

Evolution of Unique Stanzaic Structure in Short Poems of Afanasy Fet

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Abstract

The nature of Afanasy Fet's oeuvre – the best of which is short lyric poems in Russian – accounts for its being relatively little appreciated outside his homeland, but it is surprising that, more than a century after his death, and in spite of his unquestionable stature as one of Russia's greatest poets. Stanzas can integrate verse elements to give a poem form on a large scale. We will look at Fet's stanzaic structure from two points of view: the makeup of the stanza out of different elements, and how the stanzaic organization of a poem helps make reading it the sort of experience it is.

Keywords: Fet, poetics, verse form, stanza, poem, structure, graphic form, craftsman-poet.

1.0. Introduction

Afanasy Fet was in the non-poetic world sometimes but not always known as Afanasy Afanasyevich Shenshin. Fet's poems are numerous – excluding translations, there are over eight hundred, dating from the mid- or latter-1830s (Fet was born in 1820), to 1892, the year he died – and most of them are short: most often just a dozen lines, many poems a little more, others less. Fet's oeuvre has struck many readers more by its stability than by its development. Cagey and vague, Fet cultivated a persona that evades temporal definition. In his late work he returns to earlier themes and usages. He reprints and occasionally re-writes work of forty years past. Old and new blend together without obvious mediative development. I have tried to indicate ways I believe Fet's poetics are unified from early to late, but of course his practice could not but change over the more than half century in which he was writing. One of the unifying principles of Fet's poetics was his orientation toward the mind of his reader, and he well knew that his reader in 1890 was different from the reader of 1840. He also knew, as we cannot, how much of his readership had not changed, or changed only in that its response was no longer face to face, but from the grave.

2.0. Analysis

We already know something about how Fet exploits verse form in his stanzas. Sometimes, as we saw in the last section, he creates new stanzas by dislocating line-ends. An idiosyncratic six-line stanza, for example,

*Сны и тени,
Сновиденья,
В сумрак трепетно манящие,
Все ступени
Усыпленья
Легким роем преходящие,*

can readily be derived from a quatrain with alternating (abab) rhyme. Fet did not write the following quatrain:

*Сны и тени, сновиденья,
В сумрак трепетно манящие,
Все ступени усыпленья
Легким роем преходящие, ...*

The metrical device of dislocating line-ends is thus one of the ways that Fet ended up with those stanzas of different-length lines that were such an outstanding characteristic of his work. More typical than the preceding stanza, however, is the following one:

*О, не зови! Страстей твоих так звонок
Родной язык.
Ему внимать и плакать, как ребенок,
Я так привык!*

The way in which this stanza is more typical, not only of Fet but of most poetry in anisometric stanzas, is that the shorter of the alternating-length lines comes at the end. That Fet wrote several poems the other way round, as in “Сны и тени...”, is thanks in part to his creative approach to the caesura of long lines. Some aspects of stanzaic structure also came up when we talked about rhyme. As we have seen, Fet’s partly-rhymed quatrains are unusual: they are unusually frequent in his work, they are unusually diverse, and they were structurally innovative. The unrhymed lines in these stanzas are in principle not so much “unrhymed” as “not necessarily rhymed”, and, unlike most Russian poets’ partly rhymed stanzas, Fet’s could end rhymeless:

*Как ясность безоблачной ночи,
Как юно-нетленные звезды,
Твои загораются очи
Всесильным, таинственным счастьем.*

Fet thus reversed conventional stanzaic organization with respect to both the length of lines and the presence in them of rhyme. Fet’s idiosyncrasies of meter and rhyme conspire. His different experiments work to the same poetic end and together become one source of the variety his stanzaic repertory has been praised for: compared with other nineteenth-century Russian poets, Fet’s work contains more stanzas that are his alone, unshared by others, and he is disinclined to re-use the same stanzaic form in more than one poem.

Let us put this in perspective. As we know, Fet was a master – for a time practically Russia’s only master – of the short lyric poem, and nearly all the original poems that he wrote over some fifty-five years were indeed short: the corpus we have been talking about consists of some 950 poems, of which only five are what are conventionally considered long poems (поэмы), with a few others that might also be classed with them (for example, “Sakontala” and “The Nightingale and the Rose”). If Fet has more “individual” stanzas than, say, Lermontov (whose stanzas are actually quite varied), then at least some of the difference can be attributed to differences in the two poets’ longevity and degree of specialization in shorter poems, not to mention the variation induced by the changes in metrical norms over the course of Fet’s career. And saying that Fet’s stanzas were more inventive than other nineteenth century poets’ is not high praise: stanzaic structure in Fet’s time was not especially rich. Most stanzas were quatrains, usually with alternating rhyme, and so are Fet’s: out of 765 poems of more than one stanza, two thirds (507 poems) are written in abab quatrains. Stanzaic structure became even less varied in the course of the nineteenth century, and so did Fet’s: out of the same 765 poems, 58% of the earlier ones (1840-1858) are written in abab quatrains, but 74% of the later ones (1859-1892).

