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**NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF
EVGENY BARATYNSKY'S TALE
"PERSTEN" (THE RING)
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE
EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN TALE
WITHIN 1820s - 1840s**

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**NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF EVGENY BARATYNSKY'S
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The study is focused on narrative specific of Baratynsky's "unexplained" tale "Persten" (*The Ring*) in comparison to, on the one hand, the material assembled within the frameworks of HSE project *Russkaja Povest 1825–1850*, and, on the other, taking into consideration the material of previous period (the first third of the 19th century). Using the research facilities provided by *poetics of expressiveness* the author describes and defines the functions of different techniques concerning the plot, composition and narrative. The author demonstrates how Baratynsky combines the widespread plots ('magic ring', 'devil in love', 'adultery', etc.) in a very complicated narrative model that diminishes the power of every plotline and deceives readers' expectations. Using the database of most frequent plots ("Russian Tale, 1825-1850", 800 texts), the paper compares "Persten" with typical and very rare plot schemes and demonstrates that Baratynsky's tale manifests the marginal line of Russian fiction which mainstream came to choose another direction.

Key words: E. A. Baratynsky, Russian tale, evolution of Russian prose of 1825–1850, narrative, plot structure

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Introduction

Corpus-based approach to Russian tales³ of 1820s – 1850s realized in 2015–2016 by HSE Research/Learning Group *Russkaja Povest*⁴ not only allows to provide a new level of description of their plots and narrative patterns. It also originally highlights an important question of individual writers' decisions in the area of composition and narrative manner. In such aspect, texts of well-known and famous authors emerge as the most interesting. They are rarely compared to a massive fiction – which, however, for a reader-contemporary represented the true background for reception of such masterpieces as Pushkin's "Povesti pokojnogo Ivana Petrovicha Belkina" (*The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin*), Gogol's "Večera na khutore bliz Dikanki" (*The Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*), and Baratynsky's "Persten" (*The Ring*) which were published nearly simultaneously, in the second half of 1831 – at the beginning of 1832.

The case of "Persten" appears to be an unparalleled one, being the only belletristic work of the poet whose writings in prose are extremely rare. A philosophical essay "O zabluzhdenijakh i istine" (*On Delusions and the Truth*), an allegorical miniature "Istorija koketstva" (*The History of Coquetry*), the Russian translation of Xavier de Maistre's tale *Le Lépreux de la Cité d'Aoste*, and several fragments of Chateaubriand's *Le Génie du Christianisme* also translated in Russian – this is the full list of Baratynsky's texts in prose, if we leave aside two pieces of literary criticism and prosaic auto-translations of his poems, from Russian into French.

Being, as it was demonstrated, quite marginal for Baratynsky, his works in prose, including "Persten", were mostly neglected by scholars. Historical and literary context of the tale, as well as its genre background, were reconstructed adequately only twice, in [Karpov 1990a], [Karpov 1996]. This study is, without any doubt, to be corrected and completed, a number of facts concerning the tale having been given contradictory interpretations.

"Persten": idea, creation, and publication

"Persten" was published late in January 1832 in "Evropeets" [*The European*] magazine⁵, but it may have been conceived and its first version written earlier, within the period starting

³ The exact English equivalent for the Russian term 'повесть' remains, in fact, unfound. It is translated as "short novel", "long short story", even "novelette"; it is also transliterated (*povest* or *povest*). We, henceforward, will use the word "tale".

⁴ See the Group's web page: <https://philology.hse.ru/rusnovel/>

⁵ 1832. № 2. P. 165–187. The issue appeared on January 29 (according to the date marked in the censor's notification – see Letopis 1998: 286).

from November 1830 till the first half of January 1831. A number of indirect proofs⁶ allows to presume that Baratynsky created his tale as a bet – with, as a counterpart, Ivan Kireevsky who wrote his own tale named “Opal” (*The Opal*) and dated it, in the publication prepared for the 3rd issue of “Evropeets” magazine, “December 15, 1830. Moscow”⁷. Baratynsky’s spouse, Nastasya Lvovna, later pointed out that one of her husband’s “short tales” (“petits contes”) had appeared as a result of a bet:

Il a peu écrit en prose. On ne connaît de lui que deux petits contes dont l'un a été fait *à la suite d'une gageure*... [Hetso 1964: 12; italics is mine – A.B.].

