Studia Metrica et Poetica 12.1, 2025, 110–126

The Russian Sonnet

Barry P. Scherr (1945–2024)
Foreword by Michael Wachtel*

Abstract. This article describes the Russian sonnet as a verse structure. Highlighting the many deviations and innovations poets introduced – from adapting Petrarchan and Shakespearean models to radical experiments – the study shows how the sonnet's diversity has made it one of the most resilient forms in Russian poetry.

Keywords: formes fixes, sonnet, rhymes, tradition, innovation, diversity

Barry Scherr's contributions to the study of Russian poetry and poetics stand out through their range, clarity, and insight. For decades he was one of a handful of Western scholars who followed closely the developments of the vibrant field that in Russia is called "stikhovedenie". His book *Russian Poetry: Meter, Rhythm, and Rhyme* (Scherr 1986a) covers not only Russian poetry itself, but also reflects the author's immersion in Russian verse theory. It remains the most well-informed and judicious exposition of the subject in English and arguably in any language. After the publication of that book, Barry continued working on related subjects. He organized several international conferences (and edited the resulting conference proceedings), including one in honor of the centenary of Kiril Taranovsky's birth. Together with Ian Lilly, he produced a series of annotated bibliographies that give a comprehensive overview of the field over decades. He gave numerous papers on poetry and poetics at conferences and continued to publish on these subjects long after he retired from teaching. He served on the board of a number of journals, including *Studia Metrica et Poetica*, where he contributed several essays, the last of which ("Metrical Ambiguity") appeared in 2023. He was an indefatigable book reviewer who sought out, among other things, studies of Russian verse that make serious mathematical demands on the reader. His encyclopedic command of the scholarship informed his own original and independent writings. He read, commented on, and reviewed works in the field until the last months of his life, when cancer made it impossible for him to continue.

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https://doi.org/10.12697/smp.2025.12.1.04

The editors have chosen to commemorate Barry and his work by publishing the original English version of a text that appeared only in Russian translation. That initial publication took place in 1996, in a festschrift to honor M. L. Gasparov's sixtieth birthday. Barry apparently never thought to publish the English text, which he had presented at the 1994 AAASS (now ASEEES) conference in Philadelphia, where Gasparov himself was one of the discussants. He shared it with me at that time upon my request for use in a graduate seminar on Russian poetics. Each time I teach that seminar I assign the essay, and by now several generations of students have benefited from it. With that in mind, it seemed appropriate to make it known more widely by publishing it here. The essay demonstrates the virtues of Barry's scholarship: a thorough knowledge of the subject, a pellucid overview and (where warranted) a gentle critique of previous work, the ability to select enlightening examples from major and minor poets and to draw attention to complexities and, finally, a comparative discussion of Russian and English practice. Many previous scholars had sought to limit what could be called a sonnet; Barry recognizes that, however desirable such an impulse may be, there will always be poems that push those boundaries. Perhaps most valuable for students (and the reason I find the essay so compelling) is the economy of words. Barry succeeds in imparting an enormous amount of information in only a few pages.

This short essay serves as a posthumous tribute to one of our leading Slavists. In addition to its scholarly value, it also demonstrates what I would call a "soft touch". Barry was one of the kindest and most generous members of our profession. We would all do well to emulate him.

Michael Wachtel

The Russian Sonnet

Russian poets have frequently turned to so-called "traditional forms", stanzas that have been established in other literary traditions and then adapted into Russian: the elegiac distich from classical poetry, the French triolet, and Dante's terza rima have all appeared on occasion in Russian verse. At least one such construction, the Onegin stanza, is of course native to Russian verse. Some traditional forms have enjoyed a brief vogue and then largely disappeared: the elegiac distich was employed by many poets in the early nineteenth century, but has since largely fallen into disuse; the same can be said of the ten-line odic stanza, which was adapted into Russian from French and German models. Most of the other forms simply appear on an occasional basis; such is

the case, for instance, with the sestina, a complex arrangement of Provençal origin which consists of six six-line stanzas and a three-line envoi, with the end words of each stanza varying according to a fixed pattern. Sometimes one of these forms stands out either because an individual poet uses it extensively or because it appears in longer works (e.g., ottava rima – 40 of these *abababcc* stanzas comprise Pushkin's *Domik v Kolmne*, and, as a result of that influence, they can be found in other long works as well, such as Sologub's 43-stanza *Kremlev*). Still, the chief importance for many forms is simply that they are part of the repertoire to which poets turn in their search for both variety and challenge.

