heroism in battle, and sacrifice for their own country – singing about love and domestic duties is a woman's prerogative: "Це щось для дівки, сину, височенько. / Не вірю, щоб складала це вона" (57) (It is too much for a girl, son. / I don't believe she composes these songs). In such a way, Kostenko presents literary works as an ethical construct that she elevates to the mythopoetic plane. While her position is appealing in its idealism, the poet certainly gives writers a special role, dating back to the idealized romantic notion of poets. It becomes symbolic during the period when political and civil structures fail, and even the most fundamental laws of a humane society were non-existent. The significance of an

artist as a moral barometer and Cossacks as an embodiment of loyalty and enforcers of an ethical code becomes integral elements in creating the necessary mythology of a nation which unifies it into "an imagined community," to use Benedict Anderson's term, with its shared past and beliefs.

In the context of the 1970s, many Ukrainian artists were literally on trial. Kostenko underscores the parallel between the wars of liberation in the seventeenth century and the secret repressions in her own time. The dissenters advocated against Russification, "the internal passport system as a way of restricting freedom of movement, and the lack of adequate cultural facilities for national minorities" (Nahaylo and Swoboda 157). These political activists emphasized universal human rights and used *samvydav* (self-published books) to circulate their ideas among the public. As Kovalevsky notes, some writers were forced into silence; some were "tamed" like Ivan Drach; and some were tortured in the camps like Vasyl' Stus (128). Many authors were persecuted in the 1970s, but mostly secretly. Kovalevsky further explains that during the decade there were two ways of state building, namely going back to the repressions of 1937 or choosing a civilized way of society's development, and in 1985 the second way, *perestroika,* was chosen (147). As mentioned previously, Kostenko belonged to the radical group of writers labelled "the sixtiers." They were betrayed when the period of "the political thaw" after Stalin's death with its relative freedom of word was followed by repressions, censorship, and the forced silence of the 1970s. In Kostenko's poetry and fiction, the sixtiers are

portrayed as activists who never remain indifferent and make their voices heard. They become romanticized symbolic figures for future generations just as the Cossack leaders fighting for the independence of Ukraine were their point of moral reference, the compass helping to find their ethical coordinates.

In *Marusia Churai,* Khmelnytsky emphasizes the value of human life when he pardons the protagonist and demands that he be informed when capital punishment is considered. According to the hetman, numerous deaths have occurred, and he considers it his moral obligation to prevent other tragedies from happening. In the context of the 1970s, Kostenko comments on the sanctity of human life in a state where this concept was meaningless and the individual was always sacrificed for the benefit of the collective. For example, only a few years after the publication of the novel, when the nuclear reactor at the Chornobyl station exploded, the residents of the city were not informed of the imminent danger to avoid panic, as if the tragedy had not happened at all. This catastrophe (or rather the way it was dealt with) is probably one of the most characteristic examples of the devaluation of human life and unethical choices. Creating a parallel between seventeenth-century events and the moral decisions made by her contemporaries, the poet shifts the focus from the collective to the personal and re-establishes the significance of the latter.

Kostenko explores the dichotomy of the moral/the unethical in many other works focusing on historical events in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Ukraine. Her poem *The Duma about the Non-Azov Brothers,* for example,

portrays Cossack Sakhno Chernyak and two other officers, who were executed in 1638 because they stayed with their leaders out of loyalty after their fellow Cossacks betrayed them. As in *Marusia Churai*, Kostenko uses a well known folk ballad to create a new and unique perspective. The folk duma tells about three Cossack brothers who escaped from Turkish captivity. Two of the brothers did not want to help the third one, who did not have a horse, and left him to perish. Kostenko creates a *duma* with the exact opposite message, where the main characters make a moral choice at the cost of their own lives. As Walter Smyrniw asserts, "[Future historians] fail to comprehend the significance of the antithesis between the selfish and cowardly acts exemplified by the Azov brothers (the data derived from the *duma*) and the valour displayed in real life situations by the non-Azov Cossack brethren, Pavliuk, Tomylenko, and Sakhno" ("Function of Time" 128). These historians give an assignment to a computer to write a duma about the non-Azov brothers, using the original epic work. Not surprisingly, the main message is not conveyed and the historical events are misrepresented. Just like the misogynistic scholars in the afterword to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* fail to sympathize with the dehumanization of Gilead citizens, the historians in *The Duma* do not understand the ethical value of the Cossacks' acts.

Although this account is historical and reflected in the L'viv chronicle of 1638, Kostenko experiments with the concept of time, shifting from the past to the future, disrupting linearity, and creating a fixed moment in time

represented as a symbolic point of reference. When the three Cossacks are heading for their execution, they appear to be frozen in time while the landscape and people are moving past them. As R.S.Marynyak points out, "The idea of the temporal unity of the world, the model of transference and 'travels' into the past acquires an ontological meaning in contemporary historiosophic poetry in general and Lina Kostenko's works in particular, urging readers to ponder the issue of personal individual responsibility for the entire civilization" (263). In contrast with the present, the past provides clear moral bearings for Kostenko's readers. Dmytro Drozdovsky asserts, "The past is associated not with the ideal time, but the time when ethical coordinates were different, and that's why departure from the past turns into poignant grief" (320). The poet uses past events to create moral and ethical coordinates for the present and contribute to the collective national consciousness.