Of the same group of 765 poems, only twenty-five are in stanzas longer than six lines, and, not counted among the 765, Fet also wrote a dozen sonnets, mostly in the 1840s. The only sonnet form he used more than once is “aBaB aBaB ccD eeD”: it accounts for three iambic pentameter poems, all from 1842-44. In his sonnets, as in other ways, we see the young Fet in the old Fet’s arms: his first and last sonnets, from about 1840 and 1880 respectively, are the only ones in iambic hexameter – a metrical gallicism with a long Russian lineage. “Говорили в древнем Риме...” (1883) is built out of the only seven-line stanzas in Fet’s non-translated verse. Seven-line stanzas are unusual in the German tradition, too, but four of Fet’s translations from German (from about 1840 to 1865) are of poems in stanzas of seven lines, and a seven-line stanza is also found in medieval Latin – perhaps relevant to “Говорили в древнем Риме ...”, because of its thematics. In any event, here as in other ways, Fet in his late poetry exploited an unusual form he was attracted to earlier, when he selected poems for translation.

The longest stanzas Fet uses with any frequency have six or five lines, and in each instance he eventually adopts just one favored rhyme pattern. The two patterns have different status and history, in Fet’s work, as in general, but he uses both in the construction of strong verse closure and, often, ring forms. Since Fet’s preferred six-line stanza is often considered a “song” stanza, its association with such forms is especially natural. The five-liner lacks such a strong tradition.

Six-line stanzas are generally common, and Fet used them throughout his career: in all, there are 71 such poems in my corpus, of which 30 are in the canon, and 20 are one-stanza poems (8 canonical). The difference between one-stanza poems and non-stanzaic poems is not always easy to draw. Fet’s six-line poems with a regulated pattern of rhymes and clausulae favor structures atypical of his poems with repeating stanzas: eight of them are based entirely on pair rhyme, for example, and seven are based on only one or two rhymes. Because they are noticeably different from the other poems, I exclude one-stanza texts from further consideration. Among the others, the commonest rhyme pattern is “AAbCCb” (26 poems, 15 canonical). It occurs in a variety of meters, but 14 of the poems are trochaic, six of them feminine tetrameter alternating with masculine trimeter. Three other poems are in ternary meters. These metrical patterns support the association of the “AAbCCb” stanza with song forms. Yet the commonest single meter for “AAbCCb” poems is the neutral iambic tetrameter: seven texts from 1849 to 1887. Five of the seven are from the 1850s, and, unlike the trochaic poems, none of them belongs to Fet’s “Мелодии” or “Баллады”.

We have seen that the usage of The Lyrical Pantheon is in many ways sui generis, and so is its lone “AAbCCb” poem, called “Утешение” (“Вспорхнул твой ветренник, уж нет его с тобою!...”). It is Fet’s only “AAbCCb” poem in iambic hexameter, and it is syntactically unique. “AAbCCb” stanzas tend to divide syntactically into AAb+CCb, and in Fet’s usage the break between the two halves of the stanza is sharp. “Утешение” maintains the 3+3 line division in the first of its two stanzas, but the syntax of the second one, uniquely in Fet’s work, reinforces the 2+4 rhyme pattern, and thereby the link of the stanzaic form with an underlying abba quatrain. Fet’s use of such quatrains is at its height in The Lyrical Pantheon. All five of Fet’s “AAbCCb” poems from the 1840s are in two stanzas, whereas later ones are mostly in three. Since the three-stanza form is, like the stanzaic pattern itself, associated with song, the shift from two- to three-stanza “AAbCCb” poems shows Fet’s usage aligning itself with song-form convention. The correlation becomes strongest in the 1880s, when the three-stanza form is reunited with his early proclivity for using the “AAbCCb” rhyme pattern with ternary and trochaic meters: all but one of the seven “AAbCCb” poems of the 1880s is ternary or trochaic, and all are in three stanzas. The last two “AAbCCb” poems are from 1890 and 1891 respectively. Both are trochaic, and both are in two stanzas, like the poems of the 1840s. One of the late poems is “В молодые тоже годы”, a translation of Heine’s “Habe auch, in jungen Jahren...”. The other one is this:

