

The City and the Lock: Pushkin's Miniature Lyric¹

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Город пышный, город бедный,
Дух неволи, стройный вид,
Свод небес зелёно-бледный,
Скука, холод и гранит—
Всё же мне вас жаль немножко,
Потому что здесь порой
Ходит маленькая ножка,
Вьётся локон золотой.

Sumptuous city, poor city,
A spirit of unfreedom, an orderly look,
The pale green vault of the skies,
The boredom, the cold and the granite—
Still I do regret you a little,
For sometimes here
There walks a little foot,
And a golden lock is a-flutter.

This untitled lyric is a minor piece. But it is typical of Pushkin in both form and content, and I will try to pinpoint the correspondences between the two.

It was written in the fall of 1828, right before the poet's departure from St. Petersburg (to Malinniki and then on to Moscow), and addressed to Anna Olenina. Pushkin was in love with and had proposed to her—only to be rejected as, in her parents' opinion, "politically unreliable"; hence, probably, the poem's consistent ambiguity.

¹ The authorized translation of the essay and of the cited material (unless indicated otherwise) is by Dr. Arina Volgina.—A.Zh.

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The structure of the poem is in many respects obvious.² To begin with, it is a juxtaposition of two contrasting images: “the big” (spacious, formal, cold, sumptuous, orderly, but callous capital city) and “the small” (the personal, intimate, graceful, charming young woman). The contrast is couched in Pushkin’s invariant terms; it deploys the oppositions “movement vs. immobility,” “freedom vs. restriction,” and “passion vs. impassivity” (Zholkovskii 2005, 13–45). It involves the poet’s favorite motifs of granite, orderliness, a woman’s little foot and golden lock, which link this text to *Poltava*, *The Bronze Horseman*, and the Petersburg myth (Bocharov 2005).

Worth noting is the way the two opposite images, each allotted a quatrain, are paradoxically fused into a whole. The unity is based on:

- * a common meter (trochaic tetrameter) and rhyme scheme (AbAb);
- * same number of stresses (3) and stress placement in the final lines of the quatrains;
- * syntax (the entire poem forms one sentence);
- * an abundance of symmetrical—binary—elements (the binary meter; two quatrains; the rhythmic, syntactic and semantic bisection of the first two lines³ and the pairing of the two final ones; the double epithet pale-green;
- * the foreshadowing of the emotional *zhal’* [I regret] in the beginning of the second stanza by its semantic opposite *skuka* [boredom] at the end of the first;
- * the preparation of the rhyme vocalism of the second stanza (four O’s) by the persistence of stressed O’s in the first: *gOrod, gOrod, nevOli, strOinyi, svOd, zel’Ėno-blednyi, khOlod*.

All the more striking is the distinct contrast between the two stanzas, particularly at the formal level.

The first quatrain is dominated by four-stress lines (1–3), the second by three-stress ones (6–8; line 5 can be seen as carrying either three or four stresses, depending on whether the pronoun *мне* is stressed or unstressed).

² See Vinogradov (1941) 1999, 297–98; Tsiavlovskaiia 1958, 247–92; Skvoznikov 1965, 62–63; Al’mi (1969) 2008, 39–40; Tudorovskaia 1996, 116–21; Rice 2002; Bocharov 2005; Murav’eva 2009. For a comparison with an eight-line poem by Arsenii Tarkovskii, possibly influenced by Pushkin’s piece, see Epshtein 2008.

³ For patterns similar to the one used in the opening lines of the poem, see Kozhevnikova 2001.

In the first quatrain the rhyming vowels are both *E* and *U*, while the second is dominated by *O*, which is also the only stressed vowel in the final line.

In the first quatrain, in addition to *O*'s, there are two stressed *Y*'s in equally prominent positions (the first foot: *dUkh skUka*), while *A* never occurs under stress. On the contrary, in the second quatrain, there are two stressed *A*'s (*zhAl'*, *mAlen'kaia*, both times preceding a soft *l*) and only one *Y* (in the auxiliary *potomU*).

The quatrains are also contrasted in terms of consonants, most notably due to the repetition in the second quatrain of *Ж* (*vsë Zhe, mne vas ZHal', nemnoZHko, noZHka*), where it connotes (in combination with *mn*) something "small and delicate"; it is totally absent from the first quatrain.

Each pair of rhymes in the first stanza is grammatical: two adjectives, almost identical phonetically (*blednyi/bednyi*) and two nouns (*vid/granit*), all four in nominative singular, masculine. In the second stanza, on the contrary, the poet rhymes different parts of speech: adverb/noun (*nemnozhko/nozhka*) and adverb/adjective (*poroi/zolotoi*). "Poor" rhymes give way to "richer" ones.

