

On Composition of Lyrical Discourse: Completion of a Theme as a Foregrounding Marker

Gennadij Zeldowicz

Warsaw University, Poland
zeldowicz@yahoo.com

Abstract

The paper discusses a highly productive foregrounding strategy employed in lyrical discourse. Considering, first, that the most fundamental compositional divide in lyrical poem is that between passages devoted to some experience open to the lyrical hero and a passage in which a discovery of a significant, usually quite general truth is made due to this experience, this passage normally being the foreground, and, second, that it strongly tends to be located towards the end of the poem, one may hypothesize that if some semantic, pragmatic or structural theme develops in the lyrical discourse, its exhaustion will systematically coincide with the foreground, thus serving as a highlighting device. Several Russian poems are analyzed in the paper, which, first, support this assumption, second, show that this strategy may be realized in a number of different ways.

Keywords: lyrical discourse, composition, foregrounding, completion of a theme

Streszczenie

O kompozycji tekstów lirycznych: Wyczerpanie tematu jako oznaka bliższego planu dyskursywnego

W artykule omawiana jest rozpowszechniona strategia wyznaczenia podziałów kompozycyjnych w dyskursie lirycznym. Biorąc pod uwagę to, że, po pierwsze, w takich tekstach podstawowy podział kompozycyjny przebiega pomiędzy fragmentami relacjonującymi pewne doświadczenia podmiotu lirycznego a fragmentem, w którym ten ostatni dokonuje odkrycia pewnej istotnej prawdy, oraz, po drugie, to, że fragment „odkrywczy” z reguły znajduje się na końcu utworu, można przypuszczać, iż w przypadkach, gdy w wierszu rozwija się ten czy ów temat semantyczny, pragmatyczny bądź strukturalny, jego wyczerpanie powinno najczęściej następować we fragmencie „odkrywczym” i być wykładnikiem takiej właśnie jakości tego fragmentu. W artykule analizuje się kilka wierszy rosyjskich, które popierają wymienioną tezę, a zarazem pokazują, na ile rozmaite mogą być konkretne środki służące do realizacji opisywanej strategii.

Słowa kluczowe: dyskurs liryczny, kompozycja, plan bliższy, wyczerpanie tematu

1. Introduction. Foregrounding and backgrounding in lyrical discourse

It is well known that our cognition follows the principle of hierarchization: e.g., the meaning of a word normally comprises assertion and presupposition, as well as some other kinds of information, among which assertion is in some sense or other the most important; another example is the ranking of thematic roles in the (morpho)syntactic structure of the sentence, where the subject in many respects takes precedence over the direct object, the latter one takes precedence over obliques, etc. The same is true of the discourse as a whole, where foregrounded and backgrounded parts are normally detectable, with possible further subtler subdivisions within the foreground and background.

In the works of P. Hopper and S. Thompson¹ it has been established that various languages develop a comparable set of means serving to distinguish between the main plot (= foreground) and the less important additional information (such as descriptions, comments, evaluations, digressions, etc. = background) in narrative text. For instance, perfective, telic, punctive, and transitive verbs are typical of the foreground here, while for the background imperfective, atelic, non-punctive, intransitive verbs are more common. More recently, Talmy (2010) has moved beyond morphosyntactically realized strategies for foregrounding/backgrounding and has noted a number of lexical semantic strategies by which languages indicate the information that is attentionally prioritized in sentences and longer texts.

While narration is the best studied type of discourse, it is beyond doubt that some mechanisms of grounding are at work in other types of discourse as well, *inter alia* in lyrical poetry. On the other hand, it is obvious that both the concrete purposes of grounding in lyrical poems, and its specific linguistic markers may be different from those in narrative.

It is usually claimed that the foregrounded parts of lyric poem are those where metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, oxymoron or other figure of speech is present and/or where some deviation from a linguistic (semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, stylistic) or literary norm occurs.²

However, this contention is only partially accurate, for at least two reasons.

First, in many cases such an analysis is counterintuitive, since in fact figurative speech and deviations can be present in what naïve reader perceives as more and less important parts of the lyric poem.

