

“BURNING BURNING BURNING BURNING”:  
THE FIRE OF *THE WASTE LAND* IN  
ANNA AKHMATOVA’S *POEM WITHOUT A HERO*

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ABSTRACT

In 1940, when the flames of WWII were already devastating Europe and approaching the USSR, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) started what was to become her last major work, *Poem Without a Hero* (1940-1960). Thanks to the poet and writer Boris Pasternak, Akhmatova was able to read T.S. Eliot’s work. Although she and Eliot never met nor communicated directly, Akhmatova considered him her soulmate. Having witnessed WWI, the Russian Revolution and Civil War, the communist purges, Stalinism, and foreseeing the upcoming Nazi invasion, Akhmatova turns to Eliot as one of her main inspirations. The present paper explores one of the leitmotifs of *The Waste Land*, the multifaceted fire, seeing it as, first, a symbol of the horrors depicted in *Poem Without a Hero*, and second, a hope of a purifying power. Akhmatova’s *Poem Without a Hero* originated in *The Waste Land*’s despair and longing for salvation, and the fire in her poem is as merciless as it is redeeming, “like a pure flame in a dish of clay” (*Poem Without a Hero*).

KEYWORDS: Anna Akhmatova, T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, *Poem without a Hero*, Avantgarde.

“ARDIENDO ARDIENDO ARDIENDO ARDIENDO”: EL FUEGO DE  
*LA TIERRA BALDÍA* EN *POEMA SIN HÉROE* DE ANNA AJMÁTOVA”

RESUMEN

En 1940, cuando las llamas de la Segunda Guerra Mundial ya estaban devastando Europa y se acercaban a la URSS, la poeta rusa Anna Ajmátova (1889-1966) comenzó a trabajar en el que iba a ser su último gran poema, *Poema sin héroe* (1940-1960). Gracias al poeta y escritor Boris Pasternak, Ajmátova pudo leer los poemas de T.S. Eliot. Aunque ellos nunca se conocieron ni se comunicaron directamente, Ajmátova lo consideraba su alma gemela. Tras haber vivido la Primera Guerra Mundial, la Revolución y Guerra Civil Rusa, las purgas comunistas, el estalinismo y previendo la invasión nazi, Ajmátova recurre a Eliot como su principal fuente de inspiración. El presente artículo tiene como objetivo explorar el fuego, uno de los temas principales de *La tierra baldía*, símbolo tanto del horror como de la esperanza de purificación en *Poema sin héroe*. El poema de Ajmátova tuvo su origen en la desesperación y el anhelo de salvación de *La tierra baldía*, y el fuego en su poema es tan despiadado como redentor, “como una llama pura en un plato de barro” (*Poema sin héroe*).

PALABRAS CLAVE: Anna Ajmátova, T.S. Eliot, *La tierra baldía*, *Poema sin héroe*, vanguardia.

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One hundred years after the publication of *The Waste Land* (1922), the significance of Thomas Stearns Eliot's work is yet to be fully explored. *The Waste Land's* gravity and legacy stretch far beyond Eliot's native language or his native country, and to take just one example of his reach, they can be seen in his hitherto underexplored influence on the work of Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966). While echoes of his *Four Quartets* (1941) can be found in Akhmatova's *Poem Without a Hero* (1940-1960), it was *The Waste Land*, written almost twenty years earlier, that remained a strong inspiration for her in her revision of her past and that of her country, which is intertwined with the destiny of Europe.

In *Freedom and the Spirit*, the Russian philosopher and theologian Nikolay Berdyaev (1874-1948) wrote: "the spiritual world is like a torrent of fire in free creative dynamism" (1944, 57). In expanding the connection between fire, spirituality, and freedom, this paper uses the symbol of fire to explore Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Akhmatova's *Poem Without a Hero*.