While Kostenko certainly views historical events from her own perspective, her account is "not a whole cloth invention," as Guy Vanderhaeghe says of historical fiction (35). Cossacks become the embodiment of morality in Kostenko's works, and they did have their own code of honour. They not only protected Ukraine from invaders, but also restored justice if peasants were oppressed by their landlords, as Gogol vividly describes in *Taras Bulba*. On the other hand, Cossacks were not morally impeccable: they acted as mercenaries who fought for money, discriminated against the Jewish people, and committed

acts of cruelty. Kostenko's works are based on historical accounts, but she utilizes history selectively, assigning past events an integrative function.

In *Marusia Churai*, Kostenko portrays the actions of several generations of Ukrainian Cossacks, inextricably connecting the familial, the ancestral, and the collective. The poet employs what John Davis defines as generational and genealogical kinds of history. Both demonstrate a tangible link between past and future events, and the former "excite[s] moral judgement" (116-17). Generational history has an impact on the decisions of the generation whose ancestors fought against their countrymen or defended their land. Based on these two types of political events, the younger generation resolves not to repeat the mistakes of their parents and grandparents or remember their actions, making them a significant part of their national narrative. Genealogical history is that of the past which is idealized and glorified (for example, the colonized rebelling against their colonizers). Kostenko explores the concept of generational history on literal and metaphorical levels. Baida Vyshnevetsky was a hero defending Ukraine who was crucified by the Turks, while his grandson Iarema betrayed his own country and allowed it to be invaded. Marusia's father dies heroically and becomes a national hero, and his daughter writes songs about Cossacks, her country, and her nation, thus continuing her father's actions – symbolically. In a broader sense, each generation leaves a historical legacy and their moral choices create a future for their descendants: they either free Ukraine

and restore peace (even for a brief period of time) or sacrifice their country for their own political and personal goals.

Significantly, members of different generations are depicted as real historical figures, and simultaneously, heroes of folk epos. Kostenko juxtaposes these two planes – those of history and art, demystifying the processes of creating national collective memory. In fact, the realm of folk art is as important as real events. It is not only vital to make valid historical choices, but it is even more important how these events are narrated and remembered. As Catherine Gallagher points out, "[New historicism] entails reading literary and non-literary texts as constituents of historical discourses that are both inside and outside of texts and [...] its practitioners generally posit no fixed hierarchy of cause and effect as they trace the connections among texts, discourses, power, and the construction of subjectivity" ("Marxism" 37). Returning to Foucault's definition of the text as a discursive practice, an event that is a product of history and power relations and at the same time produces history, it should be noted that Kostenko views literary texts and folk epos as material practices that contribute to the redistribution of power, influence decision making, and shape national consciousness. In fact, Kostenko makes the link between the actual historical event and its place in folk songs (i.e., the social memory of the Ukrainian people) immanent and immediate. For example, when the old deacon, Marusia's fellow traveller during her pilgrimage to Kyiv, learns that Marusia is from Poltava, he asks, "Які пісні співаються печальні, / про Остряницю все та

Чурая?" (86) (What sad songs are performed there / About Ostryanytsya and Churai?). Thus, the region is identified by its folk heroes, and they constitute an integral part in the category of national memory. The deacon does not even know that Churai is Marusia's father because she wants to remain anonymous; however, her father becomes a legendary figure.

The generational and the historical gain their validity through the process of producing a work of art – creating a folk song. Poetic agency becomes a means of remembering the history of Ukraine, its heroes and traitors. Creating social memory is a process of negotiation between the author and his/her intended audience; the text is an active agent contributing to making future ethical decisions and historical choices. Znayenko asserts that Marusia wants to create her first song when she listens to a *kobzar* who performs a duma about her father, thus again connecting the realms of the generational and the historical, the personal and the national:

> Все думала: хоч би ж було спитати,
> хто склав слова про нього, про той край.
> Що був же він ріднесенький мій тато,
> а от тепер він — орлик, він Чурай. (36)

> I thought all the time that I had to ask
> Who composed a song about him and that country.
> He was my dearest father

And now he is an “eagle” and Churai.

Poetic agency and generational history become juxtaposed at pivotal points in the novel. When Marusia resumes composing ballads after undergoing a personal trauma and a long period of silence, she writes a duma about Iarema’s heroic grandfather, Baida Vyshnevetsky. He was killed by the Turks and “returned only to be crucified again by his infamous grandson” (Znayenko171). Therefore, it is folk epos that connects the personal and the national, shaping the site of contested historical memories.