¹ See Hopper, Thompson (1980), in the first place, and their followers (see, e.g., Hopper, Thompson (1982), see also the extremely influential book (Fleischman 1990).

² See, in the first place, the works of Geoffrey Leech, e.g. (1969). Recent research, such as e.g. Shen (2007), Nofal (2011), Manin (2012) shows how persistent this view is.

Second, if limiting analyses of lyrical texts to the above claim, scholars risk overlooking a more fundamental structural division that was described as early as in 1977 by the outstanding Russian literary scholar Tamara Sil'man (Сильман [1977]). She noted that, by its nature, lyrical discourse tends to comprise two clearly distinct and opposed parts. On the one hand, the lyric poem must present some experience in which the author is involved. On the other hand, this experience should lead the author to some conclusion, to comprehension of some truth and/or to a change in her/his mental/emotional attitude towards the world.

Evidently, it is the 'comprehension' that is more important and in some intuitively clear sense foregrounded in lyric discourse.

While this bipartition directly follows from the genre specificity of lyric poetry, and hence is primary to the structuring of lyrical discourse, to the best of my knowledge, it has never been studied in detail by linguists. The first thing to be done here is detection and classification of most typical linguistic means recruited to signal the distinction, and this issue will be, if in a small way, addressed below.

In principle, any reasonably salient dissimilarity between two parts of the text can suggest that they are unequal in terms of grounding. Imagine, for instance, a poem in which the background is marked by absence of adjectives, while in the foreground they are abundant, or a poem where the background is very low, and the foreground is extremely high in agentivity (such poems are indeed to be found!). However, examination of about 500 lyric poems written in Russian, Polish, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Japanese has shown that there is a relatively small set of most typical, recurrent linguistic devices employed for the task.

Thus, the 'comprehension' part of the poem (which I will call *focus* for short) is often linked to its experiential part with greater number of discourse relations than any passages of the latter one are linked to one another. A somewhat reverse tendency emerges in those numerous instances in which the focus is marked by a break of referential continuity, i.e. by absence of expected referential links with other (experiential) passages.³ Yet another extremely productive strategy of focus marking also consists in that the informativeness of the focal passages is much higher than that of non-focal ones, or at least the informativeness of the former ones is underscored by special means (Zeldowicz [forthcoming]).

³ See for details Зельдович (2015), Zeldowicz (2015).

2. Proposal

Prototypically, the focal part of lyrical discourse occupies its final position. On the other hand, it is well known that in various types of discourse there tend to appear some special markers signaling that the text is finished (sometimes such markers are subtle, or even almost cryptographic, while sometimes as unpretentious as *And here the story ends, Thank you for attention*, etc.), and there is no reason in sight why lyrical discourse would not follow this sample.

Considering this, one may hypothesize that when some theme (i.e. any motive belonging to either the content of the text, or its formal side) that was previously evolving in the poem comes to its completion, it is more probable than not that the relevant finalizing passage belongs to the focus. By completion, I mean any point in the evolution of a theme, after which its continuation becomes impossible or artistically unnecessary.

As far as the notion of theme as defined above is extremely wide, and, to make things worse, circumstances preventing further deployment of a theme are very multifarious, a full-scale verification of my claim promises to be a hard task. However, in what follows I would like to analyze at some length a range of examples that lend this claim support, or, at the very least, indicate that its thorough check might be worth our while.

3. Example 1

Let us take a look at Boris Leonidovich Pasternak's "Гамлет" ('Hamlet').⁴

1.

Гул затих. Я вышел на подмости.

Прислонясь к дверному косяку,

Я ловлю в далеком отголоске,

Что случится на моем веку.

[‘The roar calmed down. I entered the stage.

Leaning against the door jamb,

I am grasping in the distant echo,

What will happen in my life’]

2.

На меня наставлен сумрак ночи

⁴ Here and below, English glosses are mine – GZ. I tried to make them as close to the original as possible, of course, without detriment, or at least without much detriment for stylistic correctness.

Тысячью биноклей на оси.

Если только можно, Авва Отче,

Чашу эту мимо пронеси.

[‘The dark of the night is levelled at me

As a thousand of focused binoculars.