Considering the complexity of both Eliot's and Akhmatova's creative methods, a comparative analysis of their work is needed. Eliot's and Akhmatova's mutual admiration for Dante (1265-1321) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), as well as their advocacy for Christian values, have contributed to their shared perspectives on the challenges of secularism. In her notes to *Poem Without a Hero*, Akhmatova describes the poem as a "Requiem for all Europe" (Akhmatova 1990, 352). In truth, not only *Poem Without a Hero* but also *The Waste Land* can be read as requiems for Europe, the purifying fire of *The Waste Land* redeeming the land without heroes of Akhmatova's *Poem*, which is a land without heroes.

*Poem Without a Hero* has only recently become a focus of Slavonic studies. Akhmatova was unable to publish her poem during her lifetime; Soviet censorship meant that it became available to Russian readers only thirty years later. Since the secret police agents and several of her acquaintances were spying on her, Akhmatova developed a shrewd way of writing poems, called *tainopis*, which means "secret writing": she did not write down the poems, instead memorising them along with friends she could trust, some of whom would eventually write them down. As a result, many of her poems were published abroad or long after her death; as of today, more than one edition exists for various texts.

The parallel between Eliot and Akhmatova was suggested by Akhmatova herself. In her memoirs, she mentions Charlie Chaplin, the Eiffel Tower, and Eliot as all being "born" in the same year as herself (Polivanov 1994, 6). This is not quite accurate, as Eliot was born a year earlier, but her mistake might well have been deliberate, with the intention of enhancing their connection. In her conversations with Anatoly Nayman (1991, 38) and Lydia Chukovskaya (1994, 112), she referred to Eliot as her "little brother," seeing him as a kindred soul. *The Waste Land* and Eliot's later poems were an inspiration for Akhmatova, and although the dialogue between the poets never took place in person, it remains vocal in their poetic texts.

*The Waste Land* and *Poem Without a Hero* were created simultaneously in contexts at once similar and dissimilar. Eliot first became known with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), whose unique language altered the poetic idiom. With *The Waste Land* in 1922, Eliot established himself as one of the most



prominent figures of Western Modernism. *The Waste Land* is the poetic illustration of Eliot's conception of tradition, of "the mind of Europe," a mind "that abandons nothing *en route*" (Eliot 1972, 16) and of the historical sense which poets need to share, which he outlines in his seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). The experimental nature of the poem meant the consecration of Modernist aesthetics, which presented "multitudes of points of view" and established "links between different sets of beliefs that lie at the foundations of the mind of Europe" (Patea 2007, 96).

Anna Akhmatova was already a well-known poet by the time she started writing *Poem Without a Hero* in 1940. She published her first collection, *Evening*, in 1912 and immediately obtained national recognition. For some time, her poetry had been concerned with her personal challenges, but as Roberta Reeder states, the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and WWI (1914-1918) "marked a significant change in Akhmatova's work, and soon she began to take on the role of the traditional village 'wailer'" (1994, XIII). From that time on, she spoke out for all the Russians and thus became a national hero and prophet. After the Revolution of 1917, Akhmatova wrote some of her most emblematic poems: witnessing the terror that the communists brought upon her country, she created one of her best-known testimonies, *Requiem* (1935-1940). Here, Akhmatova used the strength of her talent to speak up for all those forced to remain silent while their fathers, wives, and children were torn apart in front of them. *Poem Without a Hero* was to become Akhmatova's last major poem and the crowning work of her career. Written over more than two decades, based on various fragments from her early poetry, edited tirelessly, the *Poem* was to crystallise history and its lessons lived and learnt in some terrible times.

Both *The Waste Land* and *Poem Without a Hero* are war poems. However, the texts were produced at quite different stages of their writers' lives. For Eliot, it was one of his earliest works, written when he was 34 years old; for Akhmatova her last major poem, one to which she had dedicated more than twenty years. They were written against different historical backgrounds: *The Waste Land* addresses WWI and its aftermath as well as Eliot's personal disillusionment and that of his generation in times of spiritual bankruptcy, while *Poem Without a Hero* is concerned with the ordeals of WWI, the Russian Revolution and the Civil War, the communist purges, WWII, and Stalinism. Akhmatova's poem may therefore be seen as conversant with Eliot's in its search for meaning in a meaningless wasteland.

The symbolism of fire pervades both *The Waste Land* and *Poem Without a Hero*, burning intensely yet differently in the two poems. Ronald Schuchard describes the poetic personae of *The Waste Land* as "sunk in an insidious dialogue with the self, their spirits exhausted" (1999, 5), and this spiritual burnout is both caused and healed by fire. The two poems recreate "the archaic mythological pattern of the descent into Hell" (Ushakova 2016, 76), whose fire forever tortures sinners in Dante's *Inferno*, especially in two of the lowest circles, the Seventh Circle, in which Physical Violence is punished, and the Eighth Circle, where Fraud finds its penalty (Dante 2008).

However, Eliot and Akhmatova explore fire not as a trial only. The imagery of fire is particularly striking in *The Waste Land*. In the poem, "fire" symbolises



several concepts: actual fire, the fire as a carrier of lost rituals and traditions, fire as suffering, and fire as purification through suffering. It is implied in the title, in the hell-like journey through the ashes of the modern world, as well as in multiple symbols of burning and what is left after a fire. The very same flames are ignited in Anna Akhmatova's *Poem Without a Hero*, which echoes the various functions of fire in *The Waste Land*.

#### “I TURN TO STONE, I FREEZE, I BURN”: FIRE AS AN ELEMENT

Fire is one of the four basic elements: as such, fire constitutes the foundation of all creation, and it is opposed to water. However, in their poems, both Eliot and Akhmatova reflect on the fluidity and interconnectedness of the elements. This idea is found at a structural and conceptual level in both *The Waste Land* and *Poem Without a Hero*. Take, for instance, the titles of *The Waste Land*'s sections, “Fire Sermon” and “Death by Water.” Both refer to highly significant spiritual experiences. “Fire Sermon” refers to the Buddha's Fire Sermon, where he reveals to his disciples that the origin of human suffering is people's longing for the illusory and, thus, unfulfilling things of this world. The flames of their appetites enslave and lead them astray. The only refuge is found in putting out the burning fire of egoistic and transitory wishes, so as to achieve detachment from the things of this transitory world. Eliot linked it to the next section, “Death by Water,” which establishes an allusion to baptism, one of the most symbolical rituals of Christianity, in which an old, ignorant self dies to give way to a new, illuminated one.

*Poem Without a Hero* does not employ as much symbolism of fire and water in its structure as it does in its conceptual picture. Some of the most tense passages bring the elements of water and fire together, for example in the first section of the poem, “The Year Nineteen Thirteen,” which revolves around a mysterious masquerade set in the Fountain House (where Akhmatova lived most of her life). Seeing some of the most famous literary sinners enter her home, Akhmatova's lyrical “I” personifies all the elements at once: “And I break into a wet coldness, / I turn to stone, I freeze, I burn....”<sup>1</sup> / “И я чувствую холод влажный, / Каменю, стыну, горю” (Akhmatova 1990, 323). It is only after going through such a transformation that she feels strong enough to face her unexpected visitors.

The union of fire and water may seem impossible in a land sunk in spiritual blindness. On the contrary, for those who seek release from the prison of unconscious living, every element is tied with another so as to build an eternal pattern of destruction and creation, death and birth. If in “The Year Nineteen Thirteen,” Akhmatova's persona poetica was looking at the river Neva “smoking,” in “The Epilogue,” at the end of her journey, she is by the river Kama that “chilled and froze over in front of me” / “предо мною леденела и стыла Кама” (Akhmatova

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Russian are mine.



1990, 344). Unlike the river Neva in Saint-Petersburg, one of the most westerly points in Russia, the river Kama runs along the Siberian part of the country, serving as a gate to the eastern part. Having walked the land burned with the flames of unfulfilling desires and unconscious choices, the poems end with a flight “to the east” (Akhmatova 2014, 576). In the same way, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* ends in the East, in the Himalayas, closing with “Shantih shantih shantih” (Eliot 2015, 576), leaving those who have travelled that far in search of a new dawn and a renewal.

### “SACRED CANDLES”: FIRE AS A RITUAL

Eliot and Akhmatova employ candles as one of the primary fire-carrying torches through their work. For Eliot, “the seven-branched candelabra” (Eliot 2015, 58), for Akhmatova, “wedding candles” (Akhmatova 2014, 549) / “венчальные свечи” (Akhmatova 1990, 322). These candles bring about the notion of rite, which is closely tied to spiritual living. A believer lives his or her life in the certainty that every action and moment is filled with value and meaning. From this perspective, the candles of *The Waste Land* and *Poem Without a Hero* are relics of something which is now lost, and they are there only for decorative purposes. In the modern world, religious rituals are obsolete. The candles that used to light human homes and enlighten their inhabitants are being forgotten, leaving people in physical and spiritual darkness.

The contrast between candles as carriers of light and meaning, as opposed to rooms unlit and cold, is particularly noticeable in Akhmatova’s poem. She indicates that it is being written on the eve of 1941, while her poetic “I” is lighting the “sacred candles so this evening might shine” (Akhmatova 2014, 549) / “я зажгла заветные свечи, чтобы этот светился вечер” (Akhmatova 1990, 322) and waiting for a new year to come. After WWI and the outbreak of WWII in 1939, this new year, as Akhmatova will shortly find out, is about to bring new terrors: the Nazi invasion of the USSR that will “undo” millions of people, the Stalinist terror of labour camps and executions, the purges, and the mass deportations.

The protagonist of *Poem Without a Hero* faces her own and her people’s past, their faults and misdeeds. Hosting a dreadful masquerade in the candlelight of the Fountain House, she is to welcome uninvited guests, among whom we see Faustus, Dorian Gray, and Mephistopheles himself. They are in fact doubles of Akhmatova’s acquaintances and friends. She was one of only a few who chose to stay in Russia after the Revolution, whereas most of her artistic circle fled the country. Like Eliot’s wastelanders who “read, much of the night, and go south in the winter” (Eliot 2015, 55), the protagonists of the masquerade attempt to escape to a distant happy land sought by so many of Akhmatova’s friends. However, in the *Poem’s* “The Epilogue,” this land is never discovered by those in exile:

And that happy phrase –at home–  
Is known to no one now,  
Everyone gazes from some foreign window.



Some from New York, some from Tashkent,  
And bitter is the air of banishment—  
Like poisoned wine. (Akhmatova 2014, 575)

А веселое слово —дома—  
Никому теперь не знакомо,  
Все в чужие глядят окно.  
Кто в Ташкенте, а кто в Нью-Йорке,  
И изгнания воздух горький—  
Как отравленное вино. (Akhmatova 1990, 343)

As the poems demonstrate, the twentieth century dismembered bodies and souls but also families and nations, forcing millions of people to leave their home and flee to save their lives. The “bitter air of banishment” also smells of “our burned woods” (Akhmatova 2014, 574) / “опаленных наших лесах” (Akhmatova 1990, 342), the woods where “the cuckoo does not cuckoo” (Akhmatova 2014, 574) / “и кукушка не закукует” (Akhmatova 1990, 342), which leaves “us” in an eternal lifeless wasteland.

Among the unexpected masqueraders, Psyche stands out. She is a double of Olga Glebova-Sudeikina (1885-1945), who was Akhmatova’s close friend and a vital character of the *Poem* and one of the three people to whom Akhmatova dedicates her poem. Psyche quickly became Glebova-Sudeikina’s nickname after she had interpreted this role in a play of the same name. An idol of her time, in the *Poem*, Glebova-Sudeikina came to symbolise the sins of her own and Akhmatova’s generation, one which left Russia and did not face the consequences of its choices. Akhmatova never disassociated herself from the friends of her youth and their actions. Nevertheless, for her, leaving Russia was never an option, and her feeling of betrayal over those who fled abroad is one of the key themes of the *Poem*:

You fled from the portrait  
And the empty frame on the wall will wait  
For you until dawn.  
You’re to dance —without a partner.  
And the role of the fatal chorus  
I agree to take on. (Akhmatova 2014, 559)

