



Seymour Mayne, *Cusp: Word Sonnets*, translated into Russian by Mikhail Rykov, Saint-Petersburg, Silver Age, 2019, 146 pages.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/her.23.2021.587-591>

When the medieval Sicilian poet Giacomo da Lentino (1210-1260) wrote the first known *sonetto* around 1235, he was surely unaware of how fecund a form he had just invented. The sonnet quickly spread to Spain and France, and from there made its way to Renaissance England. As it reached the Anglo-Saxon world, it changed its structure. Whereas Francesco Petrararch (1304-1374), like other poets of continental Europe, divided his sonnets into two quartets and two tercets, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) wrote sonnets of three quartets and a couplet, following in the pen-strokes of his English colleague Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542). The sonnet form, however, underwent an even more surprising transformation in nineteenth-century Russia where it became the basis of the *Onegin stanza*, written in iambic tetrameter and a fairly sophisticated rhyme scheme. Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* contains nearly four hundred stanzas, some of which copy the structure of the Petrarchan (Italian) sonnet and others that of the Shakespearean (English) sonnet. Thus, the only invariant constituting a sonnet is the number of lines – since Giacomo da Lentino's first *sonetto*, there have always been fourteen of them.

So far, the sonnet went through its most radical transformation in the United States in the twentieth century. In 1985, the American poet Brad Leithauser published the first 'word sonnet', a poem composed of fourteen monosyllabic words. In the same year, a collection of monosyllabic French-language sonnets was published in France by René Nelli. In the British Isles, the Irish poet Augustus Young began writing his word sonnets in the late 1990s. And the new variant of the sonnet then moved back across the Atlantic to Canada where the Friday Circle, a poetry group at the University of Ottawa's Department of English, published *Foreplay: An Anthology of Word Sonnets* in 2004.

The co-editor of the anthology is University of Ottawa professor Seymour Mayne. A poet himself, Mayne has published his own word sonnet volumes, developing the formal and stylistic potential of the new form: *Ricochet: Word Sonnets* (2004); *A Dream of Birds: Word Sonnets* (2007); *Cusp: Word Sonnets* (2014); and *Perfume: Poems and Word Sonnets*

(2020). Between 2011 and 2019, Mayne's word sonnets were also published in French, Hebrew, Romanian, Portuguese, Spanish and, most recently, Russian translations.

Translated by Mikhail Rykov (originally from Belarus), the bilingual English-Russian edition features a foreword by the Russian-born University of Ottawa professor Natalia Vesselova in which she states that one of the goals of the Russian translation was "to make the writing Russian reader join in the game and make the word sonnet a genre of Russian poetry." For, unlike in Canada, the word sonnet has no tradition in Russia whatsoever.

The word sonnet is the result of the greatest 'trimming' ever done to any long-established form of poetry. It casts away the Petrarchan, Shakespearean and other stanza structures, the rhyming couplets being a mere work of chance. As opposed to traditional European sonnets, divided into thesis, antithesis and synthesis, the thought in a word sonnet runs through a narrow groove of fourteen verses, each of them consisting of just one word of varying length. The main quality of a word sonnet is its 'conciseness' and 'visuality'. As Vesselova points out in her preface, "the length of words in a word sonnet does not have a metrical but a visual meaning." While Shakespeare's ten or eleven-syllable verse usually contains four semantic cores, a verse in a word sonnet always consists of one core, or none. Why? Apart from words carrying a full meaning, a verse can also be formed by a preposition, a particle, an auxiliary, or a grammatical article.

In terms of its content and topics, Mayne's word sonnets are not all too surprising. Often they have the quality of a bon mot repeating roadside wisdom: "Old age is like a used car, no sooner fix one part another goes." Somewhat more original are the poetic impromptus uttered with metaphorical economy reminiscent of Japanese haiku: "Due north of Sandy Hill the Gatineau hills loom large like backs of buffalo." Nevertheless, Mayne's muse is most evident in his impressionist images, employing the music of words and echoing the poetry of Sandro Penna (1906-1977): "A flutter of wings and the feathers of snow fill the eyes with flight."

Traditional content notwithstanding, Mayne's word sonnets pose a translation challenge, especially when it comes to Russian. Unlike English, Russian has no grammatical articles, for instance, nor does it form a genitive case using a preposition. Thus, the inherent differences between the two languages force the Russian translator to be more explicit and verbose than in the original.

In Mayne's sonnet *By the Bay Window*, three out of fourteen verses are formed by a grammatical article and one by a preposition signifying a

genitive case: “Even the cat can meditate on the absurdity of a heavy snowfall in April.” Rykov substitutes full-meaning words for all the original auxiliaries: “Даже наша кошка может вдруг задуматься о нелепой глупости снегопада сильного в месяце апреле.” – “Even our cat can suddenly meditate on (the) stupid absurdity (of a) heavy snowfall in (the) month (of) April.” The added Russian words, underscored for emphasis, have significantly altered the tone of Mayne’s poem. Its aphoristic breeziness has been replaced by cumbersome wordiness.