If possible, Abba Father,

Pass this cup by me’]

3.

Я люблю Твой замысел упрямый

И играть согласен эту роль.

Но сейчас идет другая драма,

И на этот раз меня уволь.

[‘I love Your stubborn plan,

And I agree to play this role.

But now another drama is played,

And this time let me opt out of it’]

4.

Но продуман распорядок действий,

И неотвратим конец пути.

Я один, все тонет в фарисействе.

Жизнь прожить – не поле перейти.

[‘But the order of actions is well thought over,

And inescapable is the end of the path.

I am alone, everything drowns in Pharisaism,

To live out one’s life is not to cross a field’]

As is commonly known, one of the most significant parameters along which a participant to an event may be characterized is the degree of agentivity, in the first approximation, the degree to which the participant is responsible for its coming about.⁵ Other things being equal, this responsibility is higher if the participant is a living being, and if s(he) initiates the event on her/his own will.

Examining “Hamlet” from this perspective, one can make several interesting observations.

⁵ See, among many others, Dowty (1991), Ackerman, Moore (2001).

The first appearance of the lyrical hero is marked by his high agentivity: it is his own choice that he enters the stage. Volitional is also *grasping* of something, and, most certainly, *leaning* (against the door jamb).

In the second stanza, the lyrical hero first becomes the object of an action (*На меня наставлен сумрак ночи* 'The dark of the night is levelled at me'), being, of course, low in agentivity, and then he emerges as an agent once again, but now he is an agent *asking* for something, rather than an agent independently deciding what to do.

In the third stanza, the lyrical hero also fails to undertake a truly agentive action. First his role is that of experiencer of a feeling, who is evidently less agentive than the subject of a volitional action (see again Dowty [1991]; Ackerman, Moore [2001]), then the lyrical hero expresses his readiness to obey *someone else's* will (an action implying a surrender of personal will is, of course, less than fully agentive), and next he speaks of his uneagerness to participate in what is going on.

As far as the discourse rank of this or other character tends to directly depend on how agent-worthy (s)he is (see, most prominently, Hopper, Thompson [1980, 1982]; Fleischman [1990]), one may conclude that in stanzas 2–3 the lyrical I loses much of his prominence as compared to stanza 1.

In the fourth stanza, the lyrical hero makes two final steps towards his self-elimination from the text.

First, while in stanzas 1–3 he was the source of action, wish or feeling, which rendered his agentivity definitely greater than null (by the way, even in the passage *На меня наставлен сумрак ночи* 'The dark of the night is levelled at me' he may be viewed as if inviting, provoking the relevant activity by his behavior, i.e. causing it, if in a non-prototypical manner),⁶ in the fourth stanza, saying *Я один* 'I am alone', the lyrical hero stops to be such a source: neither action, nor wish, nor emotion is to be found here, hence speaking of agentivity is pointless. Still, this is not yet the limit of his self-abnegation.

The last line of the poem is quite paradoxical. Although the laws of the lyrical genre prescribe the final line(s) of the poem to contain a discovery of significant truth, what we face here is a proverb, i.e. an utterance previously used by many others and devoid of substantial newsworthiness.

⁶ On the issue of relation between causality and agentivity, see again Dowty (199), Ackerman, Moore (2001), and especially Levin, Rappaport Hovav (2005). Incidentally, the category of objects that may be construed as causers, or co-causers of the event is so prominent that in some languages they bear a special marking; for instance, in Spanish animate object is marked by the preposition *a* in case (s)he is responsible somehow for what happens, e.g. provokes the subject to act.

Normally, however low the agentivity of the lyrical I, (s)he remains to be active at least as the creator of the poem, as the subject of speech saying something original. His resignation from this role seems to be the last possible degree of the lyrical hero's self-denial, whose attainment must be all the more notable because it is very rare, even exceptional in poetic speech.

Summing up, in the final line of "Hamlet" the theme of the lyrical I's self-abnegation reaches its exhaustion point and cannot be further developed. It seems reasonable to assume that it is this exhaustion – possibly among other things – that brings the last line to the fore and makes it sound as fresh as it, abstractly speaking, should not.