Ты сбежала сюда с портрета,  
И пустая рама до света  
На стене тебя будет ждать.  
Я же роль рокового хора  
На себя готова принять. (Akhmatova 1990, 330)

Psyche’s tragic but in the end redemptive story is tied to fire. According to Apuleius, Psyche falls in love with Cupid, who has been ordered by his mother, Venus, to punish the princess for her beauty, yet he cannot resist Psyche’s charms. Seeking to protect Psyche from his vengeful and jealous mother, Cupid places the princess in a remote palace and forbids her from ever looking at him. However,



one night, Psyche is taken over by the doubts stirred by her sisters, who are jealous of her luxurious palace, and she approaches her mysterious lover with a lit lamp so as to see him. In her amazement at seeing the god of love next to her, she cannot prevent a drop of oil from touching Cupid's skin. Having broken her vow to Cupid, Psyche is left alone as he is forced to leave her. Now Psyche has to confront various challenges to regain her happiness (Apuleius 2013, Book V).

Thus, in the myth, Psyche, whose careless use of light and fire moulded her life, had to pay the toll for her actions. Having lost her loved one to her negligence and misdoing, Psyche was to undergo numerous torments. However, many centuries later, her Russian double, Glebova-Sudeikina, among millions of others, chose exile to facing the torments of post-Revolution Russia. The sacred candles are hardly burning in the Saint-Petersburg of 1940, as Akhmatova's lyrical "I" is one of only a few who are willing to embrace torment as a path to redemption.

### "THE CITY IN FLAMES": PUNISHING AND REDEEMING FIRE

Fire possesses the ambiguous power to destroy and to create through destruction. It is this creative potential that Eliot and Akhmatova explore most deeply in *The Waste Land* and *Poem Without a Hero*.

Through images and direct references, the two poems recall the tragic destiny of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, devoured by sulphur and fire in punishment for the wickedness of their inhabitants (Genesis 18:20-21). Before the destruction, two angels come to Sodom in search of righteous people, but the only family welcoming the visitors is Lot's. In gratitude for their kindness, Lot, his wife, and children are told about the fate awaiting the sinful cities and instructed to leave their home without looking back. However, Lot's wife cannot abandon her native land like that; she turns to look at the city and is immediately turned into a pillar of salt.

Eliot does not specifically mention Sodom and Gomorrah in *The Waste Land*, yet we can say that its image is implicit in the "Unreal City," a metaphor for the desolate desert of modernity. Indeed, its atmosphere of spiritual stagnation and demise of the modern citadel recalls the doomed Biblical cities. Eliot provides a precise map of the "Unreal City" and supplies a clear topography of London: the City, King William Street, Saint Mary Woolnoth and Saint Magnus Martyr Greenwich, the Isle of Dogs, the Thames from whose banks "the nymphs are departed" (Eliot 2015, 62), the Strand, Queen Victoria's Street, Lower Thames Street. His map is very precise, yet the Unreal city is also Dante's twelfth-century Florence, Dickens' nineteenth-century London and Baudelaire's nineteenth-century Paris. The concrete city is likened to other fallen citadels "Jerusalem, Athens Alexandria," the birthplace of ancient religions, as well as the modern metropolis "Vienna London / Unreal" (Eliot 2015, 69). London becomes an archetypal city of fallen towers.

On the contrary, Akhmatova's Saint-Petersburg is very realistic. Although it is peopled by inhabitants that are as phantasmagorical as in the unreal London, Saint-Petersburg and specifically Akhmatova's house, the Fountain House, remains almost photographically precise itself. However, like Eliot's London, Saint-Petersburg



is populated by trespassers: “Dostoevskian and possessed by demons, The city withdrew into its mist” / “Достоевский и бесноватый, Город в свой уходил туман” (Akhmatova 1990, 332). Virtually all of Dostoevsky’s novels centre on the duality of human nature, body and spirit, and on the unending battle that unfolds between good and evil in the human soul. Although those who remain faithful to Christian values, like Alyosha Karamazov, are often laughed at, their spiritual antagonists, such as Ivan Karamazov, are eventually destroyed by their own crimes and moral struggles. Akhmatova’s Saint-Petersburg appears synonymous with its inhabitants, and like them, the city has relinquished its spirit to spiritual hollowiness: “And not becoming my grave, You, granite, infernal, dear to me, Grew pale, benumbed and still” (Akhmatova 2014, 575) / “А не ставший моей могилой, Ты, крамольный, опальный, милый, Побледнел, помертвел, затих” (Akhmatova 1994, 343).

