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Spis treści

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So sincerely, so tenderly.
Foregrounding in Pushkin's "I Loved you"

Summary

In this chapter we provide an answer to the question why this particular poem, "I Loved you" by Pushkin, has become so famous. It doubtlessly belongs to the canon of literary love poems in the Russian language. But why? Its fame seems to be in flagrant contradiction with its simplicity. Indeed, many readers may not perceive anything particularly "literary" in the language of the poem. In what follows, we argue that this is a mistake, and that the greatness of the poem lies exactly in the illusion of simplicity that Pushkin creates, while at the same time expressing the deepest emotions to which lovers are able. Addressing the question of how we can verify our argument, we offer some examples of empirical methods by which one can investigate the reaction of readers to the poem.
Key words: literary canon, foregrounding, parallelism, deviation, Pushkin, empirical methods

Streszczenie

W danym artykule proponujemy odpowiedź na pytanie, dlaczego wiersz A. Puszkina „Kochałem Panią…" („Ja was lubil…") zyskał szeroką sławę. Utwór ten bez wątpienia należy do kanonu liryki miłosnej napisanej w języku rosyjskim. Ale dlaczego? Wydaje się, że istnieje pewien dysonans między sławą tego wiersza a jego prostotą. I rzeczywiście, wielu czytelników może uważać, że w tym tekście nie ma niczego szczególnie „literackiego". W naszym opracowaniu argumentujemy, że podobne przekonanie jest błędne, a niezwykłość omawianego wiersza tkwi właśnie w iluzji prostoty, którą tworzy Puszkin, wyrażając przy tym najgłębsze emocje do jakich zdolny jest człowiek zakochany. Odpowiadając na potencjalne pytania o zasadność naszych argumentów, przedstawiamy przykłady badań empirycznych, przy pomocy których można sprawdzić reakcje czytelników na wiersz.
Słowa kluczowe: kanon literacki, udziwnienie, paralelizm, dewiacja, Puszkin, badania empiryczne

Introduction

There is hardly any need to introduce the famous poem "I Loved you"' by Pushkin to Russian readers, since almost everyone has once encountered it in life. Yet what remains largely unexplained, is the poem's appeal, for at first sight there seems nothing special about the text. In this paper we will present some of the reasons why the text appears so robust and resistant to the assault of time. If forgetting is part of the human condition, why then are some texts, as this one by Pushkin – hardly forgotten?

Written in 1829 and possibly read to the circle of Pushkin's friends and family, as was usual in 19th century Russian aristocratic circles, the poem has evoked critical attention right from the day. It was also put to music by various Russian composers: Alexander Dargomyzhsky (1832), Alexander Alyabyev (1834) and Boris Sheremetev (1859). It presents itself as an internal monologue of a man who is overwhelmed with his feelings for a beloved woman. Critics would discuss the seeming lack of imagery in the poem. Thus in early 20th century Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky (Овсянико-Куликовский 1923: 29) holds that "[t]he finite lyricism of the mood and expression in this wonderful poem goes beyond any doubt, and we comprehend it right away, with no effort… But where are the images? They are absent whatsoever – not only in the sense of inquisitive images, but in general – in the sense of separate, exact imaginations". Yet the lack of tropes such as imagery, metaphor or metonymy is not the only thing that strikes the attentive reader: the poem is also written in an almost everyday register, in a *parlando* voice, with no apparent poetic license, in a syntactically discreet style. So why did (and do) readers still admire and cherish it?

We address the question indeed with respect to readers, for without real readers' enthusiasm for the text the poem would have been eradicated from collective memory. The "turn of the reader" was effectuated in the 60s and 70s of the previous century through the advent of so-called "reception studies". Foremost authors in this respect were Hans Robert Jauss (1970) and Wolfgang Iser (1980) who directed the attention of literary scholars to the history and the process of reading respectively. Jauss convincingly showed how generations of readers approached literary texts from different perspectives, with an eye to dissimilar traditions and mentalities, which inevitably led to different modes of handling the texts in question. In his turn, Iser pointed out that such handling of texts crucially hinged on incomplete information in the texts themselves, so-called "gaps" that needed to be "filled" by readers themselves. Reception studies have now become an established part of literary studies (see, for example, van Peer 1986), eventually leading to the empirical study of the way in which flesh and blood readers process texts (Zyngier et al. 2008). So let us have a close look at the text itself.