Also thematically relevant is another formal difference between the quatrains: the number of stresses. The first is almost fully stressed, iconizing the heaviness of St. Petersburg's sumptuous granite, while the pyrrhic feet of the second quatrain suggest the young lady's daintiness. The sixth line (*Potomu chto zdes' poroi*) is especially lightweight, consisting only of syntactically secondary words.

While the first quatrain is written in an elevated bookish style, the second uses colloquial diction (Vinogradov [1941] 1999, 297–98). Accordingly, in terms of verse melody, declamatory style segues into conversational ("governoi") (Eikhenbaum [1922] 1969, 331). This is supported by the striking syntactic dissimilarity between the two halves of the poem.

The first four lines are designed as a long and monotonous ("heavy") sequence of parallel nominative constructions where the subjects are masculine nouns in nominative singular,⁴ connoting "non-separateness": vastness, abstractness, collectiveness, materiality.

On the contrary, the second quatrain is a sprawling complex sentence (with the conjunction *potomu chto* [because] and three predicative forms: *zhal'*, *khodit*, *v'ëtsia*), two very personal pronouns (first and second person: *mne vas*), a pronominal adverb (*zdes' [here]*), inverted word order (*khodit ... nozhka, v'ëtsia lokon*), and a run-on placement of the adverbial *poroi* (in the middle of the sentence but at the end of a verse line). In this way, the emotional states, movements, volatility and immediacy of the scene are not merely stated

⁴ With the exception of *skuka* (boredom), fem., which foreshadows the emotionality of the second stanza.

(something that is in fact feasible in the nominative mode—as in *Skuka, kholod i granit*), but are, so to speak, grammatically brought to life, personalized and tied to this very specific given place, time and speech act.

❧ 2 ❧

The transition from the first half of the poem to the second is dramatic. The two opposing images—of the city and the female character—are not merely contrasted. After the dash, which separates and links the quatrains, and the pronoun *vas* (*you*), which refers back to the previous stanza, there occurs a striking shift in the grammatical status of the four-line enumeration of the city's attributes. It becomes clear that our original understanding of it was wrong. What had seemed a self-sufficient sequence of nominative sentences reflecting a third-person point of view is revealed to have been the speaker's extended apostrophe to the city, or, rather, to the cluster of its attributes, addressed in the second person.⁵ Yet this apostrophe sounds somewhat odd due to the disapproving, alienated tone in which the city is described. This evaluative estrangement is supported by a spatial-emotional one (*zhal'* suggests a look from the outside, from the present into a regrettably lost past). And yet, by linking the static first quatrain to the more dynamic second, the inert cityscape is animated and the unity of the text consolidated.

The combination of contradictory viewpoints—ostensibly external (*zhal'...*) and paradoxically internal (*zdes'*)—links the speech act of the lyrical persona to one very specific, unique moment of departure, the borderline between “here” (where “boredom” and “cold” reside but also the desirable heroine “walks”) and “there” (where you can safely nurse your regrets of things left behind).⁶ The oddity of *vas*, which has been partly clarified,⁷ is exacerbated by the fact that the pronoun proves not to be referring to the actual addressee of the poem (unlike in *Ia vas liubil... (I loved you...); I vospomnil vashi vzory... (And <I> remembered your glances)* in Pushkin's other, more direct love lyrics).

That “you” and “here” should refer to the set of nouns in the first quatrain is also questionable, as not all the items on the list can be construed as venues where the “little foot” could “walk”: could it possibly tread on the “spirit of

⁵ On this dash and the shift in the grammatical perspective as a plot reversal, see Bocharov 2005, 277, a follow-up to Vinogradov (1941) 1999, 297–98.

⁶ The biographical data suggest the poem was written sometime between 5 September and 19 October, which accounts for the *pale-green* color of the skies and the *cold* (Bocharov 2005, 278), most likely in the second half of October (around the 19th) (Murav'eva 2009).