The bet is also mentioned in Baratynsky’s hand-written note to Kireevsky dated December 1830 – beginning of January 1831 [Karpov 1996 :177], [Letopis 1998 : 249]:

See you tomorrow. Having been busy with Pushkin, I have not seen you for quite a long time. Everyone in my family, including myself, is in good health and gives his bow to you and all yours. <...> *Have you written your tale? Mine is ready* [italics is mine - A.B.].

The note makes undoubtful that Baratynsky’s tale was created before he read “Opal” (for another opinion see [Eremeev 1990: 83, 87]). Nevertheless, it is still unknown what were the differences between the initial version of “Persten” and its published text and what changes the author had made before he sent his tale to “Evropeets”. All we can say is that some transformations certainly had place, as the letter to Kireevsky (November 29, 1831) proves. Enumerating his writings intended for Kireevsky’s magazine Baratynsky then reports:

I am working at a tale you remember: *The Ring*. You will receive all this by the next heavy post. All this is mediocre but good enough for a magazine [Letopis 1998: 279].

However, in the next letter, written early in December 1831, the poet asks his correspondent to indicate his name as the author of the tale [Ibid.] – the fact implying some importance of this work in his own eyes. It is also significant that both tales, “Persten” as well as Kireevsky’s “Opal”, were intended to be presented to the public as a “twin set” [Karpov 1996: 178]. The tale composed by Kireevsky was to be published just after “Persten”, in the 3rd issue of “Evropeets” which however did not appear as the magazine was suppressed in February 1832.

⁶ The autograph of the tale is nowadays unknown. Its first (and the only lifetime) publication remains the only reliable source of the text. The copy of “Persten” in one of Nastasya Baratynsky’s albums is by her own hand and seems to be made from the published text and after the poet’s death [PD IRLI. F. 33. Op. 1. Fol. 63 verso –72].

⁷ As Kireevsky’s magazine was suppressed in February 1832, when the 3rd issue was just being prepared (see [Vatsuro, Gillelson 1986: 114–135], [Frizman 1989:428–442]), his tale remained unknown for readers until its publication in “Dennitsa” (*The Day-Dawn*) almanac in 1834 [Kireevsky 1834]. For characteristics of two versions of “Opal” see [Karpov 1990b].

“Persten” is linked to Kireevsky’s “Opal” by a great number of formal and motif correspondences (see [Eremeev 1990:82-87], [Karpov 1990a: 621–622], [Karpov 1996: 177–178]), probably related to the conditions of the described literary bet. Besides the central image of the ring⁸ (well-known mythological and fairy-tale motif “The Magic Ring” – № 560 according to Aarne – Thompson classification), motifs of dream, the conflict between illusion and reality, relation concerning the ring and the beloved woman finally lost by the protagonist. This part of literary history of “Persten” was however unavailable for the public, as Kireevsky’s tale was published only three years later, in “Dennitsa” (*The Day-Dawn*) almanac.

Meanwhile, first readers of “Persten” were able to perceive another important context of the tale, but the critics left no comment on it. I mean “Povesti ... Belkina” which were brought from Boldino with a great number of other newborn Pushkin’s texts. Pushkin read them aloud to Baratynsky in Moscow at the beginning of December 1830, and his listener, as the author himself reported to Petr Pletnev on December 9, 1830, “ржал и бился” [Pushkin 1937–1959: XIV, 133]⁹. Pushkin might have presented to Baratynsky some other writings composed in Boldino (according to latter’s letter to Dmitry Sverbeev dated mid-December 1830 [Letopis 1998: 249]), while Kireevsky read them later, after they were published¹⁰. It is worth pointing out that Nicolay Yazykov, at the time close friend of Baratynsky, visibly preferred him to Pushkin as a narrator and presumed that his own tales “would be much better”:

...he is an artist in telling stories <...> before we saw “Vystrel” (*The Shot*) he told it here in a surprisingly elegant and distinct manner, immensely better than it is written in publication¹¹.

These two literary situations concerning “Persten” defined the main aspect of its comparative and typological interpretations: the tale was compared mainly to mentioned texts of Kireevsky and Pushkin. A wider narrative context, Russian as well as European, was outlined in [Karpov 1996: 179–185] and in Yury Lotman’s article published *post mortem* (see [Lotman 1994]). These studies, however, highlighted some motif correspondences and did not analyze the whole structure of the tale.

⁸ It is possible that there was a real talisman – an opal ring: the name of the stone became the title of Kireevsky’s tale and inspired the last name of Baratynsky’s character, Opalsky.

⁹ For the latest interpretation of Pushkin’s famous *mot* see [Golovin 2011].

