

POETRY AS COMMUNICATION: LYRICS BY SERGEY YESENIN

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Abstract

Being asked what poetry is we can turn to dictionaries where plenty of definitions are to be found. However in fact we take poetry as a way of putting words and emotions together. Just the same we do in the process of usual communication. So what's the difference? It lies in the meaning transfer given by poetry as a communicative tool, a little bit more than ordinary verbal one. Poet can create communication link of his own avoiding lack of verbal possibilities of the language. The example we can find in lyrics by Sergey Yesenin, who created very "close" communicative style like we nowadays use in Facebook.

Key words: *poetry, communication, image, practice, technologies, verbal, lyrics, imaginists*

Most of us like to read poetry to relax from the stress of everyday life, to find new impressions or look at things in some different way. That's why we often take poetry as something different from the actual life, something beautiful but not used in current practice. So what is poetry? Is it only a form of literary art or is it something more?

My friend once told me the story about her classmate who ignored poetry as an absolutely "useless" thing. The teacher however demanded from the pupil to learn a number of lyrics being included into the school curriculum. Facing the classmates the boy looked at the teacher with hate and squeezed out: "I do remember that magic moment..." (Here I mean the first line of the famous poem by Alexander Pushkin, in Russian it is: "Я помню чудное мгновенье..."). After a few years passed my friend occasionally met her former classmate in the city walking a girl and declaiming very emotionally: "I do remember that magic moment..." it was clear that this guy did not take poetry as useless thing anymore.

This funny story shows us the example of using poetry in everyday communicative practice. Poetry in this case gives us an opportunity to go "above the words" and to express emotions with the help of a picture. Nowadays we do just the same using the facilities of social networks such as "Facebook", "You Tube" and so on. "Facebook" by the way offers the users to send pictures instead of "traditional" letters of words – very remarkable thing. But at the beginning of the XX century when people did not have IT communication still needed to be more expressive and picturesque. People at that time turned to poetry in search of some "magic" tools capable of expressing the "magic" moments. This process gave birth to the movement of literary artists who called themselves "imaginists". The most outstanding among them was Sergey Yesenin (1895-1925). Yesenin is widely known as a romantic poet whose life was full of challenges very often taken by critics and biographies as drama but in fact it can be a search of new format, as we say nowadays, for a poet and literary art.

In this article we will try to find out what special communicative style Sergey Yesenin used in his lyrics and how it can be taken as the experience of using poetry as a tool of communication. The author of the article gives her own translations of Yesenin's poetry and the quotes from his articles and letters as well as the quotes from the other authors. The Russian originals are available on the links. To begin with I would like to speak about the poem composed by Yesenin in his early youth, in 1912.

"I saw you watering the house in bridle-reins.

The trees reflected in the lake and danced.

I saw your hair dancing in the breeze.

I looked into the window feeling pleased.
Your lips were scarlet in the dance of smile.
I dreamed to dance together for a while.
You laughed at me and jumped into the saddle.
The water drops were dancing on the sill rail.
The days were running on the calendar.
Past the windows you went away so far...
The tears flowed running on my face.
The trees reflected in the lake and danced.”¹

This poem looks like a number of pictures, like a movie being shown on the screen. And at the same time we can recognize here some characters of a “Facebook” post where the creator shows us different moments he keeps in his memory. It’s remarkable that at the beginning of the XX century there was a big discussion about the place of technologies in human life and especially in contemporary art. In 1922 Yesenin wrote to his friend and colleague Anatoly Mariengof from the US where he had gone together with his wife Isadora Duncan, a famous dancer: “Now I do understand those who shout about the production in fine art. This is the way to get rid of the things we practically don’t need to use. Really, let’s send to the Devil our soul for we don’t need it so much as we have it, pounds of soul in our country...”² It was the period of history when Europe and The USA especially were going through the boom of technical achievements. Yesenin says in his notes about the American journey describing the big transatlantic boat: “This huge item is the image itself, and nothing is to be compared with it. Now I see it perfectly well – the “imaginism” I go in for together with my friends is not enough...”³ Yesenin tells about a “dancing electric Terpsihore” on the moving device for street ads in New York. Here we can remind the already quoted poem about the “dancing” trees reflected in the lake. And this “magic” created by technologies made most of the people to realize the advantage of technical civilization. The poet was shocked viewing the technologies overcoming the creative images of fine arts. “Those who build the culture sometime are cruel”⁴ – writes Yesenin in his notes about America. The “magic” coming with technical innovations seemed to be able to destroy the feeling of magic given by poetry. Yesenin wonders what is to be done to save literary art from the influence of “technical” civilization. We may think he was anxious especially about literature because literature was his occupation. But if we turn to Yesenin’s theoretical literary work entitled “The Keys for Mary”⁵ (1918) we will find the evidence of his perfect understanding the language as a tool of reflecting human identity. Mary according to the author is taken here as Soul. Literary art according to Yesenin is a key for opening human soul. It’s important – the poet calls verbal language the ornament for the true meaning concentrated in images. So first of all we are to create the image and then to find the words. This point of view is opposite to “technical” way of communication when nothing stands behind the letters. To avoid this lack of meaning contemporary technologies invite the uses into the world of visual additions for IT communication such as sharing photos, self-made movies and so on. But in fact this effect can be reached with the help of poetic images. In the first quarter of XX century long before the IT advantages became available Yesenin in his poetry put into being images as the tools for communication. One of such examples is the following. It’s important to note – the poem is written in the style of a letter or a post, where the person openly speaks about what is going on in his life. Secondly – we can find here the interesting example of “metaphor without a metaphor” when the true happened events symbolize what is “happening” in the soul of a human being.