Among the various traditional forms that have appeared in Russian poetry one stands out as being by far the most widespread: the sonnet. It turns up in Russian poetry already during the eighteenth century and can be found at least occasionally in the verse of most nineteenth-century Russian poets, albeit with much less frequency from the middle of the century on. However, the true era of the sonnet begins during the Silver Age of Russian poetry, with literally hundreds of sonnets being written from the 1890s through the 1910s. And, other than a pause during the 1930s, interest in the sonnet continues unabated to the present day. Since the early 1980s several major collections of Russian sonnets have appeared (e.g., Romanov 1983 and 1987; Fedotov 1990; Sovalin 1983), while recent decades, which have witnessed an increased interest in much "looser" forms of poetry, such as free verse, have paradoxically also been a period when poets have written sonnets no less frequently than at any other time in the history of Russian poetry (indeed, practitioners of free verse have been among those to take an interest in the sonnet; cf. Romanov 1987: 24).

It is possible to cite innumerable examples of the sonnet's popularity; consider, for instance, the proliferation of various "challenges" involving the sonnet. The most striking, of course, is the so-called "crown of sonnets", which consists of fifteen interlocking sonnets. In fourteen of the sonnets the last line of each becomes the first line of the next. The fifteenth sonnet, which may appear first, but more often comes last, consists of the first lines from each of the other fourteen, appearing in the same order as the sonnets themselves. The first Russian crowns were composed in 1909 by Vjacheslav Ivanov ("Venok sonetov") and Maksimilian Voloshin ("Corona astralis"); the source would appear to be one of the crowns written by the Slovene poet France Prešeren, and translated into Russian by the philologist Fedor Korsh (published in Sovalin 1983: 176–183). Bal'mont and Brjusov also wrote crowns, while many more have appeared since the 1960s (Scherr 1991: 531–532); a 1988 bibliography (Melent'ev 1988) lists well over 200 crowns in Russian (cf. also Tjukin 1984). And those seeking an extra challenge can also try to make the lines of

the fifteenth sonnet form an acrostic, as Prešeren himself once did. Ivanov and Voloshin also helped pioneer the "answering" sonnet: one poet would dedicate a sonnet to another, who would then respond with a sonnet containing identical rhyme words in the order of the original. In that notable year of 1909 Ivanov "answered" a sonnet by Gumilev in such a manner; Gumilev in turn did the same with a sonnet by Voloshin, and then Gumilev sent a sonnet to Elizaveta Dmitrieva (later to achieve fleeting fame under the pseudonym Cherubina de Gabriak); she wrote an answering sonnet, and then sent both to Voloshin, who wrote a third sonnet with the same rhymes (Luknitskaja 1990: 82–87). Still another kind of challenge can be seen in the opening four lines of a 1980 sonnet by Vladimir Pal'chikov:

Зеленой одой о не лезь! –	*a*
нам боли бурь убил обман.	*b*
Нам утро – звон, но взор – туман,	*b*
Селена миф им, а не лес.	*a*

Each line of the sonnet forms a palindrome, reading exactly the same backwards as well as forwards.

My purpose here, though, is less to cite curiosities or to provide a history of the sonnet than to examine its parameters. This investigation involves three stages: the first is to define what might be termed the "typical" Russian sonnet; the second, to survey the range of forms exhibited by this form, and the third, to conclude by suggesting which features are most important for deciding that a poem is indeed a sonnet.

