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Shakespearean Sonnets in Ukrainian Poetry: The Question of Tercets vs. the Final Couplet

Sonnet structure is based on 14-line verses in iambic pentameter (though hexameter is also accepted) confined to a single yet contrastively arranged theme tied together by an interlocking masculine:feminine rhyme scheme of the type: aBBa aBBa CC dEdE (where small letters indicate feminine rhymes and capital ones, masculine rhymes). The rhyme scheme often varies from sonnet to sonnet. Thus the sonnet rhyme in the English (Shakespearean) poetry usually follows one of the two main patterns:

1. The Italian or Petrarchan type which falls in two main parts: a) an octave (8 lines) with the rhyme aBBa aBBa and b) a sestet (6 lines) with the rhymes CdE CdE or CdC CdC;
2. The English or Shakespearean type with three quatrains and a concluding couplet having the following rhyme schemes:

aBaB	or a Spenserian variant:	AbAb
cDcD		bCbC
eFeF		CdCd
gg		EE

To many critics, the attractiveness of the sonnet rests in its size. Its stanza is just long enough to permit a fairly complex lyric development, yet short enough and exigent in its rhyme so as to pose a standing challenge to the artistry of a poet. The rhyme pattern of the Petrarchan sonnet has, on the whole, favored a STATEMENT of a problem contrasted somewhat in a situation or in the incident development within the octave, and is concluded with a resolution of the conflict brought up in the sestet. The English (Shakespearean) sonnets fall into a similar division of the material and sometimes present a repetition-with-variation of the statement in their three quatrains, while the final couplet usually imposes an epigrammatic surprise/turn-of-events at its conclusion.

After the revolution, in the 1930's, an East German poet and literary critic, Johannes Becher (who resided at that time in the USSR), wrote much about the dialectical spirit of the sonnets. His writings were published later in a monograph entitled *Любовь моя, поэзия*¹ (Moscow, 1964). In it, J. Becher, while defending the sonnet-form against the revolutionists in literature, has pointedly stated that the sonnets are "the most dialectical art-form" in poetry on account of their dramatical tension:

the thesis in the first quatrain is replaced by an antithesis in the second quatrain, and the whole sonnet culminates by a synthesis in the final two tercets (or in the final couplet, as it is in the case of the Shakespearean sonnets). At that time, only few of the Ukrainian sonnetists paid much attention to thematic contrast in the sonnets, but one of them did. It was Mykola Zerov who understood this principle and even mentioned it in one of his sonnets already in 1931. Here is this sonnet:

Ще вчора думка мовила твереза:
Горнись і щулься: он зима іде –
Все, що було недавно молоде,
Вже обтинають невблаганні леза.

А нині – як сонетна антитеза –
Тепло і радість день новий веде,
І проти сонця золото руде
На спаді віт розвішала береза.

Прозорий жовтень радісно вступив
Між стовбурів, оградок і домів,
Розкиданих по жовтому узбоччі –

І мов весною, по ливних дощах,
Стоїть у росах, відновитись хоче
Брунатний лист на паркових кущах.²

The theme development in this sonnet is strictly canonical. The sonnet is constructed according to the dialectic scheme with thesis:antithesis:synthesis parts. Its ascending part is contained in the octave, and the descending one in the sestet. This can be observed in the initial lines of his tripartite sonnet-division:

- a) Thesis is stated in the first quatrain:
Ще вчора думка мовила твереза:
Горнись і щулься: он зима іде...
(Some days ago a thought has warned me
To bundle up, for winter is ahead...)
- b) Antithesis in the second quatrain:
А нині – як сонетна антитеза –
Тепло і радість день новий веде...
(But now, today – as a proper antithesis –
The warm and joyful is the day around...)
- c) Synthesis, expressed in both tercets:
Прозовий жовтень радісно вступив
Між стовбурів, оградок і домів...