4. Example 2

A similar compositional device may be detected in the Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov's poem «Выхожу один я на дорогу...» ("I go out on the road alone..."):

1.

*Выхожу один я на дорогу;
Сквозь туман кремнистый путь блестит.
Ночь тиха. Пустыня внемлет Богу,
И звезда с звездою говорит.*

['I go out on the road alone;
Through the mist, a flinty path is sparkling.
The night is calm. The desert is listening to God,
And a star speaks to a star']

2.

*В небесах торжественно и чудно!
Спит земля в сиянье голубом...*

*Что же мне так больно и так трудно?
Жду ль чего? Жалею ли о чём?*

['In the skies, it is solemn and miraculous!
The earth is sleeping in a blue shine...
So, why am I in such a pain and such a trouble?
Am I expecting for anything? Am I lamenting anything?']

3.

*Уж не жду от жизни ничего я,
И не жаль мне прошлого ничуть.
Я ищу свободы и покоя!
Я б хотел забыться и заснуть!*

[‘I no longer expect anything from life,
I do not in the least regret the past.
I am seeking freedom and peace!
I would like to forget myself and fall asleep!’]

4.

*Но не тем холодным сном могилы...
Я б желал навеки так заснуть,
Чтоб в груди дремали жизни силы,
Чтоб, дыша, вздымалась тихо грудь,*

[‘But not with that cold dream of the grave...
I would like to fall asleep in such a way
That in my breast doze the force of life,
That my breast, breathing, rise calmly’]

5.

*Чтоб, всю ночь, весь день мой слух лелея,
Про любовь мне сладкий голос пел,
Надо мной чтоб, вечно зеленея,
Темный дуб склонялся и шумел.*

[‘That for all of the night, for all of the day fondling my ears,
A sweet voice sing about love,
That over me, forever green,
A dark oak tree bend and rustle’]

As mentioned earlier, for being maximally agent-worthy, a participant of an event must be animate, and must initiate it of her/his own will. A participant is slightly lower in agentivity, if, while being animate, (s)he does not bring about the event intentionally, but therefore finds herself/himself in the role of experiencer (in events of seeing, hearing, smelling, etc.), or bearer of mental attitude, such as wishing, regretting, fearing, and so forth. An argument is the least agentive when it is inanimate, or its being animate is irrelevant in the present context in the sense that neither its volitionality, nor its capacity of feeling or adopting certain mental attitudes

is entailed by the relevant predicate. (Clearly, this is a gross-grained classification, skipping some options less significant in the present context, such as, e.g., someone's being bound with *obligation*).

It is quite obvious that in the poem under discussion the lyrical hero goes the whole way from high agentivity (going out on the road is a volitional action), through a lesser one (being in pain, in trouble, expecting, lamenting, wishing and hearing entail animacy of the subject, but he does not initiate these events), to the lowest agentivity possible: in the final two lines, he converts himself into no more than a space reference point (cf. *надо мной* 'over me'), for which being or not being a living sentient creature is totally irrelevant. In other words, the final lines are the point where this theme cannot develop any further – which, of course, fits perfectly well with their first-rank discourse role.

5. Example 3

The same strategy of focus marking via exhaustion of a theme is at work in the famous Russian translation from H. Heine made by Apollon Aleksandrovich Grigoriev:⁷

1.

*Они меня истерзали
И сделали смерти бледней, –
Одни – своею любовью,
Другие – враждою своей.*
[‘They have tortured (tormented) me,
And made me paler than death –
Some with their love,
Others with their enmity’]

2.

*Они мне мой хлеб отравили,
Давали мне яду с водой, –
Одни – своею любовью,
Другие – своею враждой.*
[‘They have poisoned my bread,
They would give me venom with water –

⁷ While being originally a translation from H. Heine, this poem has been so deeply rooted into Russian literary tradition that much of the time it is analyzed as a practically independent and self-sufficient Russian text.

Some with their love,
Others with their enmity']

3.

*Но та, от которой всех больше
Душа и доселе больна,
Мне зла никогда не желала,
И меня не любила она!*

['But she, because of whom
My soul is sick until now,
She never wished me evil,
And she didn't love me']

What I will be concerned with below are causal relations obtaining in this poem, or, conversely, the lack thereof.