Voloshin's sonnets both adhere closely to the general "norms" of the sonnet and are, according to many, among the most "perfect" of all Russian sonnets (Ashukin 1929: 347; Gerasimov 1986: 15):

Кому земля – священный край изгнанья,	*A*
Того простор полей не веселит,	*b*
Но каждый шаг, но каждый миг таит	*b*
Иных миров в себе напоминанья.	*A*
В душе встают неясные мерцанья,	*A*
Как будто он на камнях древних плит	*b*
Хотел прочесть священный алфавит	*b*
И позабыл понятий начертанья.	*A*

И бродит он в пыли земных дорог –	*c*
Отступник жрец, себя забывший бог,	*c*
Следя в вещах знакомые узоры.	*D*
Он тот, кому погибель не дана,	*e*
Кто, встретив смерть, в смущенье клонит взоры,	*D*
Кто видит сны и помнит имена.	*e*

1909 (Voloshin)

What, then, are the formal features of the sonnet? It contains fourteen lines, and these, dating back to Trediakovskij's 1735 revision of a translated sonnet, are normally set off graphically into two quatrains and two tercets (Berdnikov 1984: 166; cf. 1985). In the Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet, which is by far the most common in Russian, the "canonical" rhyme scheme for the first eight lines is *abba abba*, with either the *a* or the *b* rhyme feminine (designated, as above, by a capital letter) and the other masculine. The final six lines may rhyme in a variety of ways. In this Voloshin poem the couplet is followed by an alternating rhyme pair; sometimes the final four lines will consist of an enclosed rhyme (*deed*). However, the final six lines may also rhyme *cde cde*, *cdc dcd*, and more rarely, with a concluding couplet: *cdc dee*, *cdd cee*, which some scholars would already see as a deviation from the canonical sonnet form. The preferred meter for the sonnet is most often iambic pentameter, but many Russian sonnets are also in iambic hexameter.

The presumed "ideal" structure for the sonnet involves an internal "dialectic" (Becher 1957: 411–412; Brjusov 1973–1975, III: 542; Gerasimov 1985: 30–33): a "thesis" in the first quatrain, an "antithesis" in the second, and a "synthesis" that takes place either over all of the final six lines, or in the last three (and occasionally perhaps even in the last line itself).[1] Here the first quatrain focuses on the person in earthly exile, the second turns attention to the vague glimmers (of another world) in the person's soul, and the third to the effort of that person in exile to indeed recover the knowledge that has been lost and thus overcome the earthly bounds. Since each section of the sonnet is fulfilling a separate function, distinct breaks set off each of the four units, which will normally end with a period. Sometimes there will be enjambement between the two quatrains and sometimes between the tercets; only rarely

[1] Brjusov's earliest sonnets normally showed a two-part structure; this tripartite structure is more typical of his later sonnets. Note his article, "Sintetika poezii" (1924; in Brjusov 1973–1975, VI: 557–570), where he talks directly about the organizing principle of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. I thank M. L. Gasparov for this observation.

does it occur at the border between the octet and the sestet, and in all cases the enjambement would need to be carefully motivated. Finally, the sonnet tends to be a "serious" form, whether it is about love, nature, or philosophical themes. Typical of the sonnet, therefore, is an "elevated" intonation and also a "high" lexicon, which frequently includes many difficult or obscure words as well as allusions to classical motifs (Rogov 1984: 222).

In fact, it is not at all difficult, particularly in twentieth-century sonnets, to find numerous exceptions to all these strictures and particularly to the last; more often than not, even when sonnets adhere closely to the formal norms, they still lack a discernible tripartite thematic structure. Yet a surprising number of scholars insist that sonnets which fail to adhere closely to any one of the standards are in some way inferior to those that do; even iambic hexameter is seen as inferior to pentameter, the quatrain rhyme should be enclosed rather than alternating, the final sestet should contain three rhymes and not two, etc. (for similar views see, e.g., Grossman 1927b; Becher 1957; Gerasimov 1985). Yet time and again researchers are forced to admit that "the strict form, unfortunately, is rarely observed" (Grossman 1927b: 133). Indeed, what distinguishes the sonnet is not conformity but innovation and diversity.

And not just in the Russian tradition; poets elsewhere have also seen the sonnet as a form that almost calls out for experimentation. The English poet John Keats expressed his own doubts about following the Petrarchan model in a work that shatters the usual rhyme scheme:

On the Sonnet

If by dull rhymes our English must be chained,	*a*
And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet	*b*
Fettered, in spite of pained loveliness,	*c*
Let us find out, if we must be constrained,	*a*
Sandals more interwoven and complete	*b*
To fit the naked foot of Poesy:	*d*
Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress	*c*
Of every chord, and see what may be gained	*a*
By ear industrious, and attention meet;	*b*
Misers of sound and syllable, no less	*c*
Than Midas of his coinage, let us be	*d*
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;	*e*
So, if we may not let the muse be free,	*d*
She will be bound with garlands of her own.	*e*

1819 (John Keats)

Keats, who had written Petrarchan sonnets at the start of his brief career, copied out this sonnet for his brother George shortly after it was composed and commented: "I have been endeavoring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have. The legitimate [Petrarchan sonnet] does not suit the language over-well from the pouncing rhymes – the other kind [Shakespearean] appears too elegaic – and the couplet at the end of it seldom has a pleasing effect" (Keats 1988: 666). The last few sonnets that Keats was to write were in fact Shakespearean (i.e., written in three four-line quatrains, each with its own pair of alternating rhymes, followed by a concluding couplet: *ababcdcdefefgg*); this experiment did not lead to a new type of sonnet but instead inspired him to create the stanzaic forms that were to serve as the basis for his major odes, which were composed not long after this poem. Keats of course does maintain certain features of the traditional sonnet: the poem has fourteen lines and is written in his usual iambic pentameter. However, not only does the rhyme scheme here differ drastically from either the Petrarchan or the Shakespearean sonnet, but so does the structure. If anything, the poem breaks down syntactically more into four three-line clusters over the first twelve lines, with the rhyme scheme having little connection to the movement of the work as a whole. Indeed, Keats himself may well have felt that his changes went too far, for his other attempts to create a new sonnet remained essentially variants of the Petrarchan or Shakespearean sonnets; they did not break so boldly with the usual sonnet form.

Still, this poem by Keats offers several reminders when considering the various forms of the Russian sonnet. While many poets are willing to work comfortably within the established sonnet tradition, others will be inclined to seek variety by finding new ways, some of them drastic, to alter its structure. Second, Keats, along with many other English poets, published all his sonnets, not just this one experiment, as a single fourteen-line stanza, even though the syntax in his other sonnets often implies a 4-4-3-3 structure. Thus, the graphic division typical of Russian is not necessarily inherent to the sonnet. Third, and as a consequence of this last point, each sonnet tradition has its own peculiarities. If the so-called Petrarchan or Italian model is predominant in Russian, then English poets have more often preferred the Shakespearean type (its originator was actually Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, but, like the Petrarchan, it has popularly been named instead after its leading early practitioner). What is more, there are notable differences in both terminology and practice. A "crown of sonnets" in English is a sequence of seven sonnets; closer to the Russian crown is the fifteen-stanza sonnet redouble, of French origin, in which each line of the first sonnet becomes, in order, the *last* line in one of the next fourteen. In English the term "sonnet" has been applied to several forms

that do not even have fourteen lines: the "curtal sonnet", devised by Gerald Manley Hopkins, shortens both the octet and sestet to form a stanza of ten lines and a fraction; the caudate sonnet, actually Italian in origin, is literally a "sonnet with a tail" the latter consisting of two couplets and two shortened lines tacked onto the body of the sonnet (Williams 1986: 76–77, 88–89). In short, what is "inviolate" about the sonnet may vary from one poetic tradition to another.

Just what deviations from the Petrarchan norm do we see in the Russian sonnet? First of all, the octave may have alternating rather than enclosed rhyme: *abab abab*; this sonnet variant is often referred to in English as "Sicilian" (with the term "Italian" applied to constructions that grow out of quatrains with enclosed rhyme). Furthermore, it is possible to combine the two types of quatrain, so that the octet may rhyme *abab abba* (or the reverse). When each of these variations is combined with the possible forms for the concluding sestet, the possibilities for different rhyme schemes increase significantly. Furthermore, a poet may be quite inventive in stretching the parameters of the Petrarchan sonnet. Consider the rhyme schemes in Joseph Brodsky's "Twenty Sonnets for Maria Stuart":

1. aBBa aBBa CddCCC
2. aBBa BaaB cDDcDc
3. AbAb AbbA ccDeDe
4. AbbA AbAb CddCee
5. aabC bCbC bCbCCb
6. AbbA bAbA ccDeDe
7. aBBa BaBa cDcDee
8. AbbA bAAb bAAbbA
9. aBBa BaBa BBaBCC
10. AbbA bAAb cDDcEE
11. AbbA bAAb bAccDD
12. aBBa aBBa ccDeeD
13. AbAb bAbA cDcDDc
14. AbbA bAAb cDecDe
15. AbAb AbAb AbAbcc
16. aBBa aBBa cDecDe
17. aBBa aBBa CddCee
18. aBBa BaBa cDecDe
19. aBaB aBaB cDDcee
20. AbbA bAbA bAbbAb

What is most striking first of all is that not a single one of the twenty poems repeats the exact rhyme scheme found in any of the others (on Brodsky's sonnets, see Scherr 1986b: 105, 114). For the most part Brodsky maintains the usual rule of employing just two rhymes over the first eight lines, but even when doing so, he creates some noteworthy variants within the octet. Thus not only does he often combine one quatrain in alternating rhyme with another in enclosed, but in sonnet two and in several others the "outer" rhyme in the first quatrain becomes the "inner" rhyme in the second. The *ab* rhyme may be carried into the sestet, and twice (eight and twenty) runs through the entire poem (continuing the *ab* rhyme past the first two quatrains is alleged to be

bad form in Gerasimov 1985: 35). Usually when just two rhymes appear in the sestet they alternate according to the schema *cdcdcd*; Brodsky creates different patterns, including a striking sequence of three consecutive lines employing the same rhyme to conclude the first sonnet. Interestingly, only in the fifth sonnet does Brodsky break with the requirement of using just two rhymes in the first eight lines; he clearly feels that stricture particularly strongly. The poems, by the way, are written in iambic pentameter, the usual meter for the sonnet.

This one cycle illustrates two of the chief ways in which poets may create variety within the usual sonnet structure. The less immediately obvious technique is to vary the clausula (i.e., the distribution of masculine and feminine rhymes); thus the first eight lines in sonnets six and seven have the same rhyme scheme, but the placement of the masculine and feminine clausulae is reversed. But, more perceptibly, the rhyme scheme itself can be altered in many ways; if *AbbA AbbA* or *aBBa aBBa* would be the "norm" in Russian, then Brodsky finds numerous ways to stretch that norm and in one case clearly breaks with it.

For the most part Brodsky has written essentially Petrarchan sonnets, but he also does not ignore the English variant. In "Posvjashchaetsja stulu" he uses the Shakespearean sonnet as though it were a regular stanza:

Посвящается стулу (V)

Материя возникла из борьбы,	*a*
как явствуют преданья старины.	*b*
Мир создан был для мебели, дабы	*a*
создатель мог взглянуть со стороны	*b*
на что-нибудь, признать его чужим.	*c*
оставить без внимания вопрос	*d*
о подлинности. Названный режим	*c*
материи не обещает роз,	*d*
но гвозди. Впрочем, если бы не гвоздь,	*e*
всё сразу же распалось бы, как есть,	*f*
на рейки, перекладины, ваш гость	*e*
не мог бы, при желании, присесть.	*f*
Составленная из частей, везде	*g*
вещь держится в итоге на гвозде.	*g*

1982 (Brodsky)

Like all the others, this stanza, the poem's fifth, follows the Shakespeare rhyme scheme exactly; furthermore, the rhymes are nearly always masculine throughout the entire poem, and in this stanza they are so exclusively. What

is more, the poem exhibits, not atypically for Brodsky, some striking instances of enjambement. There is really no pause at all after the first quatrain, and major breaks occur within the seventh and ninth lines; the comma at the end of line eight marks a much weaker demarcation. The only clear pauses at the ends of lines are used to set off the first two lines of the poem and the last two. In each of these ways – the use of the Shakespearean sonnet as a stanza, the exclusively masculine rhymes, and the particularly marked enjambement – Brodsky is using the sonnet in a highly distinctive way for Russian poetry.