Pushkin's "I Loved you" as an interplay of foregrounding devices

The poem is famous enough, so we will not dwell on its history and motives. Instead, we present the text below together with its transliteration and a literal, word for word translation into English.

Я вас любил: любовь еще, быть может, | Yavaslew-beel // lew-bovyesh-shyoh / beet' mo-zhyet //
В душе моей угасла не совсем; | Vdooshehma-yee / oogas-lanyesav-syem //
Но пусть она вас больше не тревожит; | Napoost' / anahvasbol'sheh // nyehtrye-vo-zheet //
Я не хочу печалить вас ничем. | Yanyehha-choo / pye-cha-leet' vas // nee-chyem //

Я вас любил безмолвно, безнадежно, | Yavaslew-beelbyez-mol-v-na // byez-na-dyehzh-na //
То робостью, то ревностью томим; | Taro-bast'ee, // taryev-nast'-eeta-meem //
Я вас любил так искренно, так нежно, | Yavaslew-beel / tak // ee-skryen-na // tak / nyezh-na //
Как дай вам Бог любимой быть другим. | Kak / daivamBog // lew-bee-moybeet' / droo-geem.

Я вас любил: любовь еще, быть может, | I loved you: a love still, perhaps,
В душе моей угасла не совсем; | In my soul extinguished not quite;
Но пусть она вас больше не тревожит; | But let it no longer disturb you;

Я не хочу печалить вас ничем.	I do not want to sadden you by anything.
Я вас любил безмолвно, безнадежно,	I loved you silently, hopelessly,
То робостью, то ревностью томим;	Now by timidity, now by jealousy tormented;
Я вас любил так искренно, так нежно,	I loved you so sincerely, so tenderly,
Как дай вам Бог любимой быть другим.	As may God grant you to be [so] loved by another.

Readers may wonder at the stilted translation, but that is the way to understand the Russian words and grammar of the poem. For this reason, there have been numerous "literary" translations of Pushkin's poem, which we will not treat here. Often in such translations there is an effort to "compete" with the original in an attempt to make them as close to the spirit of the Russian text as possible. But in doing so sacrifices have to be made with respect to the original wordings. This is, properly speaking, a problem for translation studies, one that falls outside the scope of our present deliberations. It remains to be said, of course, that the syntax of Pushkin's poem is far from stilted. On the contrary, it reads as if it is composed in the most everyday Russian one may expect. At least, that is the first impression. But is it correct?

Well, not exactly. First of all, the poem is written in the form of an address. The eight lines of the verse present a lyrical confession of the speaker to the woman he has loved, remaining distant from her and displaying no conspicuous intimacy. The whole poem is built on the explicit contrast of "I" and "you" (there are 11 personal pronouns per 50 words of the poem!), where the two are obviously apart. The male lover addresses his beloved with a formal "vy / vas / vam" instead of possibly using the familiar "ty". In this way, he gives the reader a hint that his love was never returned, and the relations did not cross the intimacy boundary. One year before, in 1828, Pushkin himself explained the difference in his lines, "She substituted, by a chance, / For empty 'you' the gentle 'thou'"[1]"[2].

But then the address remains unanswered. We do not have the reply of the beloved, the addressee. So in a sense, the poem hangs in mid-air, without a reaction that would provide a dialogue between the two. This is already a deviation from usual practice. Letters are normally answered; so are complaints, requests, and even emails – at least most of the time. This incompleteness of the communicative act brings us to what is often considered the hallmark of poetry: its license. Most of us immediately recognise a poem, if only by its shape (due to verse lines, stanzas, and the like). This characteristic of poetry has been the object of theoretical reflection under the name of "poetic license" since Antiquity (see, for instance, Perloff 1990, Abrams 1999 and Walker 2000).

The poem presents us with some thoughts, some deliberations, and some reverie. But of course the thoughts are *someone's* thoughts: those of a past lover. And presumably the thoughts are *meant* for someone – otherwise they would not be expressed in language. And they serve some purpose. But what purpose? The text is printed, so we may assume it is directed to a wider audience. Thus, it is not real communication. If one sends a message, the addressee may assume that the purpose is to inform, to persuade, or to move. But what if one has the message printed and distributed to the masses? Then the purpose must be such that the masses can access the object of the printed message. If not, they will simply not read it. But what *is* the purpose of Pushkin's text? Our argument turns around the fact that the form (a poem) and the medium (printed) of the text can only be grasped if we situate it in the history of literary tradition – in other words, in its *intertextuality*.

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[1]Пустое вы сердечным ты / Она, обмолвясь, заменила.

