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THE SEQUENCE «ASTROPHEL AND STELLA»

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The XVI century is the golden age of the sonnet form in Western Europe.

During one century more than 300 thousands of sonnets were written. Perhaps this form with its exactness of the inner structure was attractive for the poets with their new interpretation of human personality and intellect -the sonnet makes possible to express the author's feelings and thoughts in a compressive way. Philip Sidney was one of the founders of this tradition of the English verse. 400 years ago in London a society was founded, called "Areopagus" headed by Philip Sidney. The members of this society were Edmund Spenser (1552 -1599), Fulk Grewil. During their meetings religious and philosophical problems were discussed and new forms of poetry were worked out. "The efence of Poetry" («Защита поэзии») by Philip Sydney was a theoretical work, philosophical and esthetical creed of the new poetry founders. The main object of poetry after Ph. Sydney is considered to be the positive influence on the individual's mentality: it is necessary for the poet to create an ideal character; and to convince the reader to believe in such perfect character («совершенство») the writers must face their characters to difficulties and make them improve their souls. The sequence "Astrophel and Stella" (written in the period 1581 -1583 and published in 1591) contains 108 sonnets and 11 songs. The young courtier Astrophel is the Greek for 'star-lover' it means «влюбленный в звезду». "Stella" - the Latin for 'star'. Before the discussion the sonnet sequence let us consider some facts from the life of Ph. Sydney and Penelope Devereux and their relationship. The contemporaries of Sydney believed them to be the prototypes of Astrophel and Stella. Sydney was engaged to Penelope, the daughter of the earl of Essex - who eventually had a rather unhappy marriage to Lord Rich. For the time Sydney was engaged to Penelope she was 18-19. Penelope is identified as Stella, although she is said to have been rather less virtuous than Stella. In the history of the development of the sonnet sequence the role of Stella is very important. She is one of the first heroines in the line of female characters of the English lyrical poetry. But nevertheless Stella differs greatly from the traditional female image of the Italian sonnets. She is noble, devoted to her moral duty. In the sequence, Sydney harmonizes his personal tone of voice with both myth and narrative; he tells about development of her love and presents this female character as a positive one. Her virtue is based not on the dream about Paradise love but on the understanding of her moral duty. She is not an ideal image; she is real lively, vivid female character, the predecessor to the Dark Lady of Shakespearean sonnets written later in 1609. Ph. Sydney realized that Penelope was an outstanding personality and she provoked him for creation of female character unknown in English lyrical poetry. Penelope Devereux possessed all the virtues which were of great value in the court life: her brilliant beauty attracted attention, she was educated, knew French, Italian, Spanish, took part at the theatrical plays by Ben Jonson (1572 - 1637). Even the king James (who was the King of Scots in 1567-1625 and of England and Ireland in 1603-1625) noticed her brilliant intellect revealed in her letters. More than other women of her time she took part in the court's political intrigues. Her brother, earl Essex was a national hero. He became and remained Elizabeth's favorite despite his marriage (1590) to Sir Philip Sydney's widow. Appointed in 1599 to put down O'Neil's revolt in Ireland earl Essex was unlucky with his campaign and it was Penelope who wrote an inspired letter praying to help her brother to the queen Elizabeth. Earl Essex attempted without success to raise a rebellion in London against the government and in this period Penelope lived in his house. Earl Essex was condemned and executed and for high treason and she defended her brother before the military Council. Earl Essex was a remarkable personality, the author of numerous sonnets; he was a patron of literature, in particular of Francis Bacon, who, however, acted as a prosecutor at his trial. Thus, the life of Penelope, this remarkable person, was connected with many outstanding people of those times.