Let it be recalled that the category of causation has a prototype structure. There are, so to speak, better-behaved causal links that are direct and hence reasonably easy to detect, and there are less direct ones, whose identification is more effortful, and in many cases even controversial. For example, killing someone by a sword hit is a more prototypical kind of causation than killing someone with poison sent over by mail.

Turning now to the poem of Ap. Grigoriev, it is not difficult to see that in the first stanza the pain afflicted to the lyrical hero is the result of a direct causation. In general, for the verb *устерзать* 'torture', 'torment', the most salient construal is that implying a direct causation, i.e. an immediate or very close contact between the torturer/tormenter and the tortured/tormented (even in those instances where torture/torment is understood metaphorically), while an indirect one is definitely a marginal option; since the context does not seem to contravene it, of course the standard interpretation is likely to be chosen here. As for the expression *сделать смерти бледней* 'to make paler than death', generally it may refer both to direct and indirect causation, but here it immediately follows the verb *устерзать* 'torture', 'torment' and is conjoined with it, hence it must assimilate with the latter one as best as possible, and, therefore, unmediated causation construal is more natural here too.

In the second stanza, the influence that the lyrical I undergoes is a mediated one, since the directly affected entities are his bread and water.

In the last but one line of the third stanza, *Мне зла никогда не желала* 'she never wished me evil', the relevant causal relation turns out to be even more distant from the prototype. For

most modern people, wishing someone some evil can become its cause only in a very, very loose sense. Moreover, even this barely discernible hint at there being a causal link is additionally masked by negation, by the indication that evil-wishing was not real.

Finally, in the last line, *И меня не любила она* ‘and she didn’t love me’, that is felt to be the focus of this poem, not a trace of causal links is to be found. This is all the more significant because the verb *любить* ‘love’ is a transitive one; since most prototypical transitive verbs entail causation,⁸ its lack in *любить* ‘love’ must be especially distinct.

To summarize, on the one hand, in this poem causal relations are most prototypical at the beginning, later they become less and less prototypical, and then almost emphatically non-existent, while on the other hand, this exhaustion of the theme in question coincides with the focus.

6. Example 4

In the following poem by Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev, the above discussed composition principle is also applied, but at a totally different level of discourse structure.

1.

*Чародейкою Зимою
Околдован, лес стоит –
И под снежной бахромою,
Неподвижною, немою,
Чудной жизнью он блестит.*
[‘By the witch Winter
Enchanted, the wood stands –
And beneath a snowy fringe,
It sparkles with a motionless,
Dumb, miraculous life’]

2.

*И стоит он, околдован, –
Не мертвец и не живой –
Сном волшебным очарован,
Весь опутан, весь окован*

⁸ Subject causes some change in object; see, e.g., Dowty (1991); Croft (1991), (1994); Ackerman, Moore (2001).

Легкой цепью пуховой...

[‘And it stands enchanted –
Neither dead nor alive –
Captivated by a magic sleep,
Totally bound, totally entangled
By a light downy chain...’]

3.

Солнце зимнее ли мечет

На него свой луч косой –

В нем ничто не затрепещет,

Он весь вспыхнет и заблещет

Ослепительной красой.

[‘Whether the winter sun darts
Its slant ray at the wood –
Nothing in it would tremble,
It would flash and shine
With a dazzling beauty’]

For our present purposes, of much interest here is the position of the lyrical I in space and time, which changes from one stanza to the next.

In the first stanza, this position remains unspecified, both in temporal and spatial terms. What is presented here may be both an impression of an external observer being somewhere near the wood, and an observer being inside of it. Likewise, the event of its observation – or fictitious, imaginary observation, for that matter – may be attached both to a short temporal interval, such as, say, one minute, five minutes, half an hour, etc., and to a long one, as, e.g., all of the winter, or a month.

In the second stanza, the temporal position of the lyrical hero is as unconstrained as in the first one. However, as for his spatial location, in order to identify that a ‘downy chain’ is light, one should better come more or less close to the trees, because otherwise the relevant statement remains to be a speculative one – the option consequently avoided by poetry in descriptions of nature.

