English Renaissance Sonnet and "The Origin of the Modern Mind"

Igor Shaytanov
Comparative Literature Department, Russian State University for the Humanities
Miusskaya sq. 6, Moscow, 125933, Russia
Email: shigor00@mail.ru

Abstract Reflection on the human soul was not alien to the medieval thought at all but within that older trend reflection in poetic imagery would have resulted in an allegorical personification developed on the vertical plane towards divine values. In Renaissance poetry the vertical axis was not rejected but doubled in a new vision opened both to the heavens and earth related in a metaphoric analogy. In the sonnet, as nowhere else, this new vision was processed in the very generic nature of its word, reflective and metaphoric. The target of the poet-reformers in England was not Pertrarch but his imitators and exaggeration of the convention excessive in its metaphoric imagery. Then wit, another salient feature of the Renaissance mind, had flourished in sonneteering and brought into action the mechanism of anti-petrarchiam parody.
Key words sonnet; consciousness of the modern mind; metaphor; Shakespeare; Sidney
Author **Igor O. Shaitanov** is Head of the Comparative Literature Department at Russian State University for the Humanities. He is also Editor-in-Chief of the bimonthly *Voprosy Literatury*, and Literary Secretary for the Russian Booker Prize. His fields of interests include comparative literature and historical poetics, European Renaissance, Anglo-Russian affinities, and English and Russian poetry. His major publications include *The Reflective Muse: The Return to Nature in 18th Century Poetry* (1989), *European Literature: Renaissance* V. 1-2: A Book for University Students (2001; 2nd ed., 2009; 3rd ed., 2014), *English literature through the Eyes of Historical Poetics* (2010), and *Shakespeare: A Life* (2013). He won the Veselovskii Prize from the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2014 and the National Prize for *Shakespeare Encyclopaedia* as the best book project in 2016.

For over three centuries in the European Renaissance the sonnet stood out as a

domineering lyric form. Various efforts were made to explain its attraction, to find a special means of expressiveness and significance in the 14-line strophic convention: either a thesis/antithesis logic, or an enigma of the golden section embedded in the quatrain-terzet structure. Literary historians seemed mesmerized by the strophic regularity of lines and paid little, if any, attention to the verbal nature of the form and a new creativity expressed in it.

Linguistic turn has been a major trend in the study of poetics since the beginning of the 20th century when Benedetto Croce announced "aesthetics as general linguistics" ("Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale," 1902). It was an important achievement but, as it often happens, achievements involve losses too. Many terms from the traditional poetics were discarded and "genre" among them.

Russian historical poetics (with the Russian formalists and Bakhtin as its extremes polarized within the common space) was exceptional in its insistence on the category of genre. They treated genre not as a prescriptive norm but as an essential unit in poetic speech — Bakhtin's verbal genre, or as a specific speech function — Tynyanov's verbal orientation. A widely known projection of this theory is Julia Kristeva's intertextuality, first introduced as her attempt to interpret Bakhtin's idea of how genres as verbal utterances interact and reciprocate in any text, oral or written. Soon the term was universally misunderstood and rejected by Kristeva but not by those many who had adopted it.

Genre approach in historical poetics is focused on the perception of the verbal nature of every form. Thus Bakhtin had promoted understanding of the novel as the first presentation of a speaking man in literature, therefore oriented on the reproduction of speech process itself in its dialogic function. In the novel a new form of generic vision was epitomized, inherent in the new consciousness, expressed in verbal art. A new artistic reflection came into being in the novel, the first genre that heralded contemporaneity in literature and seriously undermined Aristotelian poetics.

Opposed not so much to Aristotle as to many generations of his commentators, due to whose efforts Aristotle had been elevated to the position of an absolute authority and his system into a prescriptive norm, historical poetics drew on the experience of culture when individual talent began to dominate over tradition. This experience has been absorbed into a new concept of genre, dynamic and personally tinged, where every individual text is not to be pigeonholed into a generic classification but to be understood as a battlefield for the struggle of genres (Kristeva's intertextuality was introduced to interpret this situation). To correspond

to this new vision genre, traditionally treated as a stable historically developed form, came to be understood as a verbal function associated with a certain form. It was in this vein that Bakhtin defined the novelty of the novel through its speech orientation towards dialogue and heterolyglossia, or Tynyanov presented the evolution of Russian ode through its rhetorical orientation (oratory word).

With this approach in view I would wish to treat Renaissance sonnet in its long-standing popularity as a form of a principally new speech nature, which afforded an opportunity for the new consciousness to express itself. An important step in the investigation of the form has been prompted by the American scholar Paul Oppenheimer who has collected a small anthology of Renaissance sonnet titled The Birth of the Modern Mind. Self, Consciousness, and the Invention of the Sonnet. The title of my talk refers to this work.

For Oppenheimer a lasting fashion for sonneteering in Europe was due mainly to the fact that it was the first lyrical genre after antiquity written not to be sung and therefore not to the rhythm of music but to that of an inner reflection — "to echo the melodies 'unheard' of the human soul":

> The invention of the sonnet did not, of course, "create" self-consciousness. Appearing as it did at the court of Frederick II, it lead to a fashion in self-conscious, silent and meditative literature that continues into our own day. It led to a fashion in a new sort of imaginative literature as well, the literature in which concrete images would replace allegorical personifications, thereby promoting a new method of symbolism with more direct and clear connections to the subconscious. (Oppenheimer 27)

Oppenheimer here does not name directly what is substituted in the sonnet for "allegorical personifications," a trope domineering the medieval mind, but this new trope is well known — it is a METAPHOR, an instrument of the new reflection capable to unite heaven and earth, to bring together in one act of comprehension distant objects and notions.

Reflection on the human soul was not alien to the medieval thought at all but within that older trend reflection in poetic imagery would have resulted in an allegorical personification developed on the vertical plane towards divine values. In Renaissance poetry the vertical axis was not rejected but doubled in a new vision opened up both to heaven and earth related in a metaphoric analogy. In the sonnet, as nowhere else, this new vision was processed in the generic nature of its word with its "verbal orientation" (*rechevavaya ustanovka*) (Tynianov 279) — reflective

in its lyrical mode and metaphoric in its imagery.

The changes in these two aspects are clearly demonstrated in the generic evolution of the form, introduced by Petrarch later developed into a convention which had provoked a wide reaction in the 16th century known as anti-petrarchism. The target of the poet-reformers in England was not Pertrarch but his imitators and exaggeration of the convention excessive in its metaphoric beauties. Then wit, another salient feature of the Renaissance mind, had flourished in sonneteering and brought into action the mechanism of an anti-petrarchiam parody.

Before I dwell in some detail on wit as a mechanism in the evolution of English sonnet I would wish to make a preliminary conclusion concerning the role the sonnet played in the Renaissance genre system. As well as the novel, the sonnet is a genre unknown to antiquity and central in the Renaissance. Its role and importance may be explained by the verbal function that in its novelty corresponded to the changing consciousness: in the novel — outwardly oriented in the flow of epic narration and polyphony; in the sonnet — reflective and asking for a new symbolism as a means to express a new vision and the very process of meditation. No matter how different in form, the novel and sonnet represent a new man either in his action or his reflection, and both genres become loaded with cultural significance.

The complex stanzaic structure of the sonnet invites the mind to process a thought in private, now independent from rhythm dictated by music:

> This is probably due as much to the handling of time as to the inward-turning nature of personal silence. In performance, time is fleeting. It passes without pause. The audience must surrender a good deal of its capacity for reflection. In privacy and silence, however, readers may grant themselves total control... (Oppenheimer: 28)

Reflection, transformed into the form of poetic meditation, follows the path of bringing together outward images, looking for resemblances and building up a hierarchy of significance. It is here that the metaphor takes hold of the poetic mind in the sonnet. One may doubt whether Petrarch's Laura had ever existed (as some of his friends did with much offence taken by the poet) but her very name, authentic or imaginary, serves as a source to link up all the poetic values as it is consonant with a laurel equal to fame, l'aurum — gold, l'ora (a wind) standing for nature, and supported by its a mythologized image in l'Aurora — the dawn, the first light of the day. Together they make up a sound metaphor central for the book and regenerating

its imaginative power.

Petrrarch in *Canzoniere* is very economic in his use of metaphoric imagery; he never goes to excess in beautifying the earth borrowing for the purpose from the vertical plane of heavenly or precious things. It was not so with those who followed him when the fashion in the 16th century had spread over Europe. They took every opportunity to raise up their love and an ironic reaction against their efforts Shakespeare had memorably epitomized in his sonnet 130: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun…" :

> I grant I never saw a goddess go;
> My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
> And yet by heaven, I think my love as rare
> As any she belied with false compare. (Sonnet 13)

In european and English tradition of petrarchism, transformed into its opposite of anti-petrarchism, a long way lead to this text in 1590s. It goes without saying that anti-petrarchism is dependent on what it abdicates, as a parody always draws on its object — "the terms have a way of melding into each other"(Dubrow 123-124). And the force that links them up bears a name especially important in Renaissance reflection of a later period — wit.

The novel and the sonnet were genres unknown to the antiquity. Wit, though practiced by the ancient, had not been reflected and defined by them. This capacity stood out as a privilege and achievement of the modern mind, the idea unequivocally expressed by the first serious theoretician of wit in Europe — Spanish Jesuit Baltasar Gracián y Morales who defined wit as "a skill to bring together in a graceful combination and harmonious agreement two or three distant notions, embraced by a single act of mind"(Gracián: 175). His tract "Wit, or the Art of the Refined Mind" was written in 1642 and summed up a long renaissance tradition of wit at the same time paving the way for what came to be known as baroque in contrast to a classical mind both not alien in the 17th century England. Classical attitude to wit was different from that of Gracian and coined by John Dryden in 1677: "...A propriety of Thoughts and Words; or in other terms, Thought and Words, elegantly adapted to the Subject" (*Wit* OED).

English Renaissance/Elizabethan wit preferred graceful originality of distant thoughts to Dryden's propriety. At least, it seems so, if one remembers that The Anatomy of Wit, the novel brought out by John Lyly in 1578, the first part of narration about Euphues, established a fashion for witticism that like any fashion

very soon ran to excess. A true tragedy of euphuistic wit is played out between Hamlet and a courtier Osric, who brings him a challenge from Laertes and actually presides the final duel. For Hamlet euphuism is a school for graceful originality of thought, a school where Osric fails though persists in his attempts at wit.

The school metaphor seems all the more adequate here when one recollects that the very term euphuism was first used in a pedagogical tract written by Roger Ascham, at one time a teacher to princess Elizabeth, the future queen. He appealed in the term to its Greek etimology "eŮfaiv — well-endowed by nature, fuá — growth" and in his Renaissance interpretation "apte by goodnes of witte, and appliable by readines of will, to learning, hauing all other qualities of the minde and partes of the bodie that must another day serue learning, not troubled, mangled, and halfed, but, etc." (Roger Ascham. The Schoolmaster, c. 1570 – OED). It is no wonder that queen Elizabeth, a good disciple, was among the first to master the new art and promote it. A Victorian author of the *Short History of the English People* (John Richard Green, 1874) could argue that "Elizabeth was the most affected and detestable of Euphuists"). One does not hear much praise in these words and is not supposed to as the word had completely lost its attraction in the Victorian age, much more in agreement with Dryden's "propriety of Thoughts" (*Wit* – OED).

But in the time of Elizabeth and English Renaissance wit's contribution to the development of the modern mind and consciousness cannot to be overvalued. An instrument of renaissance reflection, the sonnet had initially developed the art of meditation, mataphoric vision, but when these skills had fallen imto exageration the genre, to quote Shakespeare's sonnet 111, did not hesitate "to correct correction"(sonnet 111) and undermine its own former achivements with a self-aimed wit.

When one opens a collection by the first of English sonneteering poets Sir Thomas Wyatt it is easy to surmise that the English format of the sommet came into being through its neighbourship with another renaissance genre — epigram, traditionally closed with a rhymed couplet, a strong point in epigram's satirical wit. The same couplet is a brand-mark in the English sonnet, thus structurally inclined to wit from its birth.

Besides, English Renaissance (together with Spanish) is the last stage of the whole epoch in Europe. It was time to sum up, reflect and revaluate many of the former ideals. This is exactly what is done by the greatest of Shakespeare's predecessors in "The arte of English poesie" (G. Puttenham, 1589) — Sir Philip Sidney. An intellectual, diplomat and poet he was an addressee and patron of many books of verse, political and philosophical thought, Giordano Bruno's the *Heroic*

Frenzies (De gl' heroici furori, 1585) illustrious among them. In love poetry Sidney managed to produce a note personal and by far deeper heart-felt than anyone before him. In the first piece in his cycle "Astrophel and Stella" (1591) the poet was directed by Muse: "Look in thy heart and write," — her response to his troubled doubt how to write. The poet followed this recommendation but he never could get rid of a doubt and went on reflecting on how not to make his art "of others' children changelings use"(28). In other words — not to follow or borrow, but to be original though on a well-trodden path of a sonnet.

This brings Sidney to a "poetics of doubleness" where the poet stands towards tradition in a double function of iconofile and iconoclast (Brooks-Davies xliii), or one may say — of a petrarchist and anti-petrarchist, gaining more and more depth in both.

Wit tends to change from age to age and from genre to genre. It is dependent on its object. In the English Renaissance sonnet wit is focused on the exaggerations of the petrarchan convention with its central analogy of heaven and earth in view. Petrarch found heavenly values in his love to Laura and in her personally. Sidney introduces a metaphoric inversion when Astrophel recognizes "the like" to his own love's torture "in heavenly place" (Sonnet 31). The vector points not downwards — from heaven to earth, but upwards — identifying human predicament with that in heaven.