*Я не знаю, не скажу я,
Оттого ли, что гляжу я
На тебя, я все пою,
И задорное веселье
Ты, как легкое похмелье,
Проливаешь в песнь мою,
Иль – еще того чудесней –
За моей дрожащей песней
Таит дум невольных мгла,
И за то ли, оттого ли
До томления, до боли
Ты приветливо светла?*

As we shall see later, it is characteristic of Fet’s very last work that he begins to write more poems in two stanzas. The switch is especially striking in poems with stanzaic structures associated with ternary song form. In addition to his favorite “AAbCCb” stanza and its relatives, Fet also uses other six-line stanzaic forms that we will not look at here, for example the “ABCABC” pattern of “Телемак у Калипсы”. We will, however, discuss his masterpiece six-liner “To Chopin” (“Шопену” [“Ты мелькнула, ты предстала...”], 1882), found on page 286. “To Chopin” and “Говорили в древнем Риме...” were most likely written within six months of each other, and if “Говорили в древнем Риме...” is a masterpiece of suspense, “To Chopin” is a masterpiece of suspension. The last line of each stanza looks orphaned – in the style of “Der Sänger” – until we find its partner in the succeeding (or preceding) stanza. The closural triplets of rhymes in the first and last stanzas serve to enclose the poem in a traditional Fetian ring: звуки ~ муки ~ руки is echoed in муки ~ разлуки ~ звуки, but, at closure, the triplet rhyme calls up reinforcements: this is the great triumph of the final “near orphan” rhyme, based on the same stressed /ú/ plus velar as the final triplet rhyme. The near orphan suddenly gains a force we never expected, but it is stopped in its tracks, suspended forever without that matching unstressed /i/. The history of five-liners in Fet’s oeuvre suggests that the poet was not always secure in his mastery of the form. The earliest five-liner in his canon is also his first iambic “AbAAb” poem: “Тебе в молчании я простираю руку...”. It appeared Fet’s 1850 collection (where it was the only five-liner), was rejected by the editors of his 1856 collection, and was reprinted in the third volume of Evening Lights (1888). The same 1856 volume from which “Тебе в молчании я простираю руку...” was excluded nonetheless presents the iambic-hexameter children of that poem (“О друг, не мучь меня жестоким приговором!...” and “Вчера, увенчана душистыми цветами...”) and other AbAAb poems as well: “Еще весны душистой нега...”, “Пчелы” (“Пропаду от тоски я и лени...”), and “Ласточки пропали...”. Although Fet wrote five-liners throughout his career, the only important such poem in his late work is “Ночь и я, мы оба дышим...” (1891). Special focus on the third line of an AbAAb stanza is not especially characteristic of mid-poem stanzas. It occurs at least as often in initial or final stanzas and can take the form of an especially vivid image, as in this opening stanza:

*О друг, не мучь меня жестоким приговором!
Я оскорбить тебя минувшим не хочу.
Оно пленительным промчалось метеором...
С твоим я встретиться робел и жаждал взором
И приходил молчать. Я и теперь молчу.*

or of an emotional outburst (as in the last stanza of “Пчелы”):

*Нет, постой же! С тоскою моею
Здесь расстанусь. Черемуха спит.
Ах, опять эти пчелы под нею!
И никак я понять не умею,
На цветах ли, в ушах ли звенит.*

It is quatrains that are far and away the commonest stanzas in Fet's poetry. Quatrains are usually built with two rhymes, and there are three ways to combine them: abab (alternating rhyme), abba (enclosing rhyme), and aabb (pair rhyme). Not only is alternating rhyme the commonest pattern, but its appearance is also limited nearly entirely to stanzas of exactly four lines. Longer alternating patterns, rare in most poets' work, occur in only three poems by Fet, each one consisting of a single stanza. The earliest example, written about 1856, is the mysterious six-liner "Снился берег мне скалистый ...". Of the two eight-liners, the first is a humorous occasional poem ("Наш шеф – владыка полусвета ...", 1874), and the second is this well-known poem, from 1883:

*Только в мире и есть, что тенистый
Дремлющих кленов шатер.
Только в мире и есть, что лучистый
Детски задумчивый взор.
Только в мире и есть, что душистый
Милой головки убор.
Только в мире и есть этот чистый
Влево бегающий пробор.*