In the third stanza, conversely, unconstrained is the lyrical I’s spatial position, i.e. what is described may be viewed both from external and internal standpoint, but his temporal location is subject to serious restrictions. Since the reference here is to a recurring chain of events having

the form ‘each time when event P_1 occurs, also events P_2 , P_3 , P_4 take place’, the relevant temporal range must be long enough as to provide room for such a “double multiplicity”.

The upshot is that the lyrical hero’s temporal and spatial position remains non-concretized in stanza 1, then, in stanza 2, it is at least partly specified in terms of space, and next, in stanza 3, in temporal terms. Given that, generally speaking, the author’s position is defined primarily in terms of space and time (his location in cognitive, interpersonal, etc. spaces being in some intuitively clear sense a secondary matter), one can conclude that at the most basic level of its identification the poem exhausts all relevant options, and where they get exhausted is the last stanza. Here, I think, lies the answer to why this stanza is felt as the focus of the poem, as some significant discovery – never mind its being practically no less descriptive than the former ones.

7. Example 5

Yet another possibility of marking the focus consists in that some idea conveyed implicitly at the beginning of the text may gradually become more and more explicit, and its achieving full explicitness amounts to the relevant theme being over.

Consider the poem of Georgiy Vladimirovich Ivanov:

1.

*В конце концов судьба любая
Могла бы быть моей судьбой.
От безразличья погибая,
Гляжу на вечер голубой:*
[‘After all, any fate whatever
Could be my fate.
Perishing from apathy,
I am looking at a blue evening’]

2.

*Домики покосились вправо
Под нежным натиском веков,
А дальше тишина и слава
Весны, заката, облаков.*
[‘Small houses have nodded to the right
Under a gentle pressure of ages,
And further there are silence and glory

Of the spring, the dawn, and the clouds’]

On the first reading, the two initial lines sound as a declaration of some very common, probably gnomic truth. There is no reason to think that the lyrical hero just discovered it before the moment of speech: it may well be that he was aware of it since very long ago, and now he only imparts his knowledge to the reader. Of course, in what the relevant speech act itself is concerned, it is an extremely fast-paced, even momentary event, but this boundedness is principally unavoidable and hence trivial.

However, things become different when we read line 3, in which the lyrical I confesses that he is ‘perishing from apathy’. People are hardly likely to perish (literally or metaphorically) just because they *know* some general truth; more convincing is the assumption that here the lyrical hero either understood the truth presented in lines 1–2 just a moment ago, or he has known it long since, but now, for some reason or other, he discovers it anew, experiencing it in all its freshness.

In other words, under one possible construal lines 1–2 refer to a long-lived, most probably even gnomic situation, while under another one, what is reported is either a momentary event, or the above mentioned slow-paced situation together with a momentary one – since a fresh look at what is familiar is, or at least tends to be an instantaneous action. Therefore, as early as in the first lines of the poem, there is an implicit, but fairly clear-cut contrast between two states of the lyrical hero’s conscience, i.e. that related to the proposition ‘any fate whatever could be my fate’ taken as a general, static truth, and that corresponding to its instantaneous comprehension (or re-comprehension).

Next, a quite detectable contrast having to do with how lingering are the relevant events may be found between lines 5 and 6. Considering what line 4 says, the passage *Домашки покосились вправо* ‘small houses have nodded to the right’ reports not so much the event itself of the partial deterioration of the houses, but, in the first place, the immediate observation of its results by the lyrical hero. On the other hand, prototypically the act of such a perception is rapid, if not momentaneous, which is in opposition to the long-term occurrence of ‘gentle pressure of ages’ mentioned in the next line.

Next, since glory to which lines 7–8 refer is normally a long-lasting phenomenon, they also stand in the same kind of contrast with line 5.

My main point is this.