This is exactly what happens in sonnet 31 "With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climb'st the skies!" The piece belongs to the most famous in the whole canon of English poetry — 45th place among all the poems anthologized and chosen for collections, and one of the first five among renaissance lyrics. Moon climbing the skies silently, and "with wan a face… to the long-with-love-acquainted-eyes" undoubtedly presents "a lover's case." And it is a motive for a final question to present an inverted analogy in the moral light. Does it mean that virtues over there are held in the same low esteem as down here — on earth: are beauties there "as proud as here they be":

> Do they above love to be loved, and yet
> Those lovers scorn whom that love doth possess?
> Do they call Virtue there ungratefulness? (Sonnet 31)

Sidney is especially keen on repeating the same word in different senses and grammatical functions within one text (which goes against the school rules for writing a sonnet — not to repeat the same word). In 3 lines above "love" echoes

four times. The poet seems to invite his audience to test his lexical material and to go beyond the expected meanings. His sonnet is an interrogation into the nature of love here and over there in heavens open to a witty discovery either of difference or resemblance. The former is true in this lover's case. When the word occurs in various combinations it reveals the whole range of its meanings, hair-splitting sometimes, or radically opposed. In the final couplet of sonnet 35 the word "praise" (noun and verb) is repeated 5 times in an almost spinning succession:

> Not thou by praise, but praise in thee is raised;
> It is a praise to praise, when thou art praised. (Sonnet 35)

The whole piece is — in accordance with the question in its first line — a reflection on "What may words say, or what may words not say, / Where Truth itself must speak like Flattery?" (sonnet 35).

This doubt accompanies Sidney from the first sonnet, and though he has received a good advice from his Muse — to write from his heart, he is apprehensive of misunderstanding: his love deserves so high praises that they might seem a flattery which they are not. The final word play with "praise" provides an excuse. Its meaning would be clearer to the eye and mind if in certain cases the initial letter were capitalized (but modern editors prefer lower-case letters everywhere): "Not thou by praise, but Praise in thee is raised;/It is a Praise to praise, when thou art praised" (sonnet 35). Capitalized letters would point to the divine origin of Ideas in Neoplatonism, a permanent attraction for the renaissance mind because Neoplatonism opened "channels between the divine and the mundane that transcended the world while preserving it as a platform for ascent to the godhead" (Copenhaver and Schmitt: 144).

Renaissance sonnet, Sidney's sonnet most obviously so, is inspired by love trained in the platonic school. The extremes of divine and mundane, not opposed but linked up in Neoplatonism, provided the poet's wit with an opportunity for punning — to recognize analogy and to quest it. In this quest antipetrarchan wit tended to reverse analogies, to force them to be as distant as they could be, if not — to overthrow them. The initial work of wit in the sonnet was no less important, though more positive, — in establishing analogies. Reflection in the sonnet, always inclined to a metaphoric argument, led the thought through the world catching every glimpse of resemblance on both vertical and horizontal planes of significance, in heaven and on earth. Every resemblance struck the poet's mind as an intellectual and artistic novelty, when the sense of novelty was gone it heralded the time for the

antipetrarchan inversion.

Every opportunity provided by the nature of metaphor was in use in the Renaissance art of sonneteering. The relation between tenor and vehicle was explored to the extreme and metaphoric implications grew more and more complex till metaphoric had not been transformed into metaphysical in the conceits of baroque poetry. Shakespeare in his later sonnets demonstrates his awareness of this new fashion and rejects it as love's alchemy with an allusion that looks direct and obvious on the title of John Donne's poem:

> Or whether shall I say, mine eye saith true,
> And that your love taught it this alchemy,
> To make of monsters and things indigest
> Such cherubins as your sweet self resemble… (114)

Sidney did not extend his wit in the sonnets to these extremes, but he knew how to renovate an old genre with inventions (in the old rhetorical sense). He suggested objects for comparison beyond those already exploited, set up new scenery for his art (writing a sonnet to the pace of his horse, 49), or looked for an argument in English grammar as in sonnet 63 when Astrophel caught Stella with her "no, no" to his love expostulations in a trap of double negation:

> For Grammar says (O this, dear Stella, weigh),
> For Grammar says (To Grammar who says nay?)
> That in one speech two negatives affirm. (Sonnet 63)

In the Renaissance sonnet wit had been changing its quality and function but invariably retained its status, formative in the origin of the modern mind, individual and innovative. Probably it was for the first time that tradition and individual talent came to be so definitely opposed to one another in a genre where wit had an impact on its verbal orientation. Helen Vendler taking issue over interpretation of one of Shakespeare's sonnets suggested that understanding of its merits depends on an adequate vision of the genre in its "poetics of wit" (Vendler : 445). A concept, though occasional for the author and coined in passing, sounds as good as a general definition for the Renaissance sonnet.

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