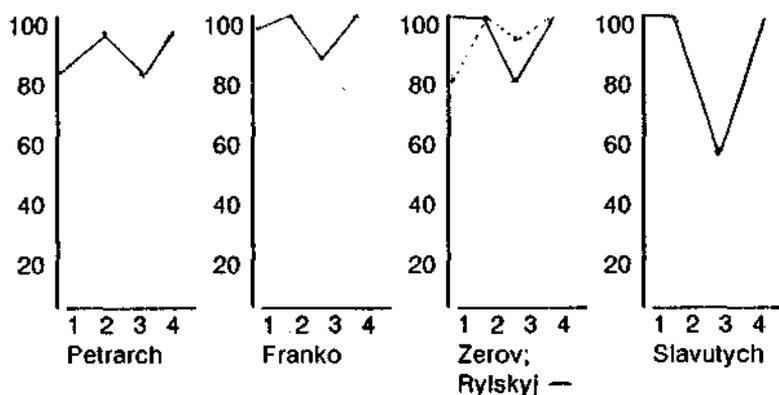
(Sunny October joyfully arrived here
Amidst the trees, the gardens and the fields...)

The poet is conveying by these last lines that autumn, a transitory season of the year, has brought a synthesis of the summer (warmth and joy) and the winter phenomena.³

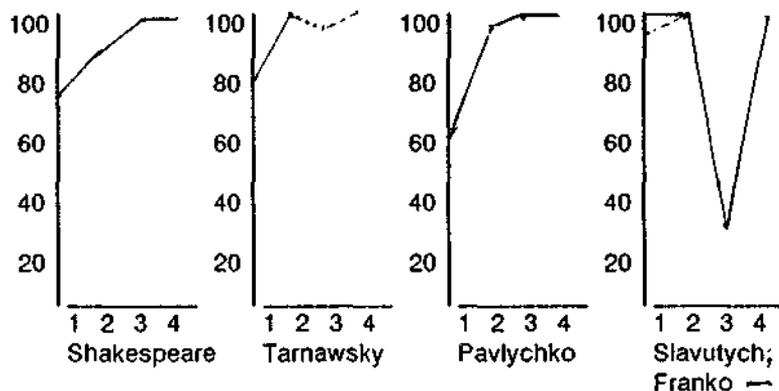
As the above example indicates, the traditional sonnet form of the Ukrainian authors has been the Petrarchan one, with two quatrains and two tercets having the rhyme scheme aBBa aBBa CC dEdE. However, little by little, the cross-rhyming schemes in the quatrains as well as in the tercets has been employed and, in addition, the couplet dividing the octave from the tercets has been transferred to the concluding and the final part of the sonnet. Such a sonnet-structure with the cross-rhyming schemes and with the couplet in the final position has been typical for the Shakespearean-type sonnets. Their concluding part, the couplet in such sonnets, is very powerful. It seems to trumpet its message like a prophetic declaration. The thought in it is aphoristic. To intensify this message in the couplet still further, Shakespeare has structured his sonnets into three quatrains, syntactically separate from each other by periods (to indicate an independent thought in each of them), followed by a couplet which always stands as an independent entity with both lines joined to each other by a paired rhyming scheme. The success of the Shakespearean sonnets has been attributed to this final couplet's rhyming scheme.

Many Ukrainian sonnetists have been utilizing this rhyming scheme, yet achieving no pungent results. The main reason for this lack of aphoristic intensity lies in the fact that the Ukrainian poets (with the exception of Ostap Tarnawskyj), while using the Shakespearean rhyming scheme, adhere to the Petrarchan and not the Shakespearean sonnet structure, i.e., they employ a sestet to express their final thought instead of a couplet. The two tercet (the sestet) structure-scheme makes no use of the content-condensing device that a couplet makes. If their final lines do have the couplet rhyming scheme, they do not contain in themselves a separate, concluding thought. They express, rather, a completion of the thought begun in the preceding four lines of the sestet. This phenomenon can be observed visually on the charts of the sonnets' punctuation marks. Ideally, each quatrain, tercet, or couplet should be demarcated with a period or any other thought-completing punctuation mark. An absence of such demarcation indicates a fusion of two structural entities into one thought entity, thus devaluing the power of that structural unit. By plotting periods, question-and exclamation-marks (as signs indicating the completed thought in each of the four units of a sonnet) on a horizontal line and the percentages of adherence to that structure on the vertical line, one can obtain a graphic profile of the sonnet's punctuation system.

Here are some examples of the syntactic (punctuation) profiles in the Petrarchan sonnets:



Shakespearean sonnets:



(In Tarnawsky's 84 Shakespearean sonnets, 56 have true couplets, i.e., they follow a period, which completed the thought of the previous stanza, and of the remaining sonnets, one third of them have couplets joined to the sestets.)

In Shakespearean sonnets of Ukrainian poets (Franko and Slavutych in particular) one can notice a deep chasm showing a lack of prescriptive (expected) punctuation marks at the end of the third quatrain. This indicates then that the final couplet is not an independent thought-entity (or a message entity) but rather an end-section of the thought expressed in the sestet as a whole. Being only 1/3 (one third) section of the sestet, the run-on couplet carries only 1/3 (one third) intensity of the message as compared to the whole message-load that is expressed in the independent couplet, separated from the quatrains by a period and a couple of distinct paired rhymes. Since a single couplet can express a whole thought with 1/3 words less than the sestet, then its power of

expression must be three times as expressive, as intense, and therein lies its strength.

Similar loss of the message-intensity is noticed likewise in the final tercet of the Petrarchan sonnets, when it is combined with the preceding tercet, by the lack of *not* separating its thoughts with a punctuation mark (which otherwise would have indicated a separate completed thought). One can observe many cases of treating tercets as one sestet in Slavutych's sonnets.

Ivan Franko's Petrarchan sonnets exhibit a better and more intense composition in respect to the punctuation convention. Franko's sonnets are composed of four distinct parts: of two quatrains and two tercets, which are carefully separated by thought-competing punctuation marks. On the other hand, in Slavutych's sonnets the tercets are fused syntactically into each other, i.e., into sestets, and a sestet deprives the tercets of their independent status as the fullfledged message-carriers.

In the works dealing with the theory of sonnets, much has been written on the importance of the concluding components of a sonnet: should they consist of two tercets, of a single quatrain, of a sestet, or of a couplet? From the aesthetic point of view, all of these alternatives are equally acceptable, as long as they are properly applied. However, among the Ukrainian sonnetists, the sestet has assumed a dominant form in their verses. The reason for this preference might have been expressed by Mykola Zerov, a leading literary poet and critic of the 1920's and 1930's. Zerov was concerned with the restrictive syntax of the sonnets. He wrote that their "syntax is especially worrisome: the sonnet's structure may lead toward the most boring monotony, if one is not careful with it."⁴ And referring to himself in this connection, he stated, "that syntactic monotony, lexical limitations, affectation, and rhyme repetitiveness will soon put an end to my sonnetizing."⁵ However, another author, Dmytro Pavlychko, having a dialectical contrast in mind as a counter-measure to monotony, has stated that "of primary importance in the poetics of a true sonnet is its systematic separation of the quatrains (which imposes their compulsory thematic contrast), while their tercets may be allowed to be syntactically united. Furthermore, what is most important here is the requirement that they do not bifurcate, but rather that both of them flow in a unified thematic stream."⁶ To this statement Zerov's maxim applies most appropriately: "the sestet with ccDeDe rhyme combination in the tercets is the best, for it provides a feminine ending in the last line of the sonnet whose concluding statement began with a masculine rhyme, and vice versa."⁷ Yet a careful examination of Zerov's theoretical deliberations leads one to the realization that even in the ideal sonnet with its concluding sestet, he (Zerov) felt a need to *condense* his thought in its last line, lengthening it by an extra poetic measure. He argued that "in the sonnet *Ivan's Grove* the last line is hexametric. This is not an accident (I did the same thing in the *Prince Ithor* and in *Alexandria*). I feel that by

condensing the content in the last line, its elongation is as legitimate as it is in the Spenserian stanza."⁸ Zerov feels that in his "ideal" sestet there is a need to demarcate and emphasize this concluding thought. Thus he added an extra iambic foot to achieve this effect.