Eliot shares Akhmatova’s admiration for Dostoevsky, one of the most significant Russian writers and Christian thinkers. Eliot had read *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* before completing *Prufrock* (1915), and repeatedly admitted that these three novels “made a very profound impression” on him (Eliot 2015, 374). This impression is reflected in “What the Thunder Said”:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
 When I count, there are only you and I together  
 But when I look ahead up the white road  
 There is always another one walking beside you  
 Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
 I do not know whether a man or a woman  
 –But who is that on the other side of you? (Eliot 2015, 69)

Critics following Eliot’s lead in his Notes have analysed his reference to the disciples encountering the resurrected Christ on their way to Emmaus and the poet’s allusion to Shackleton’s exploration of the South Pole. However, these lines are also reminiscent of the dialogue between Ivan Karamazov and Pavel Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “Who is he? Who is here? What third person?” “The third is God himself—Providence” (692). In the intense scene between Ivan, who is possessed by demons and talks with them, and Smerdyakov, the murderer of Ivan’s father, the latter is forced to confess his sin. Smerdyakov, Ivan’s illegitimate half-brother, is spiritually blind. While Ivan, through his conversations with the demons, is troubled by his materialism, Smerdyakov remains unrepentant to his death. However, even this inert soul yields to the invisible power that, in Eliot’s words, “always walks beside you” (Eliot 2015, 69) and is compelled to admit his sin of parricide.

Moreover, the demise of the brothers Karamazov’s world aligns with that of Eliot’s wasteland, whose inhabitants are exiles:

What is that sound high in the air  
 Murmur of maternal lamentation  
 Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
 Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth





Ringed by the flat horizon only  
What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air. (Eliot 2015, 69)

He refers to the exiles of the Russian Revolution, who, faceless, anonymous, “hooded,” wander aimlessly along a “flat horizon” unaware of the transcendent dimension of life. Eliot’s note to this line mentions Herman Hesse’s collection of essays *A Glimpse into Chaos* (1920) and refers to Hesse’s interpretation of Dostoevsky’s novel, “The Brothers Karamazov and the Downfall of Europe” (2015, 76). In this text, Hesse describes Europe as being in a state of “drunken illusion” singing a “drunken hymn,” which makes the ordinary man laugh and the saint cry (Hesse 1922). Hesse predicts that the downfall of Europe will originate in Asian culture, such as the Russian. When in *Poem Without a Hero*, Akhmatova witnesses the flames of sins consuming her Saint-Petersburg, she looks at the same flames that are to devour Europe in Eliot’s poem.

For Akhmatova, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is a recurring motif. In another of her later poems, “Lot’s wife,” the poet praises the woman’s unwillingness to leave her homeland without ever looking back despite the high price she has to pay for it. Akhmatova too refused to abandon her native Russia and, as is evident in the *Poem*, felt compelled to face her past and, by doing so, the past of the whole nation in order to shape a different, better future.

In *Poem Without a Hero*, the reference to the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah is most evident in the line “Death everywhere –the city in flames” (Akhmatova 2014, 585) / “смерть повсюду –город в огне” (Akhmatova 1990, 338), which belongs to the second part of the poem, “The Other Side of the Coin.” Strikingly, the following line reads “And Tashkent in wedding bloom (Akhmatova 2014, 585) / “И Ташкент в цвету подвенечном” (Akhmatova 1990, 338), referring to the fire’s rituality. As at the beginning of the poetic journey, fire is to bring about the ceremonial celebration of a sacred union. The “wedding bloom” thus becomes a logical successor of the “city in flames” refined in the heat.