Lastly, the epitome of the dichotomy “the personal/the historical” is Marusia herself, who becomes an extended metaphor for Ukraine, its losses and rebirth, national memory, and a mythmaker who is subsumed by her text and becomes part of it. At the beginning of the novel, Marusia’s songs focus on her personal experience, notably her love for Hryts and his unfaithfulness. Then the focus shifts to the communal and the national, when she goes on a pilgrimage to Kyiv and sees the devastation of her land and the suffering of the people brought about by successive wars. Marusia sees empty villages or meets only a few people who survived. As Kosharsky notes, her “descriptions of empty villages resemble present day abandoned villages, where all residents migrated to urban areas due to the Soviet policy of urbanization” (“Literary Theme” 113). When she travels through the region of Volyn, she witnesses a horrifying event. Dozens of people lie in the field quietly, waiting for their death because of hunger – they are unable to move. The depiction strongly resembles the

artificially induced famine of the 1930s Kostenko could not address explicitly in 1974; however, one cannot fail to notice a striking historical parallel used as a subversive strategy. Finally, when Marusia reaches Kyiv, she sees the formerly glorious capital in ruins, pillaged by the Polish army. The devastation of her land parallels her inner state of emptiness and grief.

Having repented and achieved the state of forgiveness, Marusia suffers from a physical ailment. As Kovalevsky asserts, "Marusia is an embodiment of spirituality, but there's war, treachery, and chaos around her. That's why she dies" (149). In the postcolonial context, Marusia's death parallels "the signing of a treaty with Moscow that will result in the oppression of Ukraine for more than three centuries" (Kovalevsky 135). On a hermeneutic level, in spite of the obvious tragic ending, the interpretation of the final lines allows for hope: Marusia hears her songs performed by her townspeople. Earlier in the poem she remarks, "Пісень немає – і мене нема" (127) (If my songs don't exist anymore, I don't either). However, if Marusia's songs are remembered, her death is not final and she is resurrected by her land. Znayenko observes, "Resurrection, and hence transcendence, are possible only within this winding movement of nature that encompasses the spirit as part of history and the collective desire for freedom and life" (173). Her land and her people are also restored to life. The residents of Poltava survived throughout the siege, manifesting remarkable spiritual resilience. As Briukhovetsky maintains, "Ukrainian land occupies a

central place in the novel, together with the main character" (172). The land itself reawakens with the natural cycle of life, and the ending entails hope.

Marusia's songs have already become an intrinsic part of collective national memory. They are sung by Cossacks leaving for war and peasants working in the fields. Like Kostenko's poems, her protagonist's works are validated through the active process of cultural negotiation between the artist and her audience. Similar to Atwood's characters, who survive hardships and ordeals but attain hope, Marusia passes her tragic agonic test and leaves a tangible national legacy. However, the record she creates is oral and there is a distinct possibility that in the future parts of it will be forgotten or changed, and there will be gaps in her rendering of the nation's losses and victories. While acknowledging these issues inherent in the writing of history, Kostenko believes that it is crucial for her nation to preserve these records, in particular its efforts to retain statehood.

In her historical novel in verse *Berestechko*, named after the place where the Ukrainian army led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky was defeated by the Poles, Kostenko explores similar concepts. Individual creative agency and its role in shaping the collective national consciousness become the focus of this literary work. She portrays the hetman tortured by this loss and betrayed by his allies, Tartars, and his own officers. Berestechko is a metaphor for tragedies in Ukrainian history, the country's position as a borderland between the East and the West, and fragmented national identity. As Dzyuba states, "Her depiction of

Ukraine in ruins was based on the Chornobyl experience of the poet herself" (199) – Kostenko travelled to the contaminated zone several times and wrote extensively on this subject. As the critic further asserts, one of the central messages in *Berestechko* is "the necessity of Shevchenko" (199). According to Kostenko, it is not enough for a nation to affirm itself through action and defining historical events, for "Бо лиш народи, явлені у Слові, / достойно жити можуть на землі" (Kostenko, *Berestechko* 132) (Only the nations embodied in the Word/ can live on earth with dignity). She constructs the entire novel as Khmelnytsky's interior monologue, the journey into his subconsciousness, which becomes a site of tragic historical events unfolding in his memory (the reverse technique is employed in *Marusia Churai*, when her actual journey through the devastated country parallels her psychological death and resurrection). Acknowledging his own mistakes and their consequences for the whole nation, the hetman still ends his tortured confession with the words of hope, not allowing for a defeat either in an individual life or the history of a nation.

Literary works offer the possibility of such hope and continuity in spite of tragic ruptures of history. Kostenko mourns the effacement of the better part of the nation in the seventeenth century and in her own time. Briukhovetsky states that all the protagonists in *Marusia Churai* die – Cossacks Lesko Cherkes, Pushkar, Iskra – their deaths are presented in a series of glimpses into the future; however, all of them will survive in *dumas* (169-71). This message acquires

another meaning in the context of the repressions of the 1970s, when Ukrainian intellectuals were on trial, and Kostenko's novel becomes a symbolic locale of remembrance. Maintaining the romantic tradition dating back to Taras Shevchenko, the poet assumes the role of a spokesperson, who is frequently in opposition and whose position is always political. D.H.Struk notes, "One keeps hoping that this weight of responsibility placed on the shoulders of a poet is not a generic feature of Ukrainian poets but directly related to political circumstance. Perhaps someday Ukrainian poets too will not have any special 'behests.' They will just be." He immediately adds that he views the role of the Ukrainian poet as "the historian of the nation" from a Western perspective ("How" 164). Of course, Kostenko has always emphasized the need to contribute to Ukrainian national collective consciousness – through narrating historical events, remembering those whose names were forgotten and obliterated, and even writing in Ukrainian during the Soviet era, when it was a political statement in itself.