There is no doubt that creating his lyrical sequence Ph. Sidney used all the achievements of European poetry in this genre. The innovations of Sydney, so called English Petrarch you can see in synthetic character of his sequence "Astrophil and Stella", in the transformation of the poetical technique. Considering the experience of Wyatt and Surrey's blank verse, Sydney invented his verse with the rhyme abbaabba cdcdgg. Sixty sonnets of the 108 are written in this form - classical Italian octave and sestet, and the two lines, so called conclusive one's are connected syntactically with the former line and contain the main idea. The range of lexical means Sidney used in his cycle is wide, - he used colloquial words, introduced political, military, law terms enriching English poetry and national language in the whole. Sidney used two methods:

1. Compound epithets consisting of two or more words. This technique was new for the English poetry, Sidney was considered to copy it from French poetry. Writing about peculiarities of the English language Sidney noted that for his native language "brilliant composition of two or three words" is characteristic. Unfortunately in Russian translations of the cycle this method is not always re-created or reproduced. Consider for example the 5th line of the 31 sonnet: "Long with Love acquainted eyes". In Russian translation it sounds different: «В любви немало ведал я невзгод».

2.The second method is inversion which has emotional and intellectual character and makes the verse more musical and coloured. For example in the 11th Song:

“Never doth thy beauty flourish
More than in my reason’s sight”,
or in the 1st Song:
“Doubt you, to whom my Muse these notes intendeth
.....
Only with you not miracles are wonders”.

Besides Sydney prefers to use one syllable or two syllable words in his verse and sometimes there is about 10 short words in the line, for example, sonnet 31:

“With how sad steps, o Moone, thou climb'st the skies”,
or sonnet 1:
“Fool”, said my Muse to me, “Look in thy heart and write...”.

It is worth mentioning that this sequence of sonnets is not a poetical diary of the writer, there are many signs of the time there. By the way, the most part of the sonnets are devoted not to Stella but to his friend, to the poets, to the moon, even to a sparrow, to human virtues, and in the first line the sonnets are addressed to the reader, while Astrophel, Stella and other characters are only actors telling about Astrophel's love to Stella. It does not matter whether Sydney was in love with Penelope, the main thing is that the image of Love exists in his imagination. Many English and American literary scholars discussed the question about identity of the Astrophil and Sydney's personalities. The question about genre of this sequence of sonnets is challenging. Almost all the sonnets are written in the first person and it is not easy to differentiate the words of the hero and the author. Nevertheless, this sequence of sonnets seems to be the first attempt of the author to separate himself from his hero and to lead his hero through the way of moral improvement. Ph. Sydney created a new type of poetic work, “Astrophil and Stella” differs from former lyric sequences of sonnets in the point, that it is “lyric and epic work”. In the “Foreword” to the first edition of this sequence (1591) Tomas Nash called this composition “tragicomedy” of Love. As to his opinion, this sequence was created to demonstrate moral perfection of a man in the struggle of passion and intelligence. The tale about the unhappy love of Astrophil defeated by Cupid begins with his dreams about mutual love, but he must confess that his mistress heart is very hard and severe. Astrophel is in despair of the thought that Stella' heart is closed to him. At last his love found response in Stella's heart, but her love is only ideal and it does not bring any satisfaction for Astrophel. Unlike Wyatt, Sydney was not aiming at the expression of strong personal emotions only, but at something more exalted and elevated or sometimes connected with military affairs. For example the following sonnet by Sydney refers to an actual tournament held in 1581. A tournament (or “tourney”) was a public contest between armed horsemen in imitation of real battle, based on ideas of chivalry and accompanied by much pageantry. The field was enclosed by barriers, with pavilions at the side for notable people. Read and analyze the 41st sonnet, consider it's Russian translation:

The 41st sonnet from the sequence

by the judgment of the English eyes And of Having this day my horse, my hand, my lance Сонет 41 Guided so well that I obtained the prize, Both В тот день служили конь, рука, копье На славу мне — моей была награда some sent from that sweet enemy, France, Horsemen my skill in horsemanship advance, Town-folks my strength; a daintier judge applies His praise to sleight which from good use doth rise; Some lucky wits impute it but to chance; Others, because of both sides I do take My blood from them who did excel in this, Think nature me a man-at-arms did make. How far they shoot awry! The true cause is, Stella looked on, and from her heavenly face Sent forth the beams which made so fair my race. (from Astrophel and Stella)

GLOSSARY

advance (1.5): speak well of daintier (1.6): more careful sleight (1.7): skill
good use (1.7): experience
impute it but (1.8): only consider it

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