Through the image of the Biblical tragedy, Akhmatova brings witness to the silenced crimes of the Stalinist regime. In the prefatory note to her arguably most known poem, *Requiem*, the poet recalls:

I spent seventeen months in the prison lines of Leningrad. Once, someone ‘recognized’ me. Then a woman with blueish lips standing behind me, who, of course, had never heard of me 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. (Akhmatova 2014, 384)

*Poem Without a Hero* and *Requiem* share a thematic unity. Both address Stalinism, guilt and redemption, and both feature similar images, for instance, using Fountain House and Leningrad (former Saint-Petersburg) as their location,



evoking Christian symbolism, and personifying Russia as a woman in grief. However, *Requiem* remains one of the crucial testimonies of Stalinist terrors, while *Poem Without a Hero*, although a historical document, is concerned with the universal human condition caused by spiritual apathy. Akhmatova believed the two poems occupied different places in her legacy. From the beginning, *Poem Without a Hero* had been thought of as a crowning work, which was to consolidate Akhmatova's experiences and lessons learned in history. As such, it borrowed freely from Dante, Shakespeare, and Eliot, threading itself into the canvas of what Eliot defined as "tradition." In 1949, Boris Pasternak (1890-1960) was presented with Eliot's *Four Quartets* but soon saw that another level of proficiency in English was necessary to read the poem and gave it to Akhmatova (Chukovskaya 1994, vol II, 63). Perhaps, reading Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, Akhmatova felt further compelled to provide her personal experience with a universal and atemporal dimension.

Eliot's poem strives for spiritual renewal. The poetic "I" sees the sterile, almost lifeless land, burnt-out and inhabited by people who have lost their souls along with their values. At this stage, water and life are only a promise, not a reality. "April is the cruellest month," and spring barely stirs "dull roots with spring rain" (Eliot 2015, 55). Akhmatova echoes Eliot in the *Poem*: "The one people call spring I call loneliness" (Akhmatova 2014, 546) / "ту, что зовут весной, одиночеством я зову" (Akhmatova 1990, 321). For a Christian, spring is a season of death and birth: as Easter approaches, Christ's trial and crucifixion are mourned while his resurrection is a matter of rejoicing. Both Akhmatova and Eliot portray a problematic spring, a mixture of death and birth, but their spring is not a facile jubilee of nature and of the spirit's renewal. Spring is "cruel," and it arrives to "dried tubers." Just as Christian mourning is accompanied by a silent faith in resurrection and redemption, there is hope for revivifying water. The thunder heard above the wasteland is a promise of fertilising faith falling on the scorched desert (Eliot 2015, 55). The voice of *The Waste Land*'s thunder is heard over Akhmatova's Fountain House too:

Didn't a shiver run through the rows,  
 Like a premonition of dawn?  
 And once more that familiar voice,  
 Like mountain thunder echoing—  
 Horror, death, forgiveness, love...  
 Unlike anything else on earth,  
 It floats like a god's messenger,  
 Catching us again and again.

Не предчувствием ли рассвета  
 По рядам побежал озноб?  
 И опять тот голос знакомый,  
 Будто эхо горного грома,—  
 Ужас, смерть, прощенье, любовь...  
 Ни на что на земле не похожий,  
 Он несется, как вестник Божий,  
 Настигая нас вновь и вновь. (Akhmatova 1990, 329)



Akhmatova directly attributes this voice to God and invests thunder with divine attributes. Convinced that being a witness to some of history's most dramatic processes is an honour, she welcomes the horrible storm that is both to destroy and to liberate. The inevitability of the thunder which is "catching us again and again" is on a par with that of "horror" and "death" brought about by "love, betrayal and passion" (Akhmatova 2014, 575) in Part One. Amanda Haight, Akhmatova's first biographer, writes about the poet's belief that "it could be a privilege to be present at the Crucifixion." Not all, as she was to express in *Poem Without a Hero*, are lucky enough to be called poets of the True Twentieth Century (1976, 148). Bearing witness to history's calamities for Akhmatova meant the honour of having the power to give testimony that will outlive her and may contribute to shaping a different course of history.

