

Title: "Biography as Pathography": Anna Akhmatova in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
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Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) has entered another century. Although Akhmatova's relatives and contemporaries are mostly dead and the possibility of finding any significantly new information about her is rather slim, over the last few years she has merited several new biographies, scholarly articles, feature films and documentaries, all of which make claims to illuminating new aspects of Akhmatova's personal life and creativity. In this paper I will compare the merits of the four newly released biographies of Akhmatova. While every biographer, in Meryle Secrest's words, sees her task as "not just record[ing] but reveal[ing]" her subject's inner motives and hidden agendas, the zeal with which Akhmatova's biographers rush to deconstruct and discredit her (or, conversely, to absolve and protect her) as one of Russia's moral beacons is truly astounding.

Apart from Roman Timenchik's monstrously delightful *Anna Akhmatova in the 1960s*, these new biographies present little new factual information about Akhmatova. The chronology of Akhmatova's life as well as its turning points remain relatively the same with every new biographer. What distinguishes one biography from another is the number of "warts" that biographers want us to see on Akhmatova's canonical face (such as her manipulateness, her conceit about her international reputation, her mostly doomed lesbian relationships, her "heavy" drinking in Tashkent during the war, etc.). Although the British and American biographers have been employing the "warts-and-all" approach since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Russia it is still a novelty. And who could be a better target than Akhmatova? On the one hand, Akhmatova's life is relatively well documented. Every biography draws heavily on various collections of memoirs (including Chukovskaia's *Akhmatova's Journals*), Akhmatova's personal records as well as her numerous attempts at writing her own biography as preserved in her famous *Notes (Zapisnye knizhki)*. On the other hand, the record of Akhmatova's life, however complete, is all in fragments, notes, some odd bits and pieces, which invites (almost begs for) thoughtful (and thoughtless) re-arranging and reinterpretation, a challenge that Akhmatova's new biographers have been willingly embracing.

Unlike her other illustrious contemporaries, such as Tsvetaeva, Pasternak and Mandelstam, Akhmatova had no sons, daughters or husbands who regarded it their duty to come up with an embellished, definitive and comprehensive account of her life for posterity (Chukovskaia's preservationist duties were divided between Akhmatova, her late husband, her father, and later Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn). In fact, Akhmatova's son, Lev Gumilev, after her death contributed to the dissemination of a rather unflattering image of Akhmatova, particularly as that of an uncaring mother. Akhmatova is a no man's land and yet she conveniently belongs to everyone. The comparison of Akhmatova's new biographies to the ones that were released some twenty years ago to commemorate her centennial in 1989 attests not only to the biographers' changing political and personal allegiances but also to the changing tastes of their readers and, in general, to the belated emergence of Russian "pathography" ('biography as pathography' in Joyce Carol Oats' apt definition from 1988).

## Works Cited

- Oats, Joyce Carol. "Jean Stafford: Biography as Pathography" *Where I've Been, and Where I am Going*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1999.  
Secrest, Meryle. *Shoot the Widow*. New York: Knopf, 2007.