The relationship between writers and past events is dynamic and constantly changing, as is the position of the text in a field of contested ideologies. Kostenko's novel was criticized for its focus on the distant past, and its idea of preserving national history was directly opposed to the dominant ideology (Oles Honchar was the only writer who addressed similar themes in his novel *Cathedral*). Nowadays *Marusia Churai* belongs to the official national discourse. Paradoxically, although situated at a different end of the spectrum, its

ideas are no less relevant than they were in the 1970s. The protagonist of Kostenko's only prose novel, *Diary of a Ukrainian Madman,* published in 2011, remarks that Ukrainian society needs a unifying national idea and a set of common moral values to counter "stagnation and profanation, discrimination and assimilation," as he sarcastically adds (231). The author focuses on the importance of the central national narrative; however, such narrative needs to be created in a pluralistic society, which provides equal rights for national and ethnic minorities.

Writers are at once immersed in their own time and yet "pull out and away," transcending the limits of the current ideology and negotiating meaning that does not lose its value in a different historical period:

> Certain texts possess some limited immunity from the policing functions of their society, they lay claim to special status, and contrive to move from one time period to another without losing all meaning. We do not experience a work of art – or indeed any significant textual trace of the past – as confirmation of what we already know. In a meaningful encounter with a text that reaches us powerfully, we feel at once pulled out of our own world and plunged back with redoubled force into it. (Gallagher and Greenblatt 16-17)

Therefore, the text is a product of current ideologies and at the same time overcomes the boundaries imposed by them. Writers are inevitably influenced

by their contemporary discourses and challenge them; every text is a field and a participant in a constantly shifting interplay of competing ideologies, "positions of power and resistance" (Hutcheon 98). It is possible to change a position or shift a field of vision, but it is impossible to remain neutral.

For Kostenko, communicating political and cultural messages that reflect the current situation of Ukrainian society is a conscious choice, and neutrality does not exist as a valid category. Undoubtedly, every text is inherently political (refusing to address certain issues and withdrawing from debates is also a statement in itself). Kostenko notes that works of art function as "a system of lenses and mirrors, so that in the reflections and magnifications every society could have an objective picture of itself and present to the world an undistorted image about itself" (Kostenko, "Cultural Aura"). Elaborating on this metaphor, she states that Ukraine is still using an outdated telescope that has never been renovated.

Kostenko addresses many nation-specific issues, namely creating national memory as an integral element of statehood and preserving historical records as a point of reference for future generations. However, some of the ideas presented in *Marusia Churai* transcend national and temporal boundaries, including individual agency and the evolution of self, loyalty to an individual and a country, and art as a nexus of morality. As Maryniak contends, "The dynamic interconnection of the past, the present, and the future in one linguistic and aesthetic unity results in that timeless poetic form that constitutes the

transcendental nature of human spirit" (261). The relationship between the reader and the text, as well as the text's role in a field of competing ideologies, has changed since the novel's publication, but moral criteria and the notion of freedom – both individual and national – have certain autonomy irrespective of geographical and temporal boundaries.

Female Poets as Creative Agents:
Cultural Memory and the Collective National Consciousness

The eponymous protagonist's symbolic roles in *Marusia Churai* are manifold. Marusia embodies her country struggling to retain its nationhood and a distinct cultural identity throughout historical ordeals, and she is the "voice of the nation," as Cossack Ivan Iskra refers to her in his conversation with Khmelnytsky. Women have been cast in the image of the motherland, and such representations have been subject to criticism as they again portray women in a familiar role as opposed to representing them as active historical agents; however, in the case of this novel, such portrayal is not only symbolic and works on several planes. The bard possesses creative agency and resistance, and she "is not the traditional, male-dependent female, but instead, one who is completely independent – physically, emotionally, and psychologically," as Kosharsky maintains ("Masked Feminism" 62). Marusia witnesses important historical events and depicts them from a female perspective, thus writing women into the archive; in her songs she not only focuses on the themes traditionally regarded

as feminine but also writes about her land, her nation, and Cossacks' glory and honour.

One of the manifestations of agency is creating a work of art. According to Kristeva, it "requires a certain lifting of repression," proposing, inventing, and reformulating a new discourse and a new universe (110, 111). As mentioned before, there are no historical documents proving Marusia's existence – she remains a legendary figure, and there have been various interpretations of her life and creative legacy. For example, Kosharsky notes that "Kostenko's Churai is very different from the one portrayed in Volodymyr Samiylenko's play *Churaivna* (1886). Samiylenko's version emphasizes Marusia's dependent character: she is repeatedly shown to rely on the play's male characters" ("Masked Feminism" 62). Also, although Ukrainian women exercised relative autonomy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and had some civil rights that were not enjoyed by women in Western Europe, as I will discuss later, Cossack culture was still predominantly patriarchal. It is doubtful that Marusia would have been so readily accepted by the Cossacks as a spokesperson for their code of honour and the national voice.