[2]In Russian, just like in French, the system of personal pronouns is dual and implies two second-person singular ones: the informal "ty" and the formal "vy" – often capitalised. In his 1828 poem («Ты и Вы»), Pushkin shows the transition from "vy" to "ty" as the relations evolve. In the "I loved you" poem, the lyrical hero still addressed his beloved one by "vy", thus indicating that the relations have remained distant and unreturned.

Intertextuality

It may well be that we do not experience the unanswered address as a deviation from normal linguistic usage. If so, it is because of literary *tradition*: we interpret the text as addressed to *us*, readers, not to a specific individual. As such, Pushkin's poem takes its place in a long tradition, beginning with Augustine's *Confessions* (around the year 397) and intensified in the 18th century by Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782–1789). They are basically autobiographic statements in a historical context, in which the subject's shortcomings and further development are highlighted – and hence are interpreted as a glorification of its subject, of God (with Augustine) or honest life (with Rousseau). In Pushkin's case, the subject describes his love as a process of self-denudation, in which the male lover presents his love as devotedly unselfish, thereby highlighting the purity and valour of the beloved woman: who else would be worthy of such a profound dedication? Thus the self-presentation (and indeed self-aggrandisation) has as its ultimate goal the exaltation of the other. So again the text deviates from everyday usage, this time by taking its place in the history of western literature – which has created a niche for laudation through self-exploration and transfiguration. The reader is invited to reflect on the nature of the beloved through the confession of the lyrical "I". And this exploration should bring an aesthetic reward to the reader.

The repetitive sentence structure and the whole machinery of the parallelism in the poem underline and further strengthen this view of the beloved. The examples from Augustine and Rousseau already make clear that this literary device is not limited to specific languages, but that Pushkin creates his own version of such a "confession".

Following Fabb (2002: 136), "verse is inherently contradictory and complex and thereby inherently aesthetic". Some hundred years ago, this reflection was systematised in the works of the Russian Formalists (Steiner 1984, Erlich 2012). According to the Formalists, in literature form is the most important thing, and form must fulfil a function – an aesthetic one in the first place. In what follows, we will provide some insights into how a parallelism as a foregrounding device may have contributed to the long-lasting appeal of this seemingly simple text.

Parallelism

Parallelism is so central to poetry that there have been efforts to *define* poetry simply by the occurrence of parallelism. The clearest of such proposals is by Ribeiro who claims that "[a] closer look at the poems from literary traditions around the world will reveal that the history of poetry is one of texts whose universal and enduring characteristic is their exhibiting certain types of repetition schemes" (2007: 191)[3]. There is even a *visual* element in this: readers *recognise* poetry because of the parallel nature of lines and stanzas (for more details, see Fabb 2002). But this also holds for oral poetry where, according to Rubin (1995: 106), lines are recognised as a *Gestalt*.

Parallelism in the poem is at play at various levels: lexical, syntactic, grammatical and phonetic. Thus, three lines out of eight start with the anaphoric repetition of "Ya vas lyubil[4]"

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[3] This is not a wholly new idea, of course, since repetition and parallelism were already identified as essential characteristics of poetry in Antiquity; see the previous references to poetics in Antiquity.

[4] Я вас любил.

("I loved you"[5]), which is reinforced with additional "lyubov[6]" ("love", Line 1) and "lyubimoy[7]" ("loved [by someone]", Line 8).

The metre is fairly conventional: binary and iambic. There is, precisely through the *parlando* mode of the syntax, a certain tension between the iambic metre and the rather flowing, everyday rhythm of speech toward which the language of the poem gyrates.

More internal parallelism is used in the second stanza. In Line 5, two adjectives "<u>bez</u>molvno, <u>bez</u>nadezhno[8]" ("silently, hopelessly") start with a negative prefix "bez-[9]" ("without"), which seems to be the continuation of emphatic negation in Lines 3 and 4: "No pust' ona vas bol'she <u>ne</u> trevozhit / Ya <u>ne</u> hochu pechalit' vas <u>ni</u>chem[10]" ("But let it [love] <u>not</u> bother you / I do <u>not</u> want to upset you with <u>no</u>thing" [the double negative in Russian is grammatically correct]).

The parallelism in Line 5 is both phonetic and grammatical when [to] is repeated twice as a conjunction in "<u>To</u> robostyu, <u>to</u> revnostyu[11]" ("By shyness, by jealousy") and is then reinforced phonetically through "<u>to</u>mim[12]" ("is tormented") where it is homonymous to the first syllable.