¹⁰ “I am familiar with “Povesti Belkina”. Pushkin read the manuscript of them to me. Give me your opinion about them”, he wrote to Kireevsky in the second half of December 1831 [Letopis 1998: 280].

¹¹ Yazykov’s letter to his brother Petr, dated November 18, 1831, is quoted by [Letopis 1998: 278].

“Persten” against the background of Russian stories of the first half of the 19th century

Below, the plot and narrative structure of Baratynsky’s tale will be discussed in comparison to, on the one hand, the material assembled within the frameworks of HSE project *Russkaja Povest 1825–1850*, and, on the other, taking into consideration the material of previous period (the first third of the 19th century) classified in Tatiana Kitanina’s study [Kitanina 2005] which is also important for us as a methodological tool. To describe the plot structure of “Persten” we will use the research facilities provided by *poetics of expressiveness* allowing to define the functions of different techniques concerning the plot, composition and narrative¹².

“Persten” strikes the reader with a sophisticated narrative structure, an unusual combination of events and plot. Main narrative plan (the story of the Dubrovins and their acquaintance with Opalsky) is devoid of unexpected events; all potential conflicts are not violent and come to a safe end. Narrative tension seems to be generated not by a plot collision, but by a concentrated mysterious atmosphere enveloping an enigmatic character, Opalsky. He, contrary to all expectations, does not act “strongly” or demonically. Thus, the intrigue is carried to the lateral plots developing in different plans. We mean not only a mysterious manuscript depicting fatal influence of love and curiosity and situating the story in the 16th century Spain (“this happened in the reign of Philip II”), but also several modern plots, put in a conventional “reality”: receiving of the ring by Alexandra Pavlovna, Dubrovin’s wife; the visit of Maria Petrovna Savina; the story of her daughter’s marriage.

All these components, separately or in simple combinations (such techniques as “story within a story”; an “interior story” introduced by reference to a discovered manuscript, letter, document etc.; correlation between the past and the present) are often used in Russian tales of the first half of the 19th century. Unusualness of “Persten” emerges from the juxtaposition of several different plots.

Plot situation of the main, “framework” plan in Baratynsky’s tale may be linked to an arch-plot¹³ of a mysterious savior:

The main character, Dubrovin, a modest nobleman, is to pay his debt immediately; all the neighbors reject his request for financial help. Opalsky, a rich squire living in the area, remains his only hope. However, Dubrovin has never met this neighbor before; besides, Opalsky’s unique appearance, habits, and conduct when he receives the visit of Dubrovin do not announce the happy end. An

¹² For the latest classified digest see [Zholkovsky, Shcheglov 2016].

¹³ The notion of Alexander Zholkovsky and Yury Shcheglov related to the “poetics of expressiveness”. Arch-plot is a plot model (invariant) realized in a number of specific plots.

accident (dropping his ring, Dubrovin does not manage to pick it up, so it runs to Opalsky) resolves the situation: Opalsky instantly agrees to provide the needed help explaining his sudden sympathy to the visitor by the fact that Dubrovin is the owner of the ring.

All further actions of the tale's characters (and mainly Opalsky's deeds) are governed by the same logic of the arch-plot. Opalsky continues acting as the Dubrovins' benefactor: he solves their law suit, builds a "nice house full of light", helps them to lay out a garden, and, finally, makes Dubrovin his heir. A technique of expressiveness named *sudden turn*¹⁴, implied by such an arch-plot, is put by Baratynsky in the very beginning of the tale, contrary to a usual development of the plots of the type. The transformation within the plot makes us to presume that Opalsky's benefaction covers something dangerous, designates a countermotion. The reader expects that Opalsky very soon will appear as a secret lover of Dubrovin's wife, or as the devil's servant who will require for Dubrovin's soul (precious object, something else). Or, differently, that he will be angered with Dubrovin and curse him, etc.

Nothing of that happens within the "framework", the real plan, but a number of such situations is outlined in lateral lines assembled by a classic motif of a magic object – the ring, in this particular case.

In 1820s – 1830s, Baratynsky seems to be intensely interested in the plot of a ring, quite ordinary though for romantic fiction, lyric and epics. Countess Nina, main character of his long poem "Bal" (*The Ball*, 1825–1828), not only possesses the ring hiding poison but finally kills herself with its aid. Motif of ring as talisman, able to change the destiny of a female character, is used in the tale in verse "Pereselenie dush" (*The Move of Souls*, 1828). The same motif of a magic ring is developed in a poem dedicated to Sofia Lvovna Engelhardt, Baratynsky's younger sister-in-law – "Ditia moe, ona skazala..." (*My child, she said...*); written not later than 1832–1833). Here, the ring is to provide to his owner the love of a wonderful friend, though obliging her to be an object of neglect on the part of the high society (cf. Dashenka's line in "Persten").