The other chief means for variety is the meter, and even though iambic pentameter and to a lesser extent iambic hexameter remain the chief meters for sonnets, modern poets feel few compunctions in employing other meters as well. In addition to the extreme instances by Khodasevich and Sel'vinskij of fourteen-syllable poems (in which each line consists of just a single syllable, but the rhyme scheme is that of a sonnet) it has become increasingly common to find metrical variety. Arsenij Tarkovskij employed iambic tetrameter as well as pentameter and hexameter in his sonnets, as well as anapestic trimeter; Junna Morits has a sonnet in trochaic hexameter ("Nochnoj poezd"); Novella Matveeva uses *both* iambic pentameter and hexameter lines in the same sonnet (in the pair called "Sonety", which in fact are about sonnets) and writes another in trochaic pentameter ("Lunnaja noch'"); and Gleb Gorbovskij writes sonnets with various types of anapests (for instance, the Shakespearean sonnet "Razbudite menja cherez tysjachu let", where anapestic tetrameter and trimeter alternate until a pair of tetrameter lines in the final couplet help impart a sense of closure).

This kind of experimentation within the modern period is perhaps to be expected. What is more surprising is that the sonnet has exhibited much variety from the very start. K. D. Vishnevskij's survey of 1647 sonnets by 143 poets, from the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, found over 600 different "types" of sonnet (where each type defines a specific rhyme scheme, clausula, and meter). Even in the eighteenth century, the 59 sonnets studied by Vishnevskij fall into over forty types. Roughly two-thirds of the 600 types found by him occur only a single time among the 1600 sonnets; just 27 of the types occur more than ten times. Major writers in fact are largely distinguished by not relying on a single type for more than a few poems; in the corpus studied by Vishnevskij, Pushkin's three sonnets exhibit three different types, Baratynskij's seven sonnets represent four types; Fet's thirteen sonnets display eleven types, Mandel'shtam's ten sonnets include nine types, etc. About three-fourths of all the sonnets are in iambic pentameter or hexameter, but over ten per cent are in iambic tetrameter and some are in various trochaic or ternary meters (Vishnevskij 1989).

It is, however, the more modern experiments with the sonnet form that make efforts to describe just what constitutes a sonnet particularly challenging. Once again, a striking example is provided by Brodsky:

Сонет

Прошел январь за окнами тюрьмы,
и я услышал пенье заключенных,
звучащее в кирпичном сонме камер:
«Один из наших братьев на свободе».
Еще ты слышишь пенье заключенных
и топот надзирателей безгласных,
еще ты сам поешь, поешь безмолвно:
«Прощай январь».
Лицом поворотясь к окну,
еще ты пьешь глотками теплый воздух.
А я опять задумчиво бреду
с допроса на допрос по коридору
в ту дальнюю страну, где больше нет
ни января, ни февраля, ни марта.
1962 (Brodsky)

Were this poem not so named, it would be hard to classify it as a sonnet. Most strikingly, of course, the poem is essentially unrhymed, despite the repetition of the same word at the ends of lines two and five and the existence of a few sound correspondences at the ends of certain other lines. At first glance the poem might appear to be written in iambic pentameter, but line eight is in dimeter and line nine in tetrameter – in short, the poem is comprised of variable iambs, a possible but nowadays quite rare meter for a sonnet. The poem in fact would seem to contain virtually none of the features found in the piece by Voloshin quoted earlier; if this work is to be called a sonnet, then it is only natural to wonder just what are the minimal qualities required for a poem to be so classified.

Before that question can be answered it will be helpful to review the "canonical" features of the Russian sonnet, not according to the narrow rules laid down by some theoreticians but as the sonnet has actually appeared in practice:

(1) The Petrarchan sonnet in fact does predominate in Russian, and to this day the majority of poets create a 4-4-3-3 division on the page.