If abab is the pattern most frequent in Fet's quatrains, it is pair-rhyme (aabb...) that is least typically associated with four-line stanzas. In contrast to his 25 four-line poems in alternating rhymes, Fet never wrote a single four-line aabb poem: his shortest pair-rhymed poem has six lines, and 34 of his 72 pair-rhymed poems are in multiples of six lines. Forty-six are in multiples of four, but only sixteen are in graphically demarcated quatrains. Fet uses pair-rhyme quatrains in translations during the 1840s and 1850s, but his first original poem among the sixteen texts in demarcated quatrains was written in the mid-1850s: "Певице" ("Уноси мое сердце в звенящую даль..."). In spite of Fet's frequent use of anisometric forms, the anisometric (An4/3) stanza of "Певице" makes it unique among Fet's pair-rhymed quatrains. All fourteen remaining pair-rhyme quatrains date to the period from 1878 to 1892.

It has been said that poets counter the distintegrative tendency of pair-rhyme quatrains by avoiding syntactic breaks that might reinforce it. Fet does nothing of the sort. On the contrary, his pair-rhyme quatrains often do seem to split into distichs. This can be clearly seen in "Ночь лазурная смотрит на скошенный луг...", and even more famously in his 1878 poem "Alter ego":

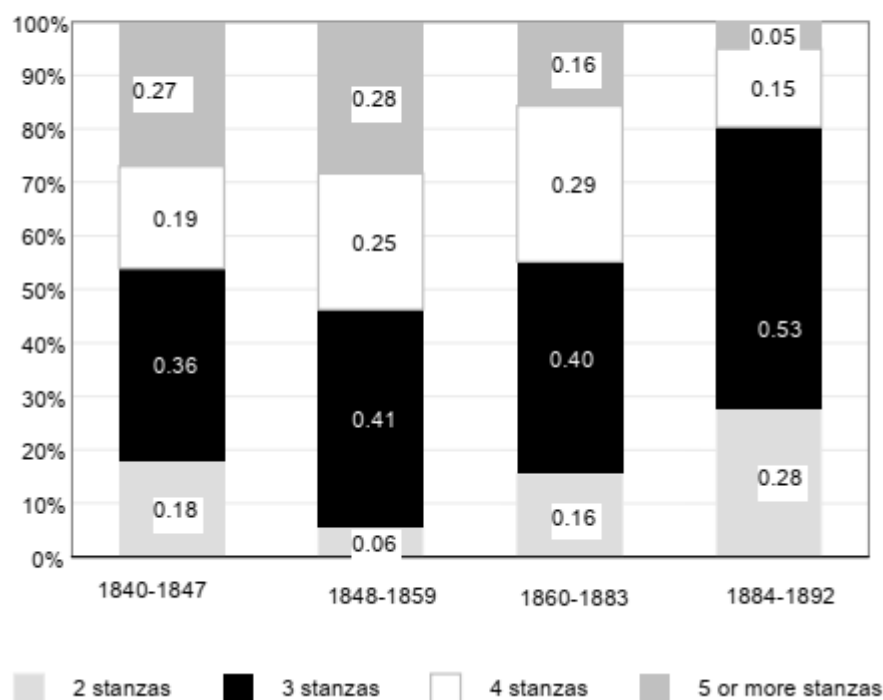
*Как лилея глядится в нагорный ручей,
Ты стояла над первою песней моей,
И была ли при этом победа, и чья, –
У ручья ль от цветка, у цветка ль от ручья?
Ты душою младенческой все поняла,
Что мне высказать тайная сила дала,
И хоть жизнь без тебя суждено мне влачить,
Но мы вместе с тобой, нас нельзя разлучить.
Та трава, что вдали на могиле твоей,
Здесь на сердце, чем старе оно, тем свежей,
И я знаю, взглянувши на звезды порой,
Что взирали на них мы как боги с тобой.
У любви есть слова, те слова не умрут.
Нас с тобой ожидает особенный суд;
Он сумеет нас сразу в толпе различить,
И мы вместе придем, нас нельзя разлучить!*

The aabb pattern works especially well in "Alter ego", of course, because it mimics the pairings expressed in the textual thematics: the inseparable pairs of the lily and her reflection, the long-ago figure of the addressee and the speaker's first "song", and, finally, the speaker himself together with his addressee, faced with the "special judgment" of eternity. The bundling of "two by two" lines into quatrains corresponds also to the larger formal structure of the doubled pair of stanzas, each pair ending with the same hemistich, while the quadruplet of stanzas matches the tetrameter lines. To be sure, the meter of the line is a ternary one, but it is anapestic, the kind of ternary meter most assimilable, in Fet's usage, to binarism.