¹ Есенин С.А. Собрание сочинений в 3 т., т. 1, с. 45

² Есенин С.А. Полное собрание сочинений в 7 т. – М.: Наука; Голос. 1995 -2002. Т.6 , с. 149 – 152.

³ Есенин С.А. Собрание сочинений в 3 т., т. 3, с. 118

⁴ Есенин С.А. Собрание сочинений в 3 т., т. 3, с. 123

⁵ Есенин С.А. Собрание сочинений в 3 т., т. 3, с. 135

“It is common for a lot of people –
Being thirty feel becoming quite,
Taking things as if you are a cripple
Happy to come out with your life.

Oh, my Darling! I am almost thirty.
And I love my living more and more.
I don't take the ground so dirty,
And I feel the fire like before.

It was early spring obsessed with fire,
Lime was full of blossom all above.
Gypsy and a parrot, very tired,
Gave a ring to me “for happy love”.

Now when I hear Gypsy music
Helpless to get rid of what I feel,
I again reply: “O, please, excuse me”
Asking you to take the ring of steel.

O, my mind! I feel it like a water
Coming up in very early spring.
Maybe I am many times forgotten
And the other one put on the ring?

Maybe it is simply very funny
For the guy who kisses you today
Saying in the light: “Come on, my Honey,
Tell about Poet again!”

It's ok, we feel a common fire.
But the life is very hard to cut.
Gypsy and a parrot, very tired,
Gave me ring and stolen my heart.”⁶

⁶ Есенин С.А. Собрание сочинений в 3 т., т. 1, с. 207

One of outstanding Russian philosophers of XX century Nikolay Berdjaev (1874-1948) wrote about the inevitable conflict between “technical” civilization and classic culture based on the sacral foundation. First of all he turned to literature as the field where personal identity is always reflected. Berdjaev is the author of a number of articles dedicated to creations of various Russian writers. Speaking about the changers coming together with the progress of technologies Berdjaev resumes that in the first part of XX century Humanity came into the “epoch of journey”⁷. This epoch according to Berdjaev is “the struggle of opposite goals, competition, deep loneliness and feeling as being left alone of each person in the society”⁸. What is to be taken by a human being for this journey to make it safe? The answer given by Berdjaev is “The new medieval times”⁹. Turning to Yesenin’s views on poetry we can find in his article entitled “Mode of Life and Art”¹⁰ the following. First of all Yesenin insists – art without reality is illusion. The poet’s opinion is that art can never be absolutely free from real life and its influence. The very first channel of transferring the influence of reality is communication. Actual trends in communication show us what is going on in our mode of life. Now we can remind the use of avatar in modern technologies of communication. What is avatar – the one whom we want to be or the one whom we want to be known as? Reading the letters and diaries of the poets who lived and worked in the first quarter of the XX century we find out the interesting thing – they all wanted the public to take poetry as a game. It was opposite to Russian poetry of the previous age when poets tried to become teachers of moral and ethics for the readers. Yesenin and the other “imaginists” gathering in their well-known meeting point – café called “The Stall for Pegasus” in Moscow used to look like reckless guys who did not feel any “burden” of social tasks.

In this case the poