Omry Ronen

AN EXPLICATION OF ANNENSKII'S "SQUARE WINDOWS"

To Vadim Liapunov

The metrical background of this eerily enigmatic poem out of the "Spectral Trefoil," "Trilistnik prizrachnyi," of The Cypress Chest, has been described by M.L. Gasparov (1979) as part of his study of the semantics of Russian three-foot iamb. Indeed, the metrical background is indispensable for identifying the poem's so-called semantic aura. The alternation of dactylic and masculine closes in three-foot iambic verse has been linked, since approximately 1840, with three main clearly marked and well-defined semantic traditions; 1) "comic verse," deriving from Karatygin's vaudevile songs; 2) "conative verse," as one might translate Gasparov's term pateticheskii stikh, stemming from Lermontov's second "Prayer," "V minutu zhizni trudnuiu"; and 3) "lyric verse," likewise proceeding from a poem by Lermontov, "Svidanie." Gasparov places "The Square Windows" within the "lyric" variety of the three-foot iamb with alternating dactylic/masculine closes, that is, in the tradition of Lermontov's "Svidanie," which has inaugurated the nostalgic theme of frustrated "southern" or oriental tryst that came to be associated with this meter and was subsequently developed, with variations in compositional make-up and emotional tonality, by Fet (,,Uzh verba vsia pushistaia"), by Polonskii ("Zatvornitsa" and "U dveri"), and by their numerous followers.

In Annenskii's poem, Gasparov specifically noted both its affinity with Polonskii, who had replaced Lermontov's exotic setting with the urban, "Nekrasovian," drab Russian background, and its kinship with Lermontov's "Svidanie," expressed by the evocation of unconsummated passion and dream-like ornamental details of exotic orientalism ("Kak ty chadru dushistuiu / Ne smel ei sniat's volos").

Characteristically for Annenskii, the poem incorporates, explicitly or by negative implication, also the contrasting themes of the other two semantic types of this meter: Lermontov's emotional prayer ("No ne mol'boi tumanitsia / Pokoi ee chela < Odnu molitvu chudnuiu / Tverzhu ia naizust") and the pathetic mockery of Nekrasov's comic verse ("Ona... da tol'ko s rozhkami").

Two other scholars briefly addressed the semantic structure of "The Square Windows." Igor Smirnov (1977, 74-75), in his still unsurpassed semiotic analy-

sis of Annenskii's poetics, pointed out the role played in this poem by the impenetrable space-time boundaries generally typical of Annenskii's model of the world:

The movement of time in *The Cypress Chest* is irreversable, and for this reason the events remaining in the past cannot be reproduced either in the future, or in the present time. In "The Square Windows," an attempt at reviving love results in activating the border, consisting of objects of humdrum philistine everyday life), which divides the personages (popytka vozrozhdeniia liubvi vlechet za soboi aktivizatsiiu sostoiashchei iz predmetov meshchanskogo obikhoda granitsy, razdeliaiushchei personazhei). The thematic development culminates in a grotesque—a transfiguatation of the feminine image into an infernally masculine one: — "A znaesh' li, chto zdes' ona?" /— "Vozmozhno l', stol'ko let?" /— "Gliadi—fatoi okutana.../ Uznal ty uzkii sled?.." //— "Ona... da tol'ko s rozhkami, / S triasuchei borodoi—/ Za chakhlymi goroshkami, / Za mertvoi rezedoi..."

E.A. Nekrasova, in a short monograph devoted to a typological juxtaposition of Annenskii and Fet, makes two fruitful observations: 1) Annenskii's characteristic device in this poem consists of interchangeable renomination of the denotate (priem perenazyvaniia denotata), that is, of re-naming the same object, with the resulting ambivalence of associations (chadra and/or fata for 'veil', luna and duma as the interlocutor of the protagonist, etc.); 2) the clandestine motif of monastic seclusion suggested by the hood (kukol') of the protagonist and the "vocabulary associated with a religious theme," repentance, to be specific (Nekrasova 1991, 64–65; 72–74). If Nekrasova is right, the transformation of an enchanting feminine image into a devil-like virago would fit in the traditional plot of the monastic tales of temptation and fall.

Still, notwithstanding the crucial thematic presuppositions provided by the metrical antecedents of the poem, or Nekrasova's attempt at deciphering its plot as "a logically consistent conclusion of the theme of forbidden, sinful love," the subject matter of the poem and the symbolic significance of its title remain enigmatic.