This tendency to put on weight can be traced throughout many of Rykov’s renderings. His version of the sonnet *Rushing* reads: “Разинув рты шагнули встретить свою смерть слепцы не замечавшие деревьев несущихся с вращением земли.” – “With their mouths open, the blind men stepped to meet their death, not noticing the trees rushing with the rotation of the earth.” Rykov added the underlined words, overcomplicating the original image: “They jaywalked into their death, blind to the trees rushing by as earth turned.”

It is mostly the insertion of new meanings that spoils Rykov’s translation. However, the Russian translator also comes up with words that repeat what has already been said. In the sonnet *Day*, Rykov translates the gerund *renewing* with two Russian transgressives *раскрашивая* (making coloured) and *расцветчивая* (colouring bright). In the sonnet *Beside*, the phrasal verb *settle down* has been replaced by two Russian ones – *успокоиться* (calm down) and *остепениться* (settle down), and in the sonnet *Edge*, the concise image “with the cutting edge of a word” has been transformed into the wordy phrase “используя слова, их остроту и режущие свойства” (using words, their sharpness and cutting properties). This multiplication of meanings, which results in pleonasms, deprives the Russian rendering of Mayne’s word sonnets of their striking minimalism.

Special attention must be paid to the sonnets marked by literary allusions. While preserving the reference to the 1964 American musical in his version of the sonnet *Fiddler*, using the words *скрипач на крыше* (fiddler on the roof), Rykov completely omits the reference to *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a famous parable by John Bunyan (1628-1688), in his version of Mayne’s sonnet titled *Pilgrims*, missing its main point. Following traditional imagery, Mayne compares “clouds” to “pilgrims”. However, he gives a touch of originality to this stock image by adding “sure of their progress.” Unfortunately, Rykov renders the phrase as “пилигримы, уверенные в своем продвижении” (pilgrims sure of their moving on), turning Mayne’s image into the stock-in-trade of Romantic poetry.

The inherent differences between English and Russian are also manifested in the different “visuality” of Mayne’s original and Rykov’s translation. Indeed, no Russian translator can achieve the same degree of visual economy as the English original. Most English words measure one or two syllables, whereas the average length of a Russian word is two and a half syllables. Therefore, the Russian versions of Mayne’s word sonnets always run through a wider groove than in the original. Figuratively speaking, they look more robust.

Nevertheless, Rykov’s translation has its strengths as well. Just as the final couplets (or “twists in the tail”) of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* are often suggestive of a proverb, a saying or an aphorism, so too Mayne’s word sonnets often end with an image reaching beyond purely personal experience. In these final lines, the epicentre/epicenter of a sonnet, Rykov at times comes up with some very good solutions.

A striking example of his inventive approach is his rendering of the poem *Cusp*, which opens the whole sonnet sequence: “On the cusp of the new morning, it’s still dark as a cat’s heart.” Rykov translates it as follows: “На самом пике утренней зари ты видишь то же, что в чужой душе – потемки.” Literally, “At the cusp of the morning dawn, you see the same thing you see in someone else’s soul – darkness.” In the sonnet’s ending, Rykov employs the Russian saying “чужая душа – потемки” (a stranger’s soul is a mystery), giving his translation the right end-weight. Whilst departing from the original image once again, the Russian version seems just as natural and equally gnomic.

Likewise, Rykov arrives at an inventive (yet faithful) solution in his translation of the sonnet called *65 Years Young*, whose Russian title reads as *Юноша 65-ти лет: “Старый? Друзья, стар лишь костюм. У парня с порохом и шилом все порядке!”* This time round Rykov uses another Russian saying – “есть еще порох в пороховницах, и шило в ягодицах” (there’s still gun powder in one’s flasks and a bodkin in one’s buttocks), meaning “I’m still full of life and energy.” The Russian rendering manifests the same boyish sparkle and vigour as Mayne’s original: “Old? Just the clothes, my friends, the boy still has mischief in his bones!”

In spite of the verbosity and various pleonasm, Rykov’s translation succeeds in maintaining the equally powerful music of words we find in the original. In his version of the sonnet *Flight*, quoted above, he masterfully employs the letter “п” (“р”): “Порхание крыльев, перья снежных хлопьев в своем стремительном кружении, тобою завладев, глаза наполнили полетом.” – “Fluttering wings, feathers of snow flakes in their swift whirl,

taking hold of you, filled the eyes with flight.” Although the Russian version is wordier than the original, it sounds very good.

By and large, Rykov’s rendering of Mayne’s word sonnets shines a remarkably bright light on how the inherent nature of the Russian language moulds poetry translations from English. Moreover, being a pioneering endeavor of its kind, it can teach “the writing Russian reader” a new way to treat the traditional European sonnet form.

STANISLAV RUBÁŠ
Charles University
stanislav.rubas@ff.cuni.cz