

A SEMANTIC AND PROSODIC STUDY OF THE BULGARIAN SONNET

Raja Kunčeva

The sonnet is a concept whose boundaries are clear-cult. As a fixed form, it can be described by a number of features: two quatrains and two tercets, there are two rhymes in the quatrains and two or three rhymes in tercets, and certain rhyme schemes: *abba abba*; *abab abab* for the quatrains with more variation in the tercets. In Bulgarian vers there is an alternation of feminine and masculine ending, while rhyme is full and the verse line is of medium length. I list all these features not because there is some kind of uncertainty as far as they are concerned; quite the opposite: unlike other categories, especially in the area of esthetics and criticism, where categories with fuzzy boundaries prevail, the sonnet is clearly defined.¹

The antiquity and the ubiquity of the sonnet in European culture are amazing. This couldn't have been possible if its structure didn't allow for a variety of modifications. Some of them have fixed names, for instance the reversed sonnet, while others bear the names of great poets — for example the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet. Diachronically, the morphology of the sonnet is the central subject of literary-historical studies.

Here I would like to present to you a point of view provided by the theory of prototypes.² I was prompted to apply it by Tereza Dobzinska, who suggested the application of the theory of prototypes to the study of free verse at a discussion of the group on comparative

¹ I am not going to talk about certain acts, typical of modernism, when an author, by providing a particular object with a name, endows it with the status of esthetic category, whose features, however, the object does not possess — for example, an object of everyday use placed in an exhibition hall, or when Rimbaud calls a prose text from his "illuminations" a sonnet.

² George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 1980.

Slavic metrics. I hope the theory sheds some light on how we think about the sonnet. I will also discuss the sonnets of three Bulgarian modern poets from the view point of some ideas in cognitive semantics and the Russian school of semantics, presented by J. Apresjan. This explains why the word “semantics” is present in the title.

The prosodic aspect of my study is justified not only by the importance of form in the research of the sonnet. It has been my intention to confirm the so far prevailing view that the 14 lines of the sonnet contain and materialize definite models of thought. Sometimes this intuition is explained by the concepts of dialectical philosophy, i.e. thesis, antithesis, synthesis; sometimes the structure of the sonnet is provided with definitions, such as dramatism, sometimes in terms of the “link between proportion and thought, which is basic and crucial to the sonnet’s success and distinctive voice”.³ The “turn”, the sudden introduction of a contrasting idea, is usually pinpointed as the most specific characteristics of the sonnet.

In any case the sonnet is not only an abstract rhyme scheme, and the temptation to present it as coincidental with the borderline of various mental states and configurations, expressed by means of language, has always existed.

From Aristotle to Wittgenstein, categorization, that is, the presentation of a group of entities, has been perceived as establishing the necessary and sufficient features which the entities in the group share. This conception, known as classical, presupposes that all entities included in a category are equally representative of it, and that there exist only two possibilities — either within the category, or outside it. The classical vision is objective, because it relies on the presence or absence of certain features.

³ “The sonnet extends to fourteen lines, providing 140-54 syllables in all. This seems to be rather more, in most modern vernaculars, than one requires for the simple expression of a feeling or state of mind. It is certainly too short for narration: a sonnet can present a narrated event, but it must be highly compressed if anything at all is to be said about it. The proportionality of the sonnet, eight parts to six, works against any kind of simple repetition of an initial point or emotion, since the second part is structurally different from the first, and almost compels some kind of development or analysis. The voice that speaks in this room, the ‘I’ of the sonnet, almost has to *make a point*, to go beyond merely declaring a feeling”. — Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet*, 1992, p. 8.

When compared to various categories of literary theory, the sonnet seems to represent the classical type of categorization in its purest shape. It is my understanding that the sonnet category encompasses phenomena, some of which we perceive as better, some as worse examples of the category. The features, mentioned in the beginning, are related to the very prototype of the sonnet category. Whenever we think of the sonnet, it is in terms of this definition, which, of course, doesn't cover all of its forms of realization. For example, in his book of sonnets *Философически и сатирически сонети* Stoyan Michailovski employs a kind of verse, typical neither of the poetic situation of his time, nor of the Bulgarian syllabotonic metre in general. This book has a special place in the evolution of Bulgarian poetry. But the sonnet we most identify with Stoyan Michailovski is *Лама сабахтини*, and it has the features of the sonnet prototype. These features are inherent in the European sonnet in general. The fact that quatrains of English sonnet are built on 4 rhymes, not 2, as in Italian, only apparently breaks the canon, because, as it is well known, there is a smaller variety of rhymes in the English language. The prototype of the sonnet handles only those forms of verse organization that are the most widely used by a particular culture. "Most widely used" is a quantitative assessment, denoting that such forms have proved to be the most functional, which is connected with the mechanism of our mind. If we arrange the categories of stanza, rhyme and metre, along a scale with easily comprehensible phenomena at one end and difficult to comprehend phenomena at the other, then the forms which our mind identifies with the sonnet will be placed in the middle. Presenting a category along a scale is typical for the theory of prototypes and this is the direction in which I view verse categories. Bulgarian poetry is syllabo-accentual. The most frequently used metre is the iamb – iambic tetrameter and also pentameter. They work like a multifunctional means of poetic discourse. In the last quarter of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the prototype of sonnet was established in the poetry of I. Vazov, K. Velichkov and K. Christov, the pentameter took the place of the tetrameter. The traditional sonnet is one of the most impressive manifestations of the pentameter. But pentameter is also the most representative example of Bulgarian syllabo-accentual verse. The situation, however, changed, and in the first decades of our century new structures were sought; metres which previously used to be marginal were brought to the fore, there was a search for

looser structures, so a plurality of metres was established. Of course, the iamb continues to be used, but the category of metre is no longer organized according to the “centre-periphery” principle. The situation with rhyme is identical. The full rhyme, typical of the earlier period, and representative of the sonnet prototype, is still used. But at the same time, loose rhyme in all its varieties is becoming more and more popular. As far as stanza organization is concerned, the quatrain is the prevailing form, unlike the most simplified couplet and the Five-line stanza. The tercet has a more special place, since one of its lines is supposed to match its counterpart in the next tercet rhyme, it is a challenge for the very concept of the stanza. It does not have the status of a non-marked form. The syntactic shaping which gives the stanza completeness is a feature of the sonnet prototype, and a stage in the development of poetic organization. The syntactic shaping became a subject of controversy at the beginning of the century, with the appearance of changes in artistic consciousness which consisted in discarding all ready forms and seeking out so-called organic, unique, and individual structures. While graphically the same, stanzas were inwardly modified by syntax. Therefore, on the one hand, the categories which are present in the prototype of the sonnet are placed at a basic level which, exactly as the study of other categories has proved, is the level where cognitive processes are carried out most successfully. On the other hand, in the first decades of the twentieth century, cardinal changes occurred, which were connected with their losing their dominance; in general, no leading role was preserved, and the centre-margin situation was replaced by a state of plurality. Without exhausting the problem of the connection between verse forms and cognitive processes, I will only mention that it is easier to create and retain the full rhyme, rather than its neighbours along the scale – the rich rhyme, on the one hand, and assonance, on the other. Along a different scale we shall trace the tension between ordinary rhyme and exotic one, while in the space in between, is a type of rhyme which fulfills its functions in the metre and meaning. In the Bulgarian language pentameter poses limitations only at the beginning and at end of each line, while the inner space is created without any specific selection in terms of various kinds of accent units. The construction of a four-line stanza, consisting of two couplets with the related possibilities of symmetry and parallelism, is obviously the easiest to be perceived. I am going to present the conclusion to this as a paradox. The sonnet, presented either as a

whimsical game, or as a rigorous, imposing pattern, makes use of those poetic means, which rely on cognitive mechanism to the greatest extent. I will try briefly to discuss the relationship between the modernist sonnet and the sonnet prototype. But before that, I would like to point out that the cognitive models of European thought are universal, therefore so is the sonnet prototype which is common for all European literatures. From this point of view, the conclusion I have just made does not contradict the differentiation between the national types of sonnet — the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean. I quote here the interesting observations of Clive Scott:

The self-engrossment of the enclosed scheme, its cyclical nature, give the Petrarchan octave a peculiar structural stability and deliberateness; the second quatrain tends to complement the first in relationships of apposition, development, even counteraction. On this solid foundation is built something very different, the nervous disequilibrating acceleration of the tercets, often using three rhymes in their six lines against the octave's customary two, each tercet being structurally incomplete, unstable. The fact that the stanzas of the continental Petrarchan sonnet are usually separated typographically means that they can relate to each other in a number of ways... and their relative autonomy helps to project their images as realities in their own right, making their own demands. Thus we can call the Petrarchan sonnet a supremely *dramatic* form, engendering complexity from the tensions within it, between symmetry and asymmetry, the static and the dynamic, the restful and the nervous; ...If the Petrarchan sonnet's dramatic nature depends, to a large extent, on the separateness of its stanzas, the more discursive character of the Shakespearean sonnet derives from its being more ...a single unit of fourteen lines than a combination of four stanzas... There is no discernible interaction among its parts, because it has no discernible parts... The Shakespearean sonnet is more essentially a poem of *address*, ...it looks like a way of making up one's mind.⁴

If a Bulgarian sonnet has the rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan or Shakespearean sonnet, is this a question of so-called literary influence. The application of the theory of prototypes will prevent us from giving a positive answer, because we do not work with comparisons of abstract schemes, which have an objective nature. Scott's characterizations of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet are constructs

⁴ Clive Scott, *French verse-art*, Cambridge University Press. 1980, pp. 173–174.

that can be used in the study of the sonnet in Slavic literatures, without the danger of creating pseudoproblems connected with literary influence. Between the abstract schemes and the particular texts in our literature there exist categories which have a prototypical effect and, I think, the interpretation of a sonnet works with them.