Kostenko's protagonist possesses agency and leaves a poetic legacy in her songs. As Smyrniw maintains, "Kostenko emphasizes the contribution of female songwriters to Ukrainian folklore: many folk songs were composed by women (for example, the grammatical category of female gender was used in many songs)" ("Istorychna Poetyka" 18). However, Kostenko constructs a

national myth, creating the symbolic figure of Marusia to depict historical events from a woman's viewpoint and thus contribute to the collective memory of the nation. It is not a complete invention that such a gifted female songwriter, most likely, existed (after all, there is a legacy of the songs ascribed to her and written from a female perspective). The political events taking place in seventeenth-century Ukraine and prominent Cossack leaders portrayed in the novel have been described in historical documents and researched by Kostenko. It is a statement in itself that political and military leaders' names were retained in the annals of history, but the female songwriter's legacy, whose songs are well known to every Ukrainian, exists in the oral domain. Gallagher states that "women should not be only visibilized, but their roles as actors and agents should be more fully understood" (4). Kostenko fills in historical gaps and redefines the female songwriter's space in a cultural and historical discourse by restructuring its boundaries and shifting the balance of power.

Kostenko underscores the role of an independent female figure in a contemporary context, facilitating the process of social change in the last decades of the twentieth century. She subverts the hegemonic ideology on two planes, undermining and diffusing the following dichotomies: totalitarian versus national and patriarchal versus feminist. Judith Newton asserts that

> the gap between a role prescription and women's actual behavior creates role anxiety and resistance suggesting that the hegemonic ideologies are far from being unified and static. Hegemonic

> ideology and power are not monolithic and stable; they are internally divided and are in constant need of construction and revision, creating the conditions which make social change and the agency of the weak possible. ("History" 155)

Marusia does not fit into prescribed roles culturally and socially. She is the embodiment of an independent female artist, whose works make her an active historical agent creating the national narrative of her country. Judith Butler states that "binary restrictions are to be overcome in experience, they must meet their dissolution in the creation of new cultural forms. […] The political program for overcoming binary restrictions ought to be concerned […] with cultural innovation rather than myths of transcendence" (*Variations* 32). Kostenko creates such new cultural forms and realigns the boundaries of political discourse.

Although Marusia's character is inevitably shaped by the ideological and cultural context of the 1970s, the historical conditions of seventeenth-century Ukraine could have facilitated the emergence of such an independent character as the one depicted in the novel. In contrast to Western Europe, in seventeenth-century Ukraine, women could occupy official posts such as *starosta* (local administrator or governor), and they could also inherit this office. Women participated in local self-government, and women-landowners paid taxes and fulfilled other rights and duties associated with this position. Some of these responsibilities were assumed out of necessity as their husbands were

often away at war for extended periods of time. Archdeacon Pavel Aleppsky, who travelled to Moscow through Ukrainian territory in the middle of the seventeenth century, was surprised to find out that "with the exception of very few, most women and girls can read" and "in the land of Cossacks all children can read, even orphans" ("Journey" 209). In one of her monologues, Marusia expresses gratitude to her father, who sent her to a Cossack school where she learned to read and write, thus obtaining the necessary means to develop her gift.

Although Ukrainian women possessed the above mentioned rights, still, their domain was mainly private and domestic as opposed to Cossack freedom. George Grabowicz explains in his discussion of *Taras Bulba*, "the most basic dichotomy is man and woman, and the next one, which is naturally built on it, is the opposition of a settled way of life to that of the Cossacks... The difference between the male and female world immediately becomes apparent" ("Hohol" 147-48). In the opening chapter of *Taras Bulba*, the protagonist manifests an open contempt for his wife and completely disregards her feelings when he takes his sons away to Zaporizka Sich after they spend only one day with their mother. Kosharsky remarks, "Everything that belongs to the female world is regarded by Bulba as inferior and not worthy of attention" ("Masked Feminism" 66). Marusia's character exists in the symbolic domain at the intersection of historical and present-day interests, becoming the embodiment of female

empowerment that would not have been feasible in the sixteenth century but rather reflects Kostenko's views of contemporary social conditions.

Kostenko facilitates social change by giving Marusia a voice and representing historical events from a woman's perspective. As Smyrniw notes, Kostenko describes not the battles themselves, but their consequences, in particular "widows' villages," where their husbands, Cossacks, did not return from the war ("Istorychna Poetyka" 13). Marusia writes about another female character who could not come to terms with her husband's death:

Живе ж оно Ящиха Балаклійська.
А голосила ж років півтора.
А чоловік же не вернувся з війська,
живе ж вона, нічого, не вмира. (125)

Yaschikha Balakliyska goes on living,
And she was crying for a year and a half.
Her husband did not return from the war,
And she lives somehow and does not die.