The terms of this enigma can be educed from Annenskii's reception of the heritage of Turgenev, the subject that has recently been broached in Lea Pild's valuable dissertation (1999, 36–38), and from his autobiographic evocation of Turgenev's funeral in the first Book of Reflections. In his essay "The Dying Turgenev," Annnenskii interpreted the meaning of one of Turgenev's last tales, "Klara Milich." In the "The Square Windows," the symbolic message elicited by Annenskii from this tale of beauty rejected and debased in life, and hopelessly pursued after death, is explored in terms of the subject matter of Turgenev's earlier novel, The Nest of the Gentlefolk, "Dvorianskoe gnezdo." The relevant subtexts are found in the description of Lisa Kalitina's decision to take the holy

vows when she realizes that she cannot marry Lavretskii, and in the final episode of the novel, Lavretskii's visit of the monastery. The consistent switching of the gender roles and attributes (the man, not the woman, withdraws to the monastery; the woman visits him; the woman sports a goat's beard and horns) in Annenskii's treatment of these episodes is an emotionally charged and metapoetically complex development of certain tropes and rhetorical figures taken from Turgenev's prose and placed in the congenial poetic context of the meter associated with the Lermontov-Polonskii theme of the failed tryst and frustrated passion.

The curious source of the grotesque goat-like image in the last strophe of "The Square Windows" is the passage from the final chapter XLV of *The Nest of the Gentlefolk*, in which Lisa's aunt tries to dissuade her from going to the monastery and not only calls men "goat-beards," but also, confused by grief, begins to mix gender in traditional Russian appellations:

[...] И кто ж это видывал, чтоб из-за эдакой из-за к озьей бороды, прости господи, из-за мужчины в монастырь идти? Ну, коли тебе так тошно, съезди, помолись угоднику, молебен отслужи, да не надевай ты черного шлыка на свою голову, батюшка ты мой, матушка ты мой...

И Марфа Тимофеевна горько заплакала.

The visitation of the protagonist by his former love or her apparition in "The Square Windows" closely follows Lavretskii's thoughts as he attempts to visualize, in the epilogue of the novel, the unimaginable and unrecongnizable Liza Kalitina in the monastery, and finds this as difficult as if he were looking at himself in the same way. This is a vision of death in life, resembling former Liza only as the dead and dying flowers on the square windows of Annenskii's poem resemble the fragrant house plants of Liza "little cell," keleika, at home:

[...] в этой комнате, где он так часто видал Лизу, живее возникал перед ним ее образ; ему казалось, что он чувствовал вокруг себя следы ее присутствия; но грусть о ней была томительна и нелегка: в ней не было тишины, навеваемой смертью. Лиза еще жила где-то, глухо, далеко; он думал о ней, как о живой, и не узнавал девушки, им некогда любимой, в том смутном, бледном призраке, облаченном в монашескую одежду, окруженном дым и ыми волнами ладана. Лаврецкий сам бы себя не узнал, если б мог так взглянуть на себя, как он мысленно взглянул на Лизу.

In the final passage of the epilogue, which describes Lavretskii actually visiting the monastery and seeing Lisa, the evocation of her pathetically whithered beauty dissolves in Turgenev's typical final effect of "looking away," "mimo!",

garda e passa, which Russian symbolists and Annnenskii sometimes parodied and sometimes emulated as a device of unfailing emotional suggestiveness:

Но что сказать о людях, еще живых, но уже сошедших с земного поприща, зачем возвращаться к ним? Говорят, Лаврецкий посетил тот отдаленный монастырь, куда скрылась Лиза, — увидел ее. Перебираясь с клироса на клирос, она прошла близко мимо него, прошла ровной, торопливо-смиренной походкой монахини — и не взглянула на него; только ресницы обращенного к нему глаза чуть-чуть дрогнули, только еще ниже наклонила она свое исхудалое лицо — и пальцы сжатых рук, перевитые четками, еще крепче прижались друг к другу. Что подумали, что почувствовали оба? Кто узнает? Кто скажет? Есть такие мгновения в жизни, такие чувства... На них можно только указать — и пройти мимо.

The affinity between these passages of *The Nest of Gentlefolk* and the somewhat reversed situation suggested by the vocabulary and imagery of "The Square Windows" is quite apparent. Yet the transfiguration of the romantic ideal in Annenskii's poem has features of such ultimate degradation that, even though they amplify and project upon a female character the comical detail of Marfa Timofeevna's description of the male sex, *koz'ia boroda*, they suggest a different source and a grotesquely infernal plot with a potential for self-debasement very different from the virtuous self-denial of Liza and Lavretskii. The source for Annenskii's image of the romantic ideal's ultimate degradation is the story, in Pushkin's "Rusłan i Liudmila," of the beautiful Naina's change, brought about by her unsuccessful suitor Finn's magic spells, from cruel aloofness to tender submissiveness, but also, unfortunately for him, from a cold young maiden to a passionate seventy-year-old witch:

И вдруг сидит передо мной Старушка дряхлая, седая, Глазами впалыми сверкая, С горбом, с трясучей головой, Печальной ветхости картина. [...]