How we can define the relationship between the sonnet of modernism and the prototype of the sonnet as a category: does the prototype of the category remain as a prototype in the new situation, in the new poetic state?

Many of the features which used to be obligatory, are no longer. In some cases the number of lines is all that remains of identity. It is exactly at this point that the classical definition of the category shows its weakness. There are several concepts which could be used in this and similar cases – the family resemblance of Wittgenstein, categories with fuzzy boundaries, radial structure – “where there is a central case and conventionalized variations on it which cannot be predicted by general rules”.⁵ If the category with “centre-periphery” structure was applicable to the sonnet in the previous type of culture, I would like to suggest a radial model for the sonnet of modernism, whose centre does not possess the qualities of a generator. In this category, uninhibited by a leading authority, various states could make themselves manifest. However, I wouldn’t define these as violations of the sonnet canon, or as a rebellion against the old tradition. All poetic devices in the sonnet change their nature — the stanza is no longer a stereotypical, ready to use structure, which segments the text both syntactically and in terms of meaning. The rhyme is no longer just a repetition of sounds, but a connection of words by means of assonance; the metrical verse does not sound metrical any more, the lines are either too long, or the mind cannot measure them, or their length varies freely and unpredictably. The function of the graphical line is misleading and the readers have to decide for themselves whether to perceive each formal line as poetic or not. Therefore, the sonnet of modernism is created by completely different means in comparison with the traditional sonnet. The new situation is not characterized by a collection of forms from which the author can choose; now, forms are created *ad hoc*. While taxonomies, even partial ones, such as the identification of the metaphysical sonnet as a separate sub-

⁵ George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, cit., p. 84.

category, are possible within the traditional sonnet, no subcategories are built within the modern sonnet. Texts are connected through cycles, which means that there is a predominance of interpretational, rather than classificational approaches. From an object of poetics the sonnet is transformed into an object of interpretation. The sonnets in a cycle exhibit a tendency towards a greater distance from the prototype of the sonnet than individual sonnets, which, because of lack of any familiar context, have to rely on prototype.

In the full text of my study I discuss the sonnets of D. Debelianov, N. Liliev and E. Bagriana. Due to restricted space, I will now only pinpoint the problems, and appendix consisting of rhyme schemes will serve as an illustration.

D. Debelianov is a poet who follows the romantic tradition, in the broadest sense of this concept. I have decided to narrow my focus to the following problems:

1. Is the sonnet of Debelianov modelled upon the Petrarchan or the Shakespearean sonnet, and what is the position of the Bulgarian sonnet with regard to these two models? My conclusion is that the influence of both models can be observed. Graphically, Debelianov's sonnet follows the Petrarchan type, but lines 13 and 14 form a couplet, within whose framework are combined rhymes, syntax, and meaning. However, not even one sonnet do we find a complete overlapping of these features. The two quatrains are not built as a block, they represent a unity. In general terms, the second quatrain specifies the first one, which, again, is a mechanism with prototypical effect.⁶ The tercets are not syntactically independent in any of the sonnets, which highlights their nature as dependent stanzas. The only exception to this common feature is a poem, entitled "Sonnet", whose subjectmatter, imagery, and syntactical independence of stanzas, bear the peculiarity of the Petrarchan sonnet. However, even this seemingly conventional sonnet comes as a surprise — while in all other sonnets quatrains are built on two rhymes, this is the only sonnet where they consist of four rhymes, which reminds of the Shakespearean sonnet.

⁶ Rachel Giora, *A Text-Based Analysis of Non-Narrative Texts*, "Theoretical Linguistics" 1985, 12 (2/3), pp. 115–135 and *A Probabilistic View of Language*, "Poetics Today" 1991, 12: 1, pp. 165–179.

2. D. Debelianov confirms the sonnet prototype. His sonnets are modelled upon cognitive image-schemes. I scrutinize the metaphorical concept “Life is a road”.⁷

3. I apply the semantic studies of J. Apresian to the mental predicat “I know” and its counterparts as a direction in the discussion of the sonnet prototype.⁸

N. Liliev is a symbolist poet. The intense melodiousness, the use of words in a meaning not typical of everyday life, and the use of categories with fuzzy boundaries encumber the functioning of the prototype, which, in its turn, is a prerequisite for the most serious destructuring of the sonnet. Liliev creates an abstract sonnet.