In lines 1–2 the contrast in question is not marked by any direct means (such as, e.g., contrastive conjunctions), and, further, the opposed notions fail to be expressed independently,

each in a separate portion of utterance, yet conversely, both of them are related to one and the same segment. Next, in lines 5–6 there is no overt indication of the contrast discussed, but a transitory event and a long-lasting one are introduced each by a separate segment, line 5 and line 6, respectively. Finally, the contrast between line 5 and lines 7–8 is such that the opposed ideas are expressed independently from each other, and, additionally, their polarity is specially indicated by the conjunction *a*, which has a strong contrastive flavor (*faute de mieux*, above it was glossed as the simple *and* that admits such a construal, but does not prompt it in any clear way).

Therefore, in this poem the contrast we are concerned with is covert at the beginning, then it becomes more readily detectable, and later it receives maximally explicit marking. Once again, the maximum endpoint of this scale coincides with what is felt as the focus of the text.

8. Example 6

The above described compositional strategy may be also realized in a more exquisite manner: in some instances, the focus is marked by exhaustion of two (or possibly even several) themes rather than only one. It appears that in such a case both themes come into existence as a result of some more general motive having been dialectically split, so that they are mutually opposed in a certain sense, while their later synthesis, or at least quasi-synthesis, i.e. some reconciliation or attenuation of the conflict between them, occurs in the segment of the poem perceived as its foregrounded part. (Of course, a further breaking of each of these themes into two sub-themes is not excluded; see below).

As a perfect illustration of this phenomenon, consider the poem by Osip Emilievich Mandelstam:

1.

Возможна ли женщине мертвой хвала?

Она в отчуждении и в силе –

Ее чужелюбая власть привела

К насильственной жаркой могиле...

[‘Is possible a praise to a dead woman?

She is in alienation and power –

She has been led by alien-loving force

To a violent hot tomb’]

2.

И твердые ласточки круглых бровей

Из гроба ко мне прилетели

Сказать, что они отлежались в своей

Холодной стохгольмской постели.

[‘And the hard swallows of round eyebrows
Have flown to me from the coffin
To tell that they have rested well in their
Cold Stockholm bed’]

3.

И прадеда скрипкой гордился твой род,

От шейки ее хорошея,

И ты раскрывала свой аленький рот,

Смеясь, италянясь, русея...

[‘And your family was proud of your great-grandfather’s violin,
Getting prettier due to its neck,
And you opened your small scarlet mouth,
Laughing, Italianizing yourself, Russifying yourself’]

4.

Я тяжкую память твою берегу,

Дичок, медвежонок, Миньона,

Но мельниц колеса зимуют в снегу,

И стынет рожок почтальона.

[‘I keep your painful memory,
A wildling, a bear cub, a Mignon,
But the wheels of the mills pass the winter in snow,
And freezing is the postman’s trumpet]

The question opening this text seems to be a rhetorical one, meaning that one cannot praise a dead woman, either for reasons of alethic nature, i.e. because such a praise is made impossible by universal laws, or – more probably – due to deontic factors, i.e. ethical or esthetical convention forbidding such a praise.

What then are the most natural continuations to be expected after this question?⁹

Obviously, there are two of them. First, it would be logical to explain why specifically the dead woman cannot be glorified. Second, in full harmony with the rhetorical canon would be such a continuation in which this impossibility would find its antithesis, i.e. which would be centered around some hope, for instance the hope for keeping forever the memory of the beloved one.

Clearly, the Mandelstam's poem follows both of these routes: in lines 2-12 the former, in lines 13-14 the latter. Thus, towards the end of the text the opportunity opened by the first line of dual, bi-topical continuation is realized, and this mere circumstance may be viewed as indication that the focus is located in the fourth stanza.

However, the story does not end with this relatively simple device, and the famous Mandelstam's tendency towards "fractality", towards infinite dualizations for the sake of the internal dialogue manifests itself also in a far more intricate manner.

The first of the above mentioned themes, i.e. the theme of explanation of reasons for the dead woman not to be praised, immediately after its introduction, i.e. in the second line, divides into two seemingly very dissimilar sub-motives: the late woman is at the same time in "alienation" that makes us think of weakness, and in "power". Additional, if less explicit, reference to "alienation" is also made in lines 3-4, where the woman is presented as obeying a force she cannot control, and further reference to "power" may be seen in the second stanza, and in the initial two lines of the third one.