"Что делать, – мне пищит она,— Толпою годы пролетели, Прошла твоя, моя весна— Мы оба постареть успели. Но, друг, послушай, не беда Неверной младости утрата. Конечно, я теперь седа, Немножко, может быть, горбата; Не так жива, не так мила; Зато (прибавила болтунья) Открою тайну: я колдунья!"

Hence the underlying metapoetic level of Annenskii's poem: a history of the romantic mood in a nutshell, it is a belated recollection of the early romantic worship of the unattainable ideal and, at the same time, of the early romantic misgivings, which from the very beginning have anticipated the ideal's eventual senile degeneration.

For Annensky, the degradation of the ideal was also, and, perhaps, above all, a profoundly personal lyric theme. He described his own soul in a poem in prose as an elderly, dishonored and pregnant maiden with a moustache: "Ia videl vo sne svoiu dushu. Teper' ona stranstvovala, a vokrug nee byla tolpa griaznaia i grubaia. Ee tolkali – moiu dushu. Eto byla teper' pozhilaia devushka, obescheshchennaia i beremennaia; na ee otechnom litse stranno vydelialis' zheltye piatna usov [...]" (Annenskij 1990, 2)

The personal aspect of Annenskii's symbols is, unlike in the instance of Blok, the most difficult to grasp. The central symbol of "The Square Windows" appears to be personal and autobiographical. We have no literary subtexts for it (for Tolstoy's "Zapiski sumasshedshego," with its image of the square white room with a red window curtain and the "red, white, square terror" associated with it, was published three years after Annenskii's death), no antecedents or precursors, only descendants. Unlike in "Nenuzhnye strofy" and some other pieces by Annensky, the title image is not autometadescriptive in regard to the poem: to identify those squares with the quatrains of the poem would be not only farfetched, but insufficient.

To approach the meaning of "Kvadratnye okoshki" as a symbol so central to the poem that it is extraposited to serve as its title, and to apprehend the evocative power which it apparently had for Annenskii, it is necessary to reconstruct certain details of the event he described in "Umiraiushchii Turgenev." A helpful clue to such a reconstruction may be found in Mandel'shtam's poem "Vy, s kvadratnymi okoshkami / Nevysokie doma," a wistful salutation of the winter in the decaying Petersburg, pitifully reduced, but still preserving some relics of its former sweet homeyness: "A davno li po kanalu plyl / S krasnym obzhigom gonchar, / Prodaval s granitnoi lesenki / Dobrosovestnyi tovar? // Khodiat boty, khodiat serye / U gostinogo dvora¹ / I sama soboi sdiraetsia / S mandarinov kozhura // [...] // I priemnye s roialiami, / Gde, po kreslam rassadiv, / Doktora kogo-to potchuiut / Vorokhami starykh "Niv'. // Posle bani, posle opery, / Vse ravno, kuda ni shlo, // Bestolkovoe, poslednee / Tramvainoe teplo..."

^{1 [}this is an evocation of Pushkin's Petersburg of "Gorod pyshnyi, gorod bednyi": ... zdes' poroi / Khodit malen'kaia nozhka, / V'etsia lokon zolotoi]

Mandel'shtam's locale in Petersburg in this poem is humdrum and commercial, and the canal where red earthenware is sold directly from the boats ought to be Obvodnyi, an earstwhile site of squat brick buildings with square windows. This is the depressing setting of Turgenev's funerary procession, which Annenskii witnessed and described in his essay about the dying Turgenev and Klara Milich:

- Мне стоит назвать это имя, и туман, который там, за мною, непременно хоть на минуту да посветлеет и расступится... Чаще всего вспоминаю я тогда теплое, почти нежное утро, но будто это уже осенью, а я стою на черном и мягком скате Обводного канала... Вот и темная рогатая голова... это бойня, это ее страшный символ неизбежности и равнодушия, схваченного за горло. Редкий дым лениво ползет из высокой трубы... Вот на дымящейся глади канала у самого берега приткнулась барка... Только я не один... нас целая толпа... странная толпа, чисто русская, зараз и неловкая, и приподнятая, и как бы готовая каждую минуту пострадать. [...]
- 22 года тому назад всё это было для меня чем-то вроде сна или декорации... Я, видите ли, тогда проводил время еще на площади и каждую минуту готов был забыть, что нахожусь, хотя и в хвосте, но все же перед театральной кассой, откуда в свое время и получу билет. Но теперь, когда поредело передо мной, а зато позади толпа так и кишит, да только вернуться туда я не могу, теперь, когда незаметно для самого себя я продвинулся с площади в темноватый вестибюль театра и тусклый день желто смотрит на меня уже сквозь его пыльные стекла, когда временами, через плечо соседа, я вижу даже самое окошечко кассы... О, теперь я отлично понимаю ту связь, которая раз навсегда сцепила в моей памяти похороны Тургенева с его последней повестью. [...]

С Кларой Милич в музыку тургеневского творчества вошла, уже не надолго, новая и какая-то звенящая нота. Это была нота физического страдания. [...]

В Аратове расположился старый больной Тургенев [...] Обстоятельства сопровождавшие смерть Клары, сначала произвели на Аратова потрясающее впечатление... но потом эта "игра с ядом" внутри [...] показалась ему какой-то уродливой фразой [...] Но это отвращение и боязнь почувствовать отвращение едва ли принадлежит Аратову: по-моему, это горький вкус болезни во рту у Тургенева, это его утомленный ум, который не хочет более тешить себя романтизмом, потому что сквозь его театральную мантию не может не видеть тела, обреченного разлагающей его животной муке. [...]

В действии Клары почти нет: она только сквозит по рассказу, точно китайская тень по экрану [...] она убивает себя от любви, хотя и боится смерти... у Клары маленькие красные розы в волосах [...] О Кларе говорят с обожанием, она и снится только прекрасной, и она желанна даже, когда приносит смерть.

[...] эта странно отрицающая аратовщину девушка, она, смертельно, оскорбленная Клара, осуждена любить Аратова [...] И только перестав быть жизнью, только обратившись снова в призрак, в возможность, — она покоряет, наконец, сердце Аратова, — но сердце было восковое и скоро растаяло. Оно боялось красоты в жизни и тем более не вынесло красоты-идеи, красоты-силы... И вот еще раз уходит от людей Красота, невоплощенная и нелюбимая.

("Умирающий Тургенев. Клара Милич", Книги отражений, I)

Thus beauty goes away from the people, unincarnated and unloved. What remained was the square horror of the box office window, where apparently tickets were not surrendered, as Ivan Karamazov had thought, but sold – to some spectral show to be watched after death, and one wonders whether the term ARAToVshchina, the names of Aratov, who watched a stereoscopic projection of Klara's photograph, and of Klara, did not suggest to Annenskii the word kvadrat by their phonic makeup.

However that may be, our hypothesis linking the square windows with the images of Obvodnyi kanal, its slaughterhouse, the degrading funeral of the author of "Klara Milich," and the ultimate debasement of the idea of beauty in death seen as a window in the box office is supported by another Annnenskii-inspired passage by Mandel'stham:

Ведь и я стоял в той страшной терпеливой очереди, которая подползает к желтому окошечку театральной кассы, — сначала на морозе, потом под низкими банными потолками вестибюлей Александринки. Ведь и театр мне страшен, как куриная изба, как деревенская банька, где совершалось зверское убийство ради полушубка и валяных саног. ("Египетская марка")

These observations, I repeat, are not an explanation of Annenskii's fore-grounded symbol, which is, in Gasparov's (1997, 452) terms, anti-emphatic and aims at *mnogoznachitel'nost'* rather than *mnogoznachnost'*, but presuppositions for such a perception of this symbol which would be adequate to the poet's design, expressed in another poem, a counterpart of "The Square Windows" with their wilting sweet peas and dead mignonette:

Пока свечи плывут И левкои живут, Пока дышит во сне резеда – Здесь ни мук, ни греха, ни стыда...

Bibliography

- Annenskij, I. 1990. Stikhotvoreniia i tragedii. Bibl. Poeta, B.S., Leningrad.
- Gasparov, M.L. 1979. "Semanticheskii oreol metra. K semantike russkogo trekhstopnogo jamba," *Lingvistika i poetika*, Moscow, 282–308.
- Gasparov, M.L. 1997. Izbrannye trudy, tom II, Moscow.
- Nekrasova, E.A. 1991. A. Fet, I. Annenskii: tipologicheskii aspekt opisaniia, Moscow.
- Pild, L. 1999. Turgenev v vospriiatii russkikh simvolistov (1890–1900-e gody). Dissertationes philologiae slavicae Universitatis Tartuensis 6, Tartu.
- Smirnov, I.P. 1977. Khudozhestvennyi smysl i evoliutsiia poeticheskikh sistem, Moscow