⁷ *Vse zhe mne ikh zhal' nemnozhko...* (Still I regret leaving them), followed by *Potomu chto tam poroi...* (Because sometimes there...), would sound more natural.

unfreedom" or the "orderly look"?⁸ Of course "here" implies "in Petersburg," but the common sense of "spatiality" has not been suggested clearly enough. This creates an effect of "understatement, inaccuracy, ungrammaticality," naturalized by the poem's casual tone. In Michael Riffaterre's terms, this may signal an important thematic reversal, hidden behind the façade of apparent clarity ("Got it! It refers to Petersburg!"), but requiring and subtly prompting a better solution (Riffaterre 1978).⁹

The connection between the two halves of the text is maintained not only by formal means. It is based on a powerful archetypal formula:

Justification (forgiveness, salvation) of a negative (unworthy, harmful, sinful) object X that is due to its containing a positive (valuable, kind, saintly) integral part Y, as in Jesus' promise to take the criminal who believed in him to Paradise. (Luke 23: 39–43)

A stronger version of this formula uses a quantitative contrast:

"For the enormous negative value X to be redeemed, it is sufficient for it to contain a minuscule quantity of the positive value Y," as in the consent of God to comply with Abraham's request and spare Sodom and Gomorrah provided not even fifty but a mere ten righteous men could be found there. (Gen. 18: 24–32)

Incidentally, this latter situation has a structural affinity to our poem in that the possibility to redeem a whole city hangs on the virtue of only a few of its denizens, in Pushkin's case, of just one loveable woman.¹⁰

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Whether the archetypal formula is an implied reference or just a typological similarity, the contrast between the "big institutional X" and the "little, personal Y" is central to the poem. The "personal smallness" is directly mentioned in the text (*nemnozhko, poroi, malen'kaia*) and rendered through a set of literary techniques:

⁸ No wonder Bocharov mentions only three of those items (*skuka, kholod* and *granit*) as referents of the pronominal *vas* and *zdes'* (2005, 277).

⁹ This awkwardness has been noticed by Bocharov, who blamed it on the unexpectedness of the apostrophe.

¹⁰ This analogy can be extended (the poet as Abraham? as Lot? as Lot's wife looking back? as God?), but we had better stop here.

- * cautious narrative mode, established by the concessive *vsë zhe* (still);
- * syntactic modesty: the entire poem is just one sentence;
- * brevity in the characterization of the woman: a mere two lines, featuring only two attributes;
- * focus on progressively smaller details of her appearance (“foot, “lock”);
- * use of a diminutive: *nozhenka*;
- * last but not least, recourse to synecdoche.

The principle of replacing the big with the small pervades the poem: the lady stands for the entire city and is herself emblemized by a foot and a lock. Nor is the use of synecdoche accidental: it is a matter of deliberate choice.

A similar situation occurs in Pushkin's *The Stone Guest*:

Дон Гуан

Ее совсем не видно
Под этим вдовьим черным покрывалом,
Чуть узенькую пятку я заметил.

Лепорелло

Довольно с вас. У вас воображенье
В минуту дорисует остальное;
Оно у нас проворней живописца,
Вам все равно, с чего бы ни начать,
С бровей ли, с ног ли.

Don Juan.

There's nothing visible
Of her beneath her somber widow's veil;
I just but glimpsed a trim and narrow heel.

Leporello

That's quite enough for you. Imagination
Will in a jiffy sketch you out the rest;
Your fancy's quicker than the painter's brush.
The starting point is all the same to you—
The forehead, or the foot.
(trans. A. F. B. Clark)

Don Juan's ability to envision a woman from a glimpse of her heel, eyebrow or foot is akin to inferring the whole from its parts, but textually it does not constitute a synecdoche, because grammatical correctness and semantic

coherence are not violated and thus do not call for a figurative interpretation: the entire process is spelled out explicitly.

Accordingly, had the alienated description of the city been followed by something like “Still I regret [leaving you] because here I can sometimes see the small foot and the golden lock,” the “big/small” contrast would have been preserved but without any synecdochal effect. Yet, the final—cathartic—lines of our poem feature a deliberate ungrammaticality that can only be straightened out by a figurative reading: “it is not the foot that walks on its own—it is its owner.”

This synecdoche contributes to the iconization of the poem’s central theme: the “smallness” is embodied by the design of the literary trope itself. To reinforce the effect, only one—emblematic—foot (rather than a pair) is mentioned; this is further developed by the reduction of the whole woman to just a lock, which is not a body part, nor even a part thereof but a part (lock) of a part (hair) of a body part (head).

Synecdoche, promoting a “small part,” is combined here with the literary device of variation, deployed to stress the idea of “the whole”:¹¹ the woman is portrayed “full-length,” from head to foot. But, in the spirit of the text’s minimalism, the portrait settles for just a pair of polar attributes (as opposed to the eight characteristics of the city in the first stanza), reminiscent of Leporello’s words. The contrast is supported by grammatical opposition: *lokon* is masculine, *nozhka* is feminine.

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The synecdochic aura of the composition is supported by cognate devices. As the speaker avoids face-to-face conversation with the female character and, in fact, any definite reference to her, the poem’s figurative design is doubled: first, the whole has to be deduced from its parts (“little foot” + “lock” = the beloved woman),¹² and then the woman is to be properly identified (as Anna Olenina).