(2) Within this one broad category many different rhyme combinations have been tolerated in Russian; the efforts by some who have written on the sonnet to be overly prescriptive in this regard have clearly not been heeded. The most common types, though, have consistently adhered to the basic norms of the broad sonnet tradition. That is, the same two rhymes will be used throughout the first eight lines, and then either two or three rhymes will be used over the last six lines.

(3) The meter is usually iambic, with a strong preference for the pentameter or hexameter, but other meters are not excluded.

(4) The most general structure for the Petrarchan sonnet is 8 + 6, with a further breakdown of the octet into quatrains. However, enjambement between the various units does occur, especially in those poems that are not divided graphically on the page.

(5) The most nearly inviolate feature of the Russian stanza is the fourteen-line length; the shorter and longer forms that occur in English and some other poetries are not at all common in Russian. When a poem is extended, it is most likely to add a partial concluding line, an "envoi", as in Khlebnikov's "Sobor grachej osennij...", a Shakespearean sonnet in its rhyme scheme, albeit containing iambic trimeter instead of pentameter, which ends with a fifteenth line that contains just the single word, "Нет!".

Clearly, a play with norms is crucial for the very vitality of the Russian sonnet tradition. Still, is it to be the case that every fourteen-line poem is to be labeled a sonnet, or are some perhaps better termed a quatorzain (a stanza of fourteen lines *other* than a sonnet; cf. Turco 1986: 105)? In addition to Brodsky's unrhymed "sonnet", it may be helpful to consider the first eight lines of a fourteen-line work by Evgenij Rejn:

«Самой природы вечный меньшевик»,	*a*
давным-давно я от себя отвык:	*a*
ни шутки, ни попойки – Иегова	*B*
лишил меня на партсобранье слова,	*B*
еще немного – и лишит мандата...	*C*
Ну что ж такого, жизнь не виновата.	*C*
Знай плещет у метро, стоит ретиво	*D*
в затылок возле кооператива.	*D*

<1990> (Rejn)

In this case, the work is, I would suggest, a quatorzain. Why? For all the experimentation with varying rhyme schemes in Russian, some sense of the 8 + 6 (or 4-4-4-2 or 4-4-3-3 or 4-4-6) structure is nearly always present; sometimes,

as in the stanza from "Posvjashchaetsja stulu", it is only the rhyme scheme that creates the structure; in Brodsky's unrhymed sonnet, the repetition of "January" in lines one and eight and the quotations that comprise lines four and eight help set off the first two quatrains (as well as the first eight lines as a whole) from what follows. A poem written in rhymed couplets lacks one of the essential structural features with which the variants in sonnet form engage. Conversely, Brodsky's sonnet, which perhaps does need the boost of its title to be so labeled, since the lack of rhyme admittedly makes the classification problematical, nonetheless does, despite the two shortened lines, show (1) an iambic pentameter impulse (as does the Rejn poem, in which only the last line is in hexameter), and (2) a clear division between the first eight lines and the remaining six.

Another type of problem arises with poems such as the following:

Пушкин

Собираясь в дальнюю дорожку,	*A*
жадно ел моченую морошку.	*A*
Торопился. Времени в обрез.	*b*
Лез по книгам. Рухнул. Не долез.	*b*
Книги – слишком шаткие ступени.	*C*
Что еще? За дверью слезы, пени.	*C*
Полно плакать. Приведи детей.	*d*
Подведи их под благословенье.	*E*
Что еще? Одно стихотворенье.	*E*
Пара незаконченных статей.	*d*
Не отправленный в печатню нумер.	*F*
Письмецо, что не успел прочесть.	*g*
В общем, сделал правильно, что умер.	*F*
Все-таки всего важнее честь.	*g*

<1974–1978> (Loseff)

Here it might be possible to argue for a thematic break after line eight, even though the rhyme scheme argues otherwise, but the issue is irrelevant – a second look reveals that the poem is simply an almost (but not quite) exact reversal of the Onegin stanza, albeit written in trochaic pentameter rather than iambic tetrameter. This example, though, does raise a question about the Onegin stanza: should it too be considered a kind of sonnet?