This character's situation is far from unique – in fact, her fate is shared by her country:

Пів-України — сироти козацькі.
Од Лохвиці до самої Молдови,
пів-України — то козацькі вдови.

Дітей без мужа ставити на ноги.

Ні захисту в житті, ні допомоги.

Такі ж гіркі, такі ж безоборонні! (106)

Half of Ukraine is Cossacks' orphans.

From Lokhvitsa to the very Moldova,

Half of Ukraine is Cossacks' widows,

Who will have to raise their children without their husbands,

Without their help and protection.

How sad they are, how defenceless!

Women will have to "rebuild the entire country ruined by 'the heroic battles' of men" (Smyrniw, "Istorychna Poetyka" 15). Atwood addresses similar themes in her poem "At First I Was Given Centuries" (*Selected* 123), when she presents different historical epochs as a narrative montage with rapidly changing scenes. Although the specific details accompanying central events vary from medieval castles to airplanes, and finally, a nuclear attack, the central idea is the same. Men are wounded or die in battle, and ultimately the entire situation becomes almost absurd as men and women participate in this frightening kaleidoscope of history, refusing to change its main determinants: struggle for power resulting in violence and death.

Narrating the tragic history of her nation, the bard witnesses the devastation of her country in the course of the pilgrimage from Poltava to Kyiv.

She states that the portrayal of contemporary historical events should be emotional in order to communicate the message to the future generations, negating the notion of the author's neutrality and detachment: "Історії ж бо пишуть на столі. Ми ж пишем кров'ю на своїй землі" (94) (History is written at a desk/ We are writing with blood on our land). Her own tragedy is overshadowed by that of her country, and her spiritual resurrection begins with feelings of empathy for her countrymen. She is no longer devoid of any emotions and regains her creative agency when she witnesses the resilience and courage of the residents of Kyiv who cope with loss and unbearable living conditions as they did during Batu Khan's attack in 1240. The medium of poetry reinforces the immediacy of the protagonist's emotion when, expecting to see a beautiful city with its churches and monasteries, she finds a place that was burned to ashes. The deacon comments that Kyiv ceased to exist and implores her not to look back like Lot's wife. The persistent theme of the loss of culture and the earlier ways of life, also prevalent in Akhmatova's poetry, reaches its apotheosis when Marusia prays not before the icons, but their ashes in a burned cathedral. As Kostenko observes, "Молилися в порожнечу, на попіл ікон молились, / шукали живого Бога у сонячних сизих стовпах" (103) (We were praying in the emptiness, before the ashes of the icons/ and looking for the living God among the columns of gray smoke). Referring to Christianity was a bold statement in the 1970s, when the Soviet government discouraged the practice of religion and cathedrals were ruined, creating an explicit parallel not

only between 1240 and the seventeenth century, but also the 1970s. While Akhmatova mourns the devastation brought about by historical changes, asserting that she understood why Lot's wife sacrificed her entire life for one look at her past, Kostenko focuses on spiritual reintegration, namely the rebirth of the country after numerous deaths, including that of the folk poet herself.

Writing about the consequences of war from a female perspective, mainly that of mothers who lost their children, Kostenko speaks of the metaphorical minefields of history that affect the future generations – in her poem "The Pastoral of the Twentieth Century" these minefields are also literal. Mothers lament the death of their children, "freckled village Argonauts" of "noble Cossack descent," who stepped on the bomb in the field decades after the Second World War was over. While the locale is the Ukrainian steppe and the poem addresses the effects of a particular historical event, the poet overcomes specific national boundaries by alluding to Greek mythology. As she explains, "І ніяка в житті Аріадна / вже не виведе з горя отих матерів" ("And not even Ariadne / will lead those mothers out of their grief") (*Selected* 32). Their individual experience becomes representative of the Second World War, and is so common that Kostenko names her poem "The Pastoral of the Twentieth Century" with bitter irony. She emphasizes that it could happen anywhere, and the detrimental consequences of tragic historical events will take place long after the event itself is over, producing a significant impact on the lives of the future generations.

Conclusion

The relativist model, which gained popularity in the second half of the twentieth century, questions the feasibility of representing historical events. According to scholars like Hayden White, Lionel Gossman, and Linda Hutcheon, historians pose their inquiries in an arbitrary linguistic system and portray the past from their own ideological standpoint, relying on the specific modes of emplotment. Thinkers such as Joyce Appleby, Elizabeth Tonkin, and John Davis do not deny the validity of these arguments, but they still claim that there is a connection between past events and their consequences for the present and some historical interpretations are more credible than others. Atwood acknowledges hermeneutic limitations to a greater extent, while Akhmatova and Kostenko present a romanticized view of the writing of history. However, the three poets agree that analyzing historical events leads to concrete choices, including maintaining continuity or preventing such occurrences from happening again. Their female protagonists are writers who become active participants in historical events, representing them in their literary works that exist at the intersection of contemporary interests and historical circumstances. The Canadian, Russian, and Ukrainian poets suggest that historical poetry and fiction should always contain an ethical component and the writers who do not sympathize with the victims of tragic political events will not produce a viable account.