Against this background, the final part of the third stanza, *И ты раскрывала свой аленький рот, Смеясь, итальянясь, русея...* 'And you opened your small scarlet mouth, Laughing, Italianizing yourself, Russifying yourself', may be viewed as a kind of synthesis. On the one hand, what these lines speak about in the first place, is the artistry of the addressee, which for Mandelstam was strongly associated with power. On the other hand, the reference here is to an artistic imitation of something proper to *foreigners* (Italians), and to the return to one's own roots, which implies a prior *alienation*. Therefore, at the end of stanza 3 these two so different, if not conflicting sub-themes appear together. On top of that, since for Mandelstam alienation (specifically, the author's alienation from the reality (s)he depicts) was also an undetachable aspect of a creative act, what we face here is not their accidental co-presence, but more than natural interaction.

⁹ To forestall misunderstanding, let it be noted that what I have in mind are both permissible *immediate* continuations, and more distant – possibly even final – parts of the further text elaborating on the relevant theme.

Thus, the motive of “explication of the reasons” that was split in line 2, regains its integrity at the end of the third stanza, and hence it must next give place to another theme suggested by the initial passage of the poem: the claim ‘one cannot praise a dead woman’ must be supplemented by its antithesis – which exactly occurs in the first and second lines of the last stanza, where it is declared that one can at least keep alive the memory of the departed person.

Still, this opposition is also almost instantly weakened, since the last two lines say that the memory cannot be, as it were, fully realized, being in this respect *very similar to the “praise”*.

To sum up, the evolution of the Mandelstam’s poem follows the same already familiar pattern: it is completed – and the relevant passage is felt as focal – at the moment when all of the competing themes outlined at the beginning and sub-themes emerging from their further division reach a synthetic or nearly-synthetic point, at which the internal conflict is either resolved, or substantially mitigated.

Let it be noted in conclusion that although for the sake of simplicity the above proposed analysis was quite informal, it may be recast in more strict, properly linguistic terms. In particular, the two most probable routes of the development of the text suggested by its first line may be spoken of in terms of the discourse relations they imply, the first one involving that of *explanation*, the second that of *contrast* – where the “explanation” and the “contrast” are fully legitimate *linguistic* notions; see, e.g., Asher, Lascarides (2003), Jasinskaja (2009). Beyond this, the routes in question also differ as to the distribution of empathy: in one case foregrounded is the woman to whom the poem is dedicated, in another the lyrical hero himself. However, such an empathy is clearly a linguistic phenomenon; see, most prominently Kuno (1976).

Next, where it is explained why “the praise is impossible”, the theme of alienation is, in properly linguistic terms, related to the fact that the nominal phrases referring to the late woman appear not as subjects, but in more peripheral semantic roles (that of direct object in lines 3–4, that of possessor in line 9, also that of possessor – if now implicit – in stanza 2), while the reference to the “power” is accompanied here by upgrading of the relevant nominals to subject rank (cf. lines 11 – 12).

Of course, a more detailed account of how the above described regularities manifest themselves in the properly linguistic matter of the poem must be very effort-consuming, and for this reason it is left for future research.

9. Conclusion

To recapitulate, in quite a few lyrical poems there is a theme, or sometimes several themes, whose evolution comes to its end exactly in the focal part of the text, and hence its completion, generally speaking, might be viewed as a foregrounding marker.

However, this conclusion, while appearing to be in line both with facts and our intuition, poses further problems. Defining the theme as widely as I did it above incurs the risk of unstoppable multiplication of themes found in each separate poem. Some of them could follow the regularity in question, some not. I suspect, what sets the themes discussed in this paper apart from other potential themes is their cognitive salience. Most certainly, these themes are in some sense or other mentally more approachable than some other ones, hence the intuitive appeal of the above presented reasoning.

From this it follows that in a thorough study of the issue, one more unknown must be introduced, which is the way we establish the presence of separate themes and their relative hierarchy. This seems to be the only right way to either corroborating or discarding my hypothesis. I suspect, there is no off-the-shelf theory equipped enough for fulfilling this objective, and I am looking forward eagerly to new works in the field.

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