In his tale Baratynsky obviously continues working at the theme of a mysterious, life-changing ring. The ring owned by Dubrovin, lacking of real magic, still can change people's fates. It is interesting to note that in further Russian fiction this motif is less representative. Keeping its mystic or romantic aura, it is mainly connected to a functional (as in Pushkin's "Dubrovsky") or psychological motivation. Thus, a character of Evgeny Grebenka's "St. Petersburg tale" also named "Persten"¹⁵ gives the ring inherited from his father to a girl he is in love with. The father though ordered by his will to be buried with the ring on his finger, and such a neglect constantly reminds the son of his disobedience and finally makes him mad. In Alexander Chuzhbinsky's tale

¹⁴ *Sudden turn* consists of "some development previous to an event, making this event hardly probable" [Zholkovsky, Shcheglov 2016: 30].

¹⁵ Literaturnaja gazeta. 1841. № 11. P. 41–44; № 12. P. 45–48.

of the same title¹⁶ the ring having an inscription “Woe to an oath-breaker!” acts as a warning against frivolous passions.

Mentioned “parenthetic” plots in “Persten” (either slightly outlined or well-developed) are ruled by the whole logic which implies approaching to the mystery of the ring via retardation and *sudden turn*. These plots may be represented as a scale.

1) the plot of a love mystery (secret love, adultery etc.) or a secret in the past of the protagonist’s wife¹⁷, represented in a compact manner:

... Opalsky’s words disturbed his [Dubrovin’s] heart. “What is this ring? Somewhere it belonged to Opalsky; my wife gave it to me. What were the relationship between her and my benefactor? She knows him! So why was she keeping this acquaintance in secret from me? When had she known him?” The more he thought about that, the more nervous he became; everything seemed strange and mysterious to him.

This pattern though is immediately declined as a false one. After having a conversation with his spouse, “whose face and voice were so calm” when she was asked about Opalsky,

Dubrovin left all his doubts. He reported to his wife every detail of his visit to Opalsky, confessed an unwilling anxiety filling his heart, and Alexandra Pavlovna, after having a bit severe, soon reconciled with her husband.

The first false line being unmasked leads to the next line which also appears to be false.

2) reduplication of the motif of a secret being transferred from the protagonist’s wife to her friend (Anna Petrovna Kuzmina) who had once given the ring:

I will certainly write to Anna Petrovna, she [Dubrovin’s wife] said. What a secretive person! She had never told me a word about Opalsky. Now, seeing that we have already known a half of her secret, she will tell us the whole truth.

Nevertheless, this line is very soon unmasked according the same pattern. The “suspect” Anna Petrovna simply denies her acquaintance with Opalsky referring to the fact that the ring was given to her by a third person after being found on a road:

Anna Petrovna answered Alexandra Pavlovna’s letter. She did not understand her hints, assuring that she had never seen any person named Opalsky, even in her dreams, that the ring was a gift made by one of her friends to whom it had been brought by a servant who found it on a road. Thus, the Dubrovins’ curiosity remained unsatisfied.

¹⁶ *Illustratsija*. 1848. T. 6. № 16. P. 241–245.

¹⁷ See this motif, linked to the offer of a ring, bracelet etc. in Alexander Bestuzhev’s tale “Ispytanie” (*The Tryout*) (*Syn Otechestva and Severny Arkhiv*. 1830. T. 13. № 29. P. 117–143; № 30. P. 181–215; № 31. P. 245–268; № 32. P. 309–349), in Lermontov’s “Maskarad” (*The Masked Ball*).

Such a repetition on the level of the plot (also representing a well-known technique of expressiveness¹⁸) underlines an apparent insolvability of the mystery of the ring. Opalsky himself also seems to be unsolvable, incomprehensible; to define him Baratynsky several times mentions “people’s gossips” introducing the theme of black magic and close relation with another world¹⁹. So, a “realistic” explanation of the mystery of the ring, conventionally based on love and adultery, is compromised, shaped as *refusal movement* that brings to the foreground a “mystic line”²⁰ packed with the aid of the “story in a story” technique.