On numerous occasions, Atwood has been referred to as a feminist writer and asked to "support and endorse feminist politics and to … associate her work with the movement" (Tolan 2), but she has always rejected any specific labels. Unlike the Canadian poet, Akhmatova and Kostenko do not discuss the category of gender or women's rights explicitly, but the three authors' protagonists assume roles traditionally assigned to men and their texts undeniably interact with the ideas of feminist discourse. The poets underscore the process of the writing of history and its significance for their respective nations on two planes, mainly the importance of historical accounts and their impact on the decision-making process of future generations as well as the empowerment and redemptive qualities gained by their characters in the process of creating poetry.

Atwood's understanding of the validity and accuracy of historical records and interpretations of political events accessible through literary texts is multi-faceted, often containing explanations that appear to contradict or undermine each other. On the one hand, the poet questions the knowability of past events and emphasizes reconstruction and selection. On the other hand, she asserts that learning about the past of one's nation is crucial to identity formation. In her earlier works, namely her poems on the experiences of early Canadian settlers and the 1972 edition of *Survival*, she demonstrates a more unified view of history, emphasizing the necessity of reclaiming Canada's symbolic national space and finding common ground (*Survival* 9). In her later works, in particular *Alias Grace* and *The Robber Bride,* she explores

epistemological challenges, stating that even imperfect and inevitably subjective historical accounts are essential to self-identification and nation building. In contrast, Akhmatova and Kostenko view poets as the historians of their countries in accordance with Russian and Ukrainian literary traditions, making their positions pre-determined and politically charged. Akhmatova is convinced that her memory is the only valid historical record and does not question the malleability or subjectivity of memory. When official records are inaccessible, individual and frequently subversive memories assume the role of historical documents. This process is enabled largely through the reception of Akhmatova's and Kostenko's poems by the public that legitimized and appropriated their works by circulating them secretly and investing them with their own emotional response and private memories. Kostenko parallels objective political events in seventeenth-century Ukraine and their depiction in Marusia's songs, rendering the message that the latter is of more significant value and will be preserved in the space of collective cultural memory.

While many authors, including Rudy Wiebe, Guy Vanderhaeghe, and Arnold Davidson, analyze the works of historical fiction, very few scholars, most notably Frank Kermode, James Olney, and Stan Smith, focus on exploring the genre of historical poetry. To the best of my knowledge, no effort to conduct a comparative analysis of historical poems by Canadian, Russian, and Ukrainian female poets has been undertaken. This genre is a unique medium juxtaposing personal and collective experiences as well as recreating particular past events

as if the reader had participated in them. As Grabes maintains, "By virtue of its spatio-temporal abstraction from reality, together with its ability to bring a highly complex and abstract historical period into both a personal, exemplary and sensuous focus, literature allows for individual connectivity and identification along with normative or ethical discrimination" (347). Although he comments on both historical fiction and poetry without discriminating between them, the latter is more subjective and foregrounds the perspective of the lyrical "I," thus relaying its perception of these events, capturing this moment in history with its minute details, and saving it from oblivion. Jennifer Wallach observes, "If we conceive of history as vicarious experience, it only follows that such experiences should produce memories as well as a deeper subjective understanding of the past" (40). Disrupting the dichotomy of "the individual/the collective" and erasing the clear demarcation line between its two components, Atwood, Akhmatova, and Kostenko make historical events a personal responsibility and therefore implicate their readers. The Canadian poet creates an archetypal man and woman who engage in power games that take place in their relationship and on a global scale. Their need to control others leads to the destruction of their emotional ties, acts of violence and wars; their children learn about these games and imitate them. Atwood's protagonists participate in political events and become their victims, while refusing to believe that it is happening to them and not somebody else. The author states, "This war [is] grinding across your body" (*Selected* 258). Akhmatova writes about her

personal tragedy (the loss of her family members to Stalin's terror), which is shared by millions of her fellow citizens. She narrates her own story – recollecting the morning of her husband's arrest, contemplating suicide, "[flinging herself] at the hangman's feet" (*Requiem* 2104) to save her son, while repeatedly emphasizing that her tragedy is common for her country. Kostenko juxtaposes the betrayal of a personal relationship with that of Ukraine, concluding that the same moral criteria should be applied in both cases.

In her poems on the Vietnam War and crimes against humanity in El Salvador, Atwood states that though these political catastrophes do not take place on the Canadian territory, her readers should consider them their moral responsibility and become involved. Akhmatova constructs her own role as a poet whose responsibility is to commemorate the victims of Stalin's repressions because her poems might be the only remaining tangible records after the official documents were destroyed. Kostenko creates the symbolic, idealized figures of Cossacks who defend their country and value independence and freedom (both their own and that of their nation).