E. Bagriana wrote her poetry in the period of postsymbolism. Her sonnets are extremely varied. I discuss problems of metre and rhyme. Whenever there isn't one universal metre, the phenomenon of plurality prompts the creation of connotations from other poetic cultures. Bagriana is the creator of a rhyme with a different kind of clausula, which sets new conditions for the requirement of alternating clausulas, while at the same time the use of assonance transforms the rhyme scheme into a free area of interpretation. I also discuss the narrative and the imagery of the sonnet as a source of innovation. I enclose the so-called “scenario of emotion”, developed in the works of Apresian, concerned with internal dynamics of the sonnet.

J4
abab cdcd cfe gfg
AbAb CdCd EfE GfG

YHEC
An3
abab abab cdcd ce
aBaB aBaB cDcD ce

J4
abab cdcd cef ggf
AbAb CdCd Eef GGf

ВСЯКА ПОИЦ
H5
abab abab dcb dcb
AbAb AbAb Dcs Dcb

⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

⁸ Ю. Апресян, *Избранные труды*, т. II с. 405-431.

ДВОРЕЦ ВЕНДРАМИН
J(8, 9, 10)
abba abba cde cde
ABBA ABBA cDe cDe

ЛАВРИ
J7
abba baab cde dcd
ABBA BAAB CdC dCd

ЧУДНИ ВЕЧЕРИ
H6
abba abba ccd cdc
ABBA ABBA CCD CDC

БРЕТАН
abba abba ccd dcd

ХИМИ
abba abba cdcdcd

AN3
abab cdcd cfe ffe
aBaB cDcD cFe FFe

СОИЕТ
J6 m/f caesura
abab abab bac bea
aVAb AVab baC bCa

ДВОРЕЦ МОНСПИНГО
J(7, 9, 11)
abab abab cdc dee
AbAb AbAb CdC dee

ГЛАС
J5
abab abab cde dee
AbAb AbAb Cde dCe

ОТ ВРЪХ НА ВРЪХ
J6,5
abba abba cde dcd
aBBa aBBa CdC dCd

L'ILE DE GROIX
J8 caesura v/v
abba abba ccd dcd

РАКОВИНИ
abab abab cdcdcd

ЗЛАТНА ПЕПЕЛ

J5
 abab baba cdc cdc
 AbAb bAbA cDc cDc

СОНЕТ

Я5
 abab cdcd cfc gfg
 AbAb CdCd EfE GfG

ДА МОЖЕХ

AMF3
 ababababddcdc
 aBaBaBaBcDDcDc

ВЕДРАТА ДУША

H5
 aba bab cdcd cdcd
 aBa BaB CdCd CdCd

ЛЮЛЕЯТ СЕ ИЗМАМНИ

J5,3
 abab abab cdc dcd
 AbAb AbAb CdC dCd

НОЦНА РАЗИСКРЯ

J5
 abab abba cdc dcd
 ABAB ABBA CDC DCD

ДЕНЯТ, ЖЕЛАНИЙ

J6 m. caesura
 abba abba ccd cdc
 aBba aBba CCd EdE

ГРИЖА

J6 m.
 abab baba cdc dec
 AbAb bAbA cDc Dec

СЛЪНЧОГЛЕДИ

J5
 abab baba cdc dec
 AbAb AbbA CCd EdE

ВЕЧЕР И ВЕЧЕРНА

H5,2
 abba ccde cdf ggf
 aBba CCde cdf GGf

НА СЛЪНЦЕТО

J5
 abba abab cdc dcd
 AbbA AbAb CdC dCd

НАД ЕЗЕРОТО

J5
 abba baab cdc dcd
 aBba BaaB CDC DCD

И ВСЕКИ ТЛЕНЕН

J6 m. caesura
 ababbacdexxcd
 aBbaBbaCDexXcd

И ЕТО, ТУК СЪМ

КРАЙ МЕИ

ПЛОВДИВ

J5

abab abab cdc dcd

аВаВ аВаВ сDc DcD

ПРЕД ТГБЕ

J4,1,3

abacdbdbcexbec

АбAcDbDbceXbec

ТИ СПЛИТАШ

J5

abba baab cdc cde

AbbA бAAб сDc cDe

ГОДИНИ МОЯТА

J5

abba abab cdc ddc

аВВа аВаВ сDc DDc

ОГ РАИИНА

J5

abba baba cdcdc d

аВВа ВаВа сDcDc D