The issue of the origin and classification of the Onegin stanza has been considered at length, and my intent is not to review the entire matter here.

Some have pointed to possible models for the Onegin stanza within fragments of longer works (cf. Iljushin 1977: 92–95); others have suggested that the form may have been expanded from the then-popular ten-line stanza employed in the ode (Nikishov 1992: 12–13). Grossman (1927b: 74–82), while believing that the stanza is simply Pushkin's own invention, nonetheless cites some interesting parallels with the sonnet in several stanzas, such as the following:

Не мадригалы Ленский пишет	*A*	*A*
В альбоме Ольги молодой;	*b*	*b*
Его перо любовью дышит,	*A*	*A*
Не хладно блещет остротой;	*b*	*b*
Что́ ни заметит, ни услышит	*A*	*C*
Об Ольге, он про то и пишет:	*A*	*C*
И полны истины живой	*b*	*d*
Текут элегии рекой.	*b*	*d*
Так ты, Языков вдохновенный,	*C*	*E*
В порывах сердца своего	*d*	*f*
Поешь бог ведает кого,	*d*	*f*
И свод элегий драгоценный	*C*	*E*
Представит некогда тебе	*e*	*g*
Всю повесть о твоей судьбе.	*e*	*g*

(Pushkin, *Evgenij Onegin*, IV, 31)

The right-hand column gives the usual rhyme pattern for the Onegin stanza; here, because the same rhymes are used throughout the first eight lines, the scheme is much closer to that of the usual sonnet. Furthermore, as in (according to Grossman's calculations) about a third of all the stanzas in *Evgenij Onegin*, the structure is closer to 4-4-3-3 (i.e., that of a Petrarchan sonnet) than 4-4-4-2 (Grossman 1927a: 175; cf. Vinokur 1941: 204–213). The lack of graphic divisions within his fourteen-line units as well as the use of iambic tetrameter speak against a direct inspiration from the Petrarchan sonnet; as for the Shakespearean, which is closer to his rhyme scheme, Pushkin may not have even known that form when he began work on his novel in verse (Shaw 1993: 321). Granted the Onegin stanza is a sufficiently distinct (and, as the previous example shows, a sufficiently recognized and imitated) form that it surely deserves to be classified separately. And yet instances such as the stanzas cited by Grossman, as well as the numerous liberties taken with the stanza form even by Pushkin's day (cf. Tomashevskij 1958), make it tempting to consider the Onegin stanza as yet another deviation from the "canonical"

sonnet.[2] At the very least it is difficult to believe that in his creation and in his exploitation of this stanza's possibilities he was not at least indirectly inspired by the sonnet form.[3]

The precise relationship of the Onegin stanza to the sonnet may remain an insoluble mystery. Yet the sonnet itself has clearly been a form that, against a set of clearly defined norms, has permitted almost endless variations in its formal elements. As a result the Russian sonnet remains a favorite of Russian poets, for whom it continues to offer seemingly inexhaustible possibilities and thus remains as fresh today as it was at the beginning of the Russian syllabotonic tradition over two centuries ago.

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[2] In this regard Ian Lilly, in commenting on an earlier version of this paper, has suggested a broad relationship between the sonnet and the Onegin stanza in the history of Russian verse, noting that the decline in the sonnet may have been in response to the appearance of the Onegin stanza. Interestingly, both Voloshin and Vjacheslav Ivanov, who introduced the crown of sonnets in Russian, also wrote substantial works in Onegin stanzas: "Pis'mo" and "Mladenchestvo", respectively (on Voloshin's "Pis'mo", see Scherr 1991: 524–526). In a sense they then mark the turn from the Onegin stanza back to the sonnet.

[3] M. L. Gasparov, also in commenting on this paper, has proposed that a close investigation of the semantic and syntactic structure of both the sonnet and the Onegin stanza might ultimately show whether in fact the two forms are organically related.

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