In my thesis, I have applied a new historical and a postcolonial approach. The poets view their literary works as functions that occupy different positions in relation to dominant ideologies, interacting with other texts and cultural practices. In such a way, they depict historical events and at the same time contribute to moulding the collective consciousness by re-affirming or refusing to follow certain cultural practices. Atwood focuses on Canadian history,

namely the dual and ambivalent experiences of early settlers, when this topic was scarcely addressed; however, now it has become an inherent element in the hegemonic discourse. Akhmatova's poems on the October Revolution and Stalin's repressions oppose the oppressive power structures, but in her Second World War poems she internalizes the colonial discourse, creating the rigid binary opposition of "Nazi versus the Russian people," "us versus Germans" and obliterating the differences between national and cultural groups in the Soviet Union. Kostenko's poems on Ukrainian national history were subjected to censorship during the Soviet era; nowadays they coincide with the official master narrative of independent Ukraine. The author believes that Ukrainian national identity needs to be constantly reasserted and reclaimed to resist an imminent threat of colonization posed by Russia.

The three authors' poems present constructed phenomena and cultural myths such as a unifying sense of national identity or pride, but these myths have concrete consequences. I agree with their viewpoint that the accounts of past events have an ethical dimension. The Canadian, Russian, and Ukrainian poets advocate against historical amnesia although Atwood and Kostenko acknowledge that the process of posing historical inquiries is complicated by the fact that any political event generates a variety of interpretations and perspectives.

In my study, I have analyzed Judith Butler's concept of feminism as an open category where different political influences compete and that will never

achieve closure. This category comprises different factors, including class, nation, and ethnicity and participates in reshaping the current political discourse. Teresa de Lauretis sees the shift from a view of "woman defined purely by sexual difference (i.e., in relation to man) to the more difficult and complex notion that the female subject is the site of differences; differences that are not only sexual or only racial, economic or (sub)cultural, but all of these together, and often enough at odds with one another" (14). For example, national identity and female agency become interrelated and interdependent in the three poets' works. Atwood's, Akhmatova's, and Kostenko's protagonists relate their experience that is shared by many of their fellow citizens and becomes historical. Moodie has to overcome her feelings of alienation and reconcile, both psychologically and physically, with her new land, often by surviving though traumatic experiences, namely her son's death. Akhmatova constructs a poetic persona whose role is to remember the victims of a totalitarian state and to counteract the official mechanism of destroying historical documents. Akhmatova asserts that her biggest fear is losing her memory but does not acknowledge the inherent subjectivity and unreliability involved in the process of remembering. She is convinced that viable alternatives do not exist and these tragic events will be forgotten if her poems do not reach their audience. Therefore, remembering becomes a moral concept that acts as a means of retaining humanity during the regime of terror. Like Akhmatova, Kostenko views Churai's songs as a record of the Cossacks' heroism and sacrifice as well

as people's struggles during the wars of liberation in sixteenth-century Ukraine. Although these ballads are oral and modified by different performers, Cossack leaders will survive in these stories because the archival evidence is destroyed during the war.

The protagonists narrate their stories from a female perspective. As gender is a cultural project, its artificial construction opens possibilities for agency and change. It is never finalized of fixed but allows different meanings and functions to operate in a contested field. Atwood's, Akhmatova's, and Kostenko's characters overcome the social boundaries of a patriarchal society. Atwood's Moodie tells the story of early settlers in Canada, overcoming hardships and becoming the embodiment of her new country. The historical Moodie might not have conquered her feelings of alienation towards her new surroundings, but Atwood's Moodie accomplished this task, although only on a symbolic level. Akhmatova tells the story of her son's imprisonment as a citizen and a mother, juxtaposing the personal and the collective. During the period of Stalin's repression, telling a story was the ultimate act of courage as the mere act of relating her experience could result in an imminent death. Kostenko's Churai addresses the themes that were traditionally masculine such as Cossacks' glory and their victories in battle. She is respected as a songwriter by her fellow citizens, including Cossack leaders, while the historical Churai would not have been accepted in the male domain.

Sharing one common feature, the poets' characters view their creative agency as a source of empowerment. It would be naïve and idealistic to claim that their depiction of historical events is accurate, but it is not entirely a product of their imagination either. Rather, it is based on past accounts and contemporary motives, where the present brings history back to life, reclaims and repossesses it.

Emerging from a certain historical context, poems possess characteristics of their time period, interact with other texts, and participate in reshaping cultural imagination. Wiener contends that literary works "are always in process; they enact, they perform, they effect. Texts are transformative, not merely reflective. They are continually 're-presenting'—not only doing cultural work as themselves the products of cultural struggles, but also continuing without end to do cultural work as each reader, each hearer, each viewer recasts them in the act of reception" (621). The three poets suggest that literary works are never finalized but have "a life of their own," interacting with the reader independently of the author's intentions. In *In Search of Alias Grace,* Atwood tells the story of the famous poet Pablo Neruda, who found out that his friend, a postman, used his poem in the courtship of a local girl, telling her he was the author:

> "But," replies the postman, "poems do not belong to those who write them. Poems belong to those who need them." And so it is with stories about the past. The past no longer belongs only to

those who once lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it. (39)

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