Evident as it is, parallelism in the poem is not the only manifestation of foregrounding. Deviation, though much less conspicuous, indeed plays a role in increasing the beauty one feels when reading Pushkin's verse. Let us explain.

Deviation

In Jakobson's view (1981), the poem illustrates the fact that in poetry there need not be any deviation at all. But according to the above analysis, this is quite wrong: there is no direct conversational equivalent for the way the speaker communicates his thoughts and emotions. It is, and this has to be stressed, quite deviant from what we are used to in everyday communication. And it shows the genius of the poet who can actually mislead one of the great linguists of the 20th century into believing that the language is "ordinary". True, there are no strong grammatical anomalies and no flouting of our everyday language. Yet the fact is that there is no direct correspondence between the speaker's aims in the text and our daily communicative needs. In a sense Jakobson's misjudgement is understandable when one incorporates the time in which it was conceived: the 1960s were preoccupied by grammaticality, following the Chomskyan paradigm, and the pragmatic revolution had hardly begun. And it is precisely in the pragmatic area that the deviations in Pushkin's poem occur. But the beloved woman does not reply to the address. Nor do we know who she is or what her reaction to the address might be, we are left alone with the speaker in the poem. And the effect is (after Fabb 2002: 85) to strengthen the tie between the speaker and the reader, in his words "to increase the effect of mutuality."

Line 7 of the poem contains "tak[13]" ("so") repeated twice, but here, intentionally or not, Pushkin combines parallelism with deviation and deceived expectation. If read alone, the

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[5]Henceforth the translation in parenthesis is ours, its only aim being to render the semantics and stylistic colouring of Russian words as well as possible.

[6] любовь

[7] любимой

[8] безмолвно, безмятежно

[9] без-

[10]Но пусть она вас больше не тревожит; /Я не хочу печалить вас ничем.

[11]<u>То</u> робостью, <u>то</u> ревностью

[12]<u>то</u>мим

[13] так

line "Ya vas lyubil tak iskrenno, tak nezhno[14]" would mean "I loved you so sincerely, and so tenderly". Semantically it could have been the final line of the poem where "tak[15]" would have been an adverb of measure. Yet when Line 8 "Kak day vam Bog lyubimoy byt' drugim[16]" is added, "tak" turns into part of a conjunction structure "tak… kak[17]" ("as much … as"), and the reader may be both surprised and enchanted by the unexpected twist – the technique used in the "I love you not" experiment by van Peer, Hakemulder and Zyngier (2012: 12). Now the poem would read "I loved you as sincerely, as tenderly / As, if it's God's will, you will be loved by another man". We may hypothesise that it is the enjambment in the ending that increases the emotional impact of the poem on its reader – the claim that is in need of an empirical verification.

In his turn, Jakobson in his "Poetry of grammar and grammar of poetry" (1981: 72–75) picks up the claim in an attempt to demonstrate that the grammatical structure of the poem could in fact be a figure, a trope – a major tool of poetic expression. He holds that the selection and proportion of grammatical forms in the text bear important semantic functions.

Shklovsky (Шкловский 1969: 223) reacts to Jakobson's article and criticises his understanding of general poetic principles, offering instead his own interpretation of the poem as one whole trope – an extended litotes, an understatement:

> The lyrical hero – the author, the "I" – is very moderate when talking about himself; he restricts himself as much as possible, diminishing his grief. He seems to be not talking, but betraying his thoughts. […]. Litotes is not the ultimate goal of creating this poem – it's one of the ways of indirect expression. Yet the term emphasises generalization and repetition of this technique (*priyom*). The author restricts himself. All the lines are arranged as a restricted talk about the most important thing, and the "I" repeats itself many times [*here and below,the translation is the authors'*].

He continues to claim (*idem*: 224) that "I Loved you" is Pushkin's love poem. It is a revelation of a person who in a way betrays his thoughts by confessing to himself. It is a different, personal tragedy, the tragedy of a loving person who faces the one who does not love him. The last line, in Jakobson's view (1981: 74), is a kind of spell the lyrical hero casts on the woman he loves: he is sure that without supernatural assistance she will not be able to meet love like his.

In fact, Shklovsky's reading of the poem does not reject that by Jakobson, but rather contributes to it from a standpoint of a holistic approach to a text, which is in a way beyond a pure linguistic approach. As a Russian Formalist, Shklovsky treats the poem as a single device (technique, *priyom*).