Shakespearean-type sonnets solved the problem of thought-condensation quite satisfactorily by expressing the whole thought in the two-line pentametric couplet. Present research in the field of language acquisition-psychology⁹ has revealed that the human organism possesses only a limited ability to digest information, for there are definite parameters (limits) regarding speed and quantity of its acquisition. Consequently it is important to transmit not only a given quantity of information but also attention must be directed to its high- and low-information elements. To quote the author:¹⁰ "For a given number of symbols (in this case of lexical symbols - DBC), the amount of information reaches its maximal effectiveness when the language utterance, limited by the selected symbols and utilized in the transmission process, is of a kind where all symbols do have an equal opportunity of self-actualization, i.e., when they become probability-equal symbols. It is true, one may say, that redundant loquaciousness may be useful, for on the one side it provides a guarantee against mistakes in information transmission (because redundancy allows a listener (reader) to reconstruct the particular information even if some parts of its elements are missing); but on the other side, if we take into consideration the full meaning of the word "INFORMATION" which stands for something NEW added to an already known part of the transmitting message or notion, then the superfluous words introduce nothing new, nothing unforeseen or original. Idle words only hinder the acquisition of information and exhaust the listener by their monotony. It stands thus to reason that for a harmonious, holistic acquisition there must be an ideal load for information that can be absorbed."¹¹ And indeed such load-parameters for our memory have been derived. In numerous experiments conducted by George A. Miller¹² on human memory he found out that there is, as the title of his paper indicated, "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits of Our Capacity for Processing Information."¹³ He has reported therein that "for our operative memory (which relies on the sensory acquisition of information by way of our hearing senses (phonetics), there is an operative ideal amount of information which humans can absorb. Its numerical average is 7 ± 2 elements, which can be either phonetic, phonemic, or lexical. In respect to the last ones, one can only speculate as to what extent this magical number 7 ± 2 applies. However, if one were to quantify the folk proverbs (In any language known to me), one then observes an inescapable conclusion about the validity of this "magic number." The overwhelming majority of the proverbs (which are considered to contain the true wisdom and common sense of the people), contain between six and eight words per proverb. Examples:

Zlarnko do ziarnka i będzie miarka (Polish); Нитка до нитки і буде свитка; Як си постелиш, так ся виспиш; Чим хата багата, тим вона і рада; Хто чим воює, той від того гине; Рада б душа до неба, та гріхи не пускають; Хто рано встає, тому Бог дає; Хто за віру вмирає, той си царство здобуває; Як не слухаєш мене, будеш слухав псьої шкіри і т. п. In addition to the above, my random count of Russian proverbs (numbering about 50) in the Russian Dictionary of Proverbs¹⁴ (M., 1966), has revealed that on the average these proverbs have about six words each. The range of words in these 50 proverbs was from five to eight words, close to an average of seven. It has also been established by research conducted on the syntax of East Slavic languages that "any expansion of the subject of the predicate in a sentence leads to the weakening of their mutual interdependence, which in turn hinders and interferes with its acquisition."¹⁵

Thus a concluding thought in the Shakespearean-type sonnets, expressed in their final couplets, seems to have found its ideal form. Unfortunately, my research on the Shakespearean-type sonnets of Ukrainian poets shows a considerable lack of understanding of this fine principle. One can only hope that this situation will change in the future.

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Від ред. УШТ щиро поздоровляє проф. д-ра Богдана Чопика з нагоди його 65-річчя ц. р.