Fet's oeuvre also includes twenty-one texts based on the general type abba, including three poems consisting of only one stanza. Whereas aabb quatrains come into their own only in Fet's later work, ten of the abba poems – nearly half – had been written by the end of 1847. Five are in The Lyrical Pantheon. Obviously, the abba pattern is more specifically a quatrain form than abab or aabb, since unlike the other two it cannot be added to at the end, to create a stanza of six lines with the same pattern. The abba pattern is thus inherently more tightly closed than are the other quatrains, and this is something Fet's usage exploits: his abba stanzas have a special affinity for ring structure.

Stanzas not only articulate the form of a poem but also express its experiential trajectory: a poem of two stanzas should correspond to “a bipartite experience”, and one in three stanzas – to an experience that is somehow ternary. We have already noticed that different stanzaic forms at different times are associated with poems of different lengths, and that the rhythm of iambic hexameter in a three-stanza poem differs from that in a poem of two stanzas or four. Fet was always inclined to use odd numbers of stanzas, the great bulk of his work was written in poems of two, three, or four stanzas, and his favorite number of stanzas was always three. Yet his usage changed considerably across time, and some aspects of this are shown in Chart 1. The chart shows only the canon of Fet’s shorter poems (“стихотворения”), since I wanted to avoid including poems whose stanza shape might either have been borrowed (in translations) or not definitively established (for texts unpublished in Fet’s lifetime). Including non-canonical works, especially Fet’s occasional poems, would have substantially increased the number of both longer-than-average and shorter-than-average texts, but the overall tendencies would be similar.

Chart 1. Chronological change in the number of stanzas per poem in Fet’s canonical shorter poems.



3.0. Results of the Analysis

Fet’s early usage favored three-stanza forms, but other stanza lengths were well represented, and the three-stanza form is not so clearly dominant as it later became. Because non-canonical poems have been excluded, *The Lyrical Pantheon* is nearly unrepresented, but its inclusion would make the diversity of Fet’s earliest work even more obvious. Three-stanza poems are more typical of the edition of 1850 than of *The Lyrical Pantheon*. Medium-length poems predominate in the 1850s: together, 3- and 4-stanza poems have come to account for about two thirds of his canon, as they will for the rest of Fet’s career. In addition, the number of 2-stanza poems has shrunk. In the third period distinguished in the chart, Fet’s poems come to be written in a dramatically smaller number of stanzas. For the first time, the number of poems with more than four stanzas begins to shrink and the number of two-stanza poems – to expand.

In the last period distinguished in the chart, there is sharp reduction in the number of “longer shorter” poems, of more than three stanzas. The number of three-stanza poems expands at the expense of longer ones, while 28% of all his poems are in two stanzas. Since, in the same period, Fet was even more inclined to write in quatrains than earlier, it turns out that over a quarter of all his late poems were only eight lines long, and of such short poems, for the first time a sizeable proportion is in aabb stanzas. Our study of iambic hexameter rhythm, as well as what we know about the nature of aabb stanzas, suggests that the role of the stanza as an organizer of Fet’s late poetry is rather limited. On the contrary, as we shall see especially when we discuss certain aspects of Fet’s syntax, eight-line poems tend to be demarcated by distichs. The rise of two-stanza poems in Fet’s late work is a natural development of his practice both in the immediately preceding period and in his earliest writing.

4.0. Conclusion

The history of form in Fet's poetry shows both radical experiment and gradual evolution. He more than once changed his metrical repertory, and he nearly entirely dropped such characteristic habits as, for example, his use of partial rhyme. But change also was taking place slowly and almost imperceptibly, in very basic matters: in his metrical rhythm, in the length of his poems, and in where he located the emotional center of a text. These things are harder than metrical repertory for an editor to capture, these things are form not as convention but as the stuff conventions are built of. With respect to these things, Fet's poetic form matured and changed and grew, even over the years when it was seldom manifested. This organic quality in the development of his verse form is all the more striking because of the famed disruption of his middle years, as well as his final reminiscence. Critics have noticed the integrity of each singular work that Fet, at his best, created. The history of form in his work shows self-similar integrity.

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