This deliberate indirection is also characteristic of other poems from “the Olenina cycle,” for instance, in “Thou and You” (“Ty i vy”), playing on the two forms of the second person singular pronoun in Russian—the formal *vy* and the informal *ty*:

¹¹ On variation, see Shcheglov 1967; and Zholkovskii and Shcheglov 1977.

¹² The brief mention of the golden lock may be regarded as a fleeting—synecdochal—reference to the “golden locks *cum* blue eyes” topos, which Pushkin often (first seriously and later ironically) used in his poetry, following in the footsteps of Konstantin Batiushkov and others (see Al’tman 1971, 124–27).

Пустое *вы* сердечным *ты*
 Она, обмолвись, заменила
 И все счастливые мечты
 В душе влюбленной возбудила.
 Пред ней задумчиво стою,
 Свести очей с нее нет силы;
 И говорю ей: как *вы* милы!
 И мыслю: как *тебя* люблю!

The hollow *you* with a cordial *thou*
 She replaced by mistake
 And evoked all happy dreams
 In [my] enamored soul.
 I stand pensively in front of her,
 Unable to take my eyes off her;
 And I tell her: "How nice *you* are!"
 And think: "How I love *thee!*"

But all the while playing with the opposition between the formal and informal second person singular pronouns, the first-person speaker still refers to the heroine in the third person: *она, пред ней, ei*.¹³

In light of Pushkin's thematic invariants, the play upon "directness/indirectness" stems from the ambivalent opposition "passion/impassivity" (Zholkovskii 2005, 55–56). In "Gorod pyshnyi," "indirectness" is built into the entire system of substitutions of part for whole, small for big, understatement for explicitness. Also eloquent is the anonymity of both the female character and her "male" counterpart—the city (masculine in Russian), which remains technically anonymous even though its description unambiguously implies Petersburg.¹⁴

These manifestations of indirection and understatement suggest a possibility of reading the "ungrammatical" *vas* (you) as latently addressed not only to the city but also to the heroine. The poem is obviously a love

¹³ Cf., on the contrary, direct references to Olenina in poems addressed to third parties: "To Dawe, Esq." and "Her eyes" ("Ее глаза").

¹⁴ This identification is supported by a parallel with a work written slightly later, *The Bronze Horseman* (1830):

Прошло сто лет, и юный **град** [...] Вознесся **пышно**, горделиво [...] Люблю тебя, Петра творенье, Люблю твой строгий, **стройный вид**, Невы державное течение, Береговой ее **гранит** (A hundred years passed, and the young **city** [...] Rose **sumptuously**, proudly [...] I love you, Peter's creation, I love your austere **orderly look**, The powerful current of the Neva, The **granite** of its banks).

lyric, and it would be natural for the speaker to be addressing the object of his desire,¹⁵ yet for some reason (fear of rejection? lack of trust in the future of the relationship? a sense that she is inseparable from the city?), he does not risk approaching her directly; as a result he has the pronoun *vas* refer awkwardly to the city rather than her. Thus, not only does the apostrophe to the city (in the second person) replace the initial—misconstrued—third-person description, but also the expected direct second-person address of the heroine is replaced with an oblique third-person treatment.

The complicated relationship with both the beloved woman and the unfriendly city results in the speaker's tongue-tied performance,¹⁶ and the very oscillation between the competing referents of the pronoun *vas* amounts to yet another—perhaps unintentional, but very eloquent—master trope of the poem.¹⁷

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The ambiguous, almost provocative concatenation of the female character and the city has a solid foundation: the archetypal motif of “the city as a woman (mother, virgin bride, prostitute) subject to conquest, condemnation, etc.”¹⁸ The best-known example of the “condemnatory” use of this archetype is the apocalyptic image of ancient Babylon as a whore:

¹⁵ “This is a love poem, almost a madrigal” (Bocharov 2005, 277).

¹⁶ According to Freud, slips of the tongue reveal inner conflicts. An interesting similar case has been analyzed by Paul de Man (1979, 289), namely, an ungrammatical sentence from Rousseau's *Confessions*:

“Elle était présente à ma pensée, **je m'excusai sur le premier objet qui s'offrit**. Je l'accusai d'avoir fait ce que je voulais faire, et de m'avoir donné le ruban, parce que mon intention était de le lui donner” (Rousseau 1962, 77).

The misuse of the preposition *sur* renders quite adequately the narrator's conflicted psychological motives (De Man 1979, 289).