3) Meanwhile, a mysterious legend telling a tragic love of Antonio, a black magician and cabbalist, to beautiful and sly donna Maria who beguiled him and cruelly ruled him with the aid of the ring made by Antonio himself, does not give the reader any answer. “Mystic” plan does not correspond to a “framework”, a real story. It is significant that Dubrovin refuses to believe in the manuscript legend: “this is a translation of one of those modern tales in which stuff passes for a brave singularity”. Therefore, this line seems to be as false as previous two.

4) A bright ending is supported by its close connection with previous, invalid explanations. The story of Maria Petrovna Savina (donna Maria of a “mysterious tale”), a light-headed girl who played a trick with Anton Isaich Opalsky (cabbalist Antonio in the manuscript), a simple-minded officer, simultaneously explodes the “mystic line” in explanation of the story of the ring (technique of *refusal movement*) and emerges as the third element in a sequence of the story of Opalsky and his talisman (technique of *partitioning*). An additional effect is provided by the situation of “accidental meeting” (Maria Petrovna’s unexpected arrival to the Dubrovins). The latter situation is explicitly in contrast with curiosity of Dubrovin and his wife in previous two cases (1 and 2).

The banning of mystic, exploding of fantastic motivations is a typical technique for a tale of the mid 1820s – 1830s, widely used in the texts of Orest Somov, Alexander Bestuzhev (“Strashnoe gadanie”, *A Dangerous Fortune-Telling*²¹, “Vecher na Kavkazskikh vodakh”, *Evening on Caucasian Waters*), Mikhail Zagoskin (“Vecher na Khopre”, *Evening near Khoper*²²), tales translated from Washington Irving etc.; see [Vatsuro 2002: 372–392]. It is important, however, that Baratynsky does not definitely negate the “mystic” line: in his tale, the

¹⁸ See [Zholkovsky, Shcheglov 2016: 140–148].

¹⁹ Appearance of ghosts as well as of wizards, witches etc. represented in a serious manner is quite often for the Russian tale of Pushkin’s and after-Pushkin periods. See the compound of basic plot situations named “Ghosts, Apparitions” in our corpus “Russian tale 1800–1825” and a group of plots of the same name in Kitanina’s classification [Kitanina 2005: 577–590].

²⁰ “People’s rumours” thus function as a prognostic of a mysterious manuscript legend, temporarily supporting the “mystic line”.

²¹ Moskovskiy telegraf. 1831. Part. 38. № 5. P. 36-65; № 6. P. 183–210.

²² Syn Otechestva i Severny Arkhiv. 1830. T. 14. № 37. P. 193–217. № 38. P. 257–279. № 39. P. 321–339. № 40. P. 385–412. T. 15. № 41. P. 3–22.

possibility of an “ordinary miracle”, i.e. benefaction, still exists. It is made either for no reason in particular (Dashenka’s line) or in gratitude for generosity (Opalsky thus explains his sympathy to Dubrovin: “you have not beguiled my insanity, as other people”).

The conclusion of the tale is made in the same, arabesque manner. The story of the ring and the story of Opalsky both lose their mysterious cloth, but this coincides with the death of the character. He leaves the scene together with his mystery: a pastiche mystics of a “mysterious tale” gives place to a serious motif of sudden clarification (“I have woke up from a terrible dream!..”) and hope for eternal life (“... I know well that I had sold eternal happiness for a temporal one...”). The conclusion also compacts two other plot situations, familiar and widely used – the situation of “poor bride” (Dashenka’s line) along with the situation of “heritage litigation”. Both situations end happily.

Conclusion

The happy end, representing an apology of calm and virtuous life (the Dubrovins and Dashenka with her husband), seems to be openly archaic. In the same time, it smoothes hard tension of the most different plot lines combined and developed in the tale. The reader thus “forgets” the previous narrative which is made in a very sophisticated manner. Meanwhile, all those particularities obviously differ Baratynsky’s tale from massive fiction of 1820s – 1840s, especially in comparison with later writings published in magazines. Our corpus of the annotated tales clearly demonstrates that experiments with narrative structure and numerous lateral plots are giving way either to unusual psychological and plot collisions (tales by Nicolay Pavlov, Vladimir Odoevsky etc.) or to mono-plots concentrated on a love story.

We have right to say that the case of “Persten” (potential plots, motif correspondences, compositional techniques of plot expressiveness) represents, first, orientation to paradigmatic, i.e. poetical practices, quite rare for prosaic texts. Second, it is a way that the Russian tale of 1830s – 1840s *did not choose*, pursuing syntagmatic practices and construction of psychological collisions. In this aspect, “Persten” is closer even not no “Povesti ... Belkina” but to some earlier Pushkin’s experiments in prose in which different plot schemes are confronted in a small text space.

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