The therapeutic power of Pushkin's poem is discussed by Senderovich (Сендерович 1987) who, similarly to Jakobson, holds that the poet follows both a psychological and poetic goals when the "sincere revelation remains an act of silent love, and the cry of hopelessness acquires an unexpected power of a spell while jealousy turns out to be indistinguishable from shyness, being expressed in the gesture of infinite tenderness and renunciation" (*idem*: 324).

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[14] Я вас любил так искренно, так нежно

[15] так

[16] Как дай вам Бог любимой быть другим

[17] как… так

The empirical dimension

The previous pages have argued for an interpretation of Pushkin's text, one that explains not only its meaning, but also its attraction. About that attraction, there is little doubt, and we need not do much research in order to establish the fact. But what about the *reasons* we have given for its attraction? Is there any way in which we can demonstrate that these are indeed the reasons? This is, fortunately, the case. Over the last decades literary studies have developed reliable methods to answer this question. This is what *empirical study of literature* is[18].

From this perspective our interpretation is not just one out of the multitude of possible interpretations, but is considered a *hypothesis*, the truthfulness of which may be established on methodological grounds. Or, to use an even better term, our interpretation is considered as a *prediction*: given the text in its actual form with its structures and meanings, it is predicted that readers will respond to it in an aesthetic way – and derive some kind of delight from it, both in a cognitive and in an emotional sense.

What would such a reconstruction look like? We have outlined a number of characteristics of the text that in our opinion are crucial to make it poetic, to make it a poem. That is *one* part of the equation. The *other* is the reaction of readers. By that we mean *real* readers because our prediction must be held against reactions of readers in reality, not against our own preferred opinions.

In its simplest form, we could test, in line with the standards of using empirical methodology in the Humanities (Chesnokova 2011 and van Peer et al. 2012), our predictions by changing the characteristics of the text that we hold responsible for its attraction. In earlier sections of this chapter, we have referred to deviational aspects as well as various forms of parallelism. By replacing these textual elements with non-deviational and / or non-parallelistic forms (and keeping all other aspects of the text constant), we can ideally trace their concomitant effects on readers' reactions. These may be gauged through various methods, the simplest of which are pen-and-paper questionnaires. We can distribute a manipulated version of the poem among a group of readers, while at the same time distributing the original poem among the second group. If we do this randomly, we have no reason to expect the two groups to be composed in a biased way. Then, after having requested participants to read the text, we ask both groups the same questions, which can be of a cognitive, emotive or attitudinal kind. They relate to the *psychological* dimension of the poem's attraction. If we find clear differences between the average responses of the two groups, and if these are statistically significant, they must be due to the textual manipulation that we had applied. However, not all readers are the same, so we can also build in a *sociological* dimension in the test of our prediction, by investigating different groups of people, for instance different nationalities, age groups or gender differences.

To our knowledge, no such research has been carried out with respect to Pushkin's poem, but various studies have demonstrated the effects of such literary features (see, for instance, Miall and Kuijken 1994, Kuijpers 2014, Chesnokova and van Peer 2016, Koopman 2016, Menninghaus et al. 2017), and several others. And the previous description makes it clear that there are no principled obstacles against launching such an investigation.

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[18] There is an international association called IGEL (see: https://sites.google.com/igelassoc.org/igel2018/home) that brings together scholars in this field; its official journal, *Scientific Study of Literature* can be accessed at: https://benjamins.com/catalog/ssol/main.

By way of a suggestion, we may, for instance, manipulate the most conspicuous trigger of the parallelistic effect – the "Ya Vas lyubil" ("I loved you") anaphoric element – into, in turns, "Lyubil ya Vas" ("Loved you I", which Russian word order grammatically permits), "Mechtal o Vas" ("Dreamed [I] about you"), or "O vas mechtal" ("[I] About you dreamed"). Comparing the reactions to the manipulated and original versions of the poem by the experimental and control group respectively will then allow to check whether the "I loved you" phrase makes the poem more meaningful / beautiful / easy to remember, etc.

Discussion

In the considerations above, we tried to persuade the reader that foregrounding devices in the poem by Pushkin by themselves may have particular effects on readers, and it is exactly this that largely contributes to the everlasting aesthetic and emotional appeal of the seemingly simple text. When we remove the devices, readers' responses could, in fact, be different – a claim which awaits empirical verification.

For further research, the experiment should be carried out with different population samples. From a more general perspective, the above considerations give some indication that the traditional views on Pushkin's poem may need certain revision.

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