Hope for renewal pervades the voices of *The Waste Land* and the *Poem*. The hope for a new era shines the brightest in Eliot's direct allusion to Dante, in the final section of *The Waste Land*: "*Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*"<sup>2</sup> (Eliot 2015, 71). At the end of his arduous journey, Eliot recalls the words of Dante's poetic mentor, Arnaut Daniel, who willingly throws himself into the purifying fire in the *Purgatorio*.

*Poem Without a Hero* also seeks the refining power of fire and does find glimpses of it. In a room lit with sacred candles, Akhmatova's alter ego sees "a pure flame in a dish of clay" (Akhmatova 2014, 546) / "СЛОВНО В ГЛИНЕ ЧИСТОЕ ПЛАМЯ" (Akhmatova 1990, 321). A reference to Greek mythology, the line evokes the notion of creation that cannot be completed only by divine forces but requires human action too. In Greek mythology, fire is a prerogative of gods. Prometheus stole the fire and gave it to humans; although sentenced to eternal torture, Prometheus changed people's destiny, and they willingly took the chance to shape their own lives. After all, as Berdyaev writes in *Freedom and the Spirit*, "(man) moulds and creates himself in and through his experience of life, through spiritual conflict, and through various trials, which his destiny imposes upon him. Man is only what God is planning, a projected design" (1999, vii): just as clay needs firing, so does the human soul.

## CONCLUSION

E.M. Forster's definition of *The Waste Land* as "a poem of horror" (quoted in Schuchard 1999, 126) can easily be applied to Akhmatova's poem, written as a testimony to twentieth-century tragedies. Horrified at the physical and spiritual devastation they witnessed, Eliot and Akhmatova depict the tragic portrayal of the wasteland burnt out with the flames of materialism, which has left modernity almost deprived of meaning.

What hope can there be? Eliot and Akhmatova differ in their responses. In their metaphysical deserts, the poets observe flames, the old ones that have led to

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<sup>2</sup> In English: "Then he hid himself in the fire which refines him" (Dante 2008, 315).



destruction, and the new ones, which may convert ashes into fertile soil. *The Waste Land* ends with the revelation of the Word that can lead to spiritual rebirth. The fire has burnt out the land, leaving it dead, and despite the sound of water here and there, so far, life has not returned to the wasteland. Akhmatova too confronts the devastating flames not only with horror but also with gratitude, as they are to purify her sins and those of her generation. Like Eliot, she grieves for what is lost in the course of time, rushed by people who find no meaning in life. She is anguished at witnessing whole cities that are “dead,” not only because of wars, but also because of the candlelight, which has become a vicious bonfire. The reason why Akhmatova and Eliot find consolation in such darkness is the belief in the redeeming power of faith, which grants them and their readers a hope for “thunder of spring over distant mountains” (Eliot 2015, 68).

After guiding their readers through the ruins of a modernity scorched by spiritual poverty, Eliot and Akhmatova will bring the readers to the poems’ final sections, “The Epilogue” and “What Thunder Said.” In *The Waste Land*, the rain falls in the form of the fable of Thunder, the revelation of the Word, DA, that can guide the individual to “Shanti shanti shanti.” Akhmatova’s regenerating water is frozen (Akhmatova 2014, 57), but this “frozen” hope is less distressing, as the Russia “recognizing the hour of vengeance” (Akhmatova 2014, 576) is certain to see the thaw, which comes even after the deadliest winter.

Reading *The Waste Land* alongside *Poem Without a Hero* demonstrates that in her last major poem, Akhmatova establishes a dialogue with Eliot, a poet whom she thought of as her soulmate. Unable to communicate with him in real life, she used the power of her talent to impress her work on European literary tradition. Through this dialogue, Akhmatova carries the redemptive fire of *The Waste Land* to any Sodom and Gomorrah, whether it be an unreal London or Dostoevskian Saint-Petersburg, thus universalising the spiritual quest of both T.S. Eliot and Akhmatova herself.

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