¹⁷ The abundance of ungrammaticalities and tropes in the second part of the poem as opposed to the rhetorical smoothness of the first reads as yet another representation of the opposition “irregular, alive, free” vs. “regular, lifeless, over-restricted.”

A relevant parallel to the problematic *vas* in our poem is the famous anacoluthon in the final line of Pushkin's “I Loved You Once...” (1829): *Kak dai vam Bog liubimoi byt' drugim* (As God grant you be loved by another): an imperative (*dai*) inside a subordinate clause (*Kak...*) is grammatically incorrect (Slonimsky 1959, 120); on the role of this anacoluthon in the psychological dynamics of “Ia vas liubil...” and in the system of Pushkin's invariants, see Zholkovskii 2005, 59.

¹⁸ See Toporov 1987, 121–32.

One of the seven angels ... came and spoke with me, saying, "... I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed sexual immorality, and those who dwell in the earth were made drunken with the wine of her sexual immorality." ... I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet-colored animal, full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of the sexual immorality of the earth. And on her forehead a name was written, "Mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of the prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth." ... He said to me, "The waters ... are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages.... The woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth." (Rev. 17. 1–5, 15, 19)

For Pushkin's poem the variants of this archetype that foreground the futility of trying to conquer/rape the city/woman are of special relevance. For instance, one may recall the episode in *War and Peace* where Moscow is represented as a woman Napoleon lusts after but cannot possess—because, abandoned by its citizens, it is like a hive left by the queen bee.¹⁹

An intriguing analogy to our poem is offered by the finale of Vladimir Mayakovsky's "A Letter to Tatiana Yakovleva" ("Pis'mo Tat'iane Iakovlevoi"), written exactly a century later—in 1928:

[В]ы и нам / в Москве нужны, / не хватает/ *длинноногих*. / Не тебе, / в снега/ и в тиф / шедшей / этими *ногами*, / здесь / на ласки / выдать их / в ужины/ с нефтяниками. / Ты не думай, / шуряя просто / из-под выпрямленных дуг. / Иди сюда, / иди на перекресток / моих больших / и неуклюжих рук. / Не хочешь? / Оставайся и зимуй, / и это / оскорбление / на общий счет нанижем. / Я все равно / тебя / когда-нибудь возьму— / *одну / или вдвоем с Парижем*.

[W]e also need you in Moscow, there aren't enough *long-legged* ones. It is not for you, who walked through snow and typhus on these legs, to give them up to be dined and caressed by oil tycoons. Don't [waste time on] think[ing], squinting simply from under *straightened arches*. Come here, to the *intersection* of my big and awkward arms. You don't want to? Stay [where you are then] for the winter, we will add this

¹⁹ For more detail, see Zholkovskii 1996, 675–80.

insult to the overall bill. All the same I will one day get you—*alone or along with Paris*.

To return to the poem's formal aspects, the two key attributes of the woman that crown the poem appear in the same form (nominative singular) as the city's eight characteristics in the first quatrain. The functions of these two nominative cases are of course quite different.

In the first quatrain the nominative case marks the subjects (which are also predicates) of the nominative sentences, which later on turn out to be allocutions (= apostrophes), while in the second quatrain the same case marks the subjects of "regular" sentences, governing the main verbs (of motion).

The singular in the first quatrain is practically the only option, since the semantics of the nouns featured there predetermine their use as *singularia tantum*; in the second stanza, the same grammatical number emphasizes the smallness and individuality—synecdochality—of the images.

Still, the grammatical symmetry is salient; compositionally, it provides an elegant frame, while thematically it tends to "freeze"—in accordance with the city's impassive coldness—the dynamic details of the picture, turning them into almost static emblems.

Yet another—barely perceptible, "shimmering"—compositional rhyme can be glimpsed in the last line featuring the golden lock that "*v'etsia*." A lock can be wavy (= curly) by itself, or it can undulate due to the person's walking, or it can wave in the autumn Petersburg wind (cf. *Nad Nevoiu rezvo v' iutsia / Flagi pestrye sudov* [The bright flags of the ships are briskly waving over the Neva], in "The Feast of Peter the Great" ["Pir Petra Pervogo"]). In this third interpretation, a detail of the female character's appearance is fused with a synecdochal imprint of the cityscape, thus finally sharing with the latter a bit of its loveable dynamism and giving it a human, female, touch.²⁰

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²⁰ Thus, the paradoxical bonding of the poem's antagonists results not only in a partial "defrosting" of the city but also in a "freezing" of the female character, which puts her in the company of other "impassively cold" Pushkin women (among them Tatiana in Chapter VIII of *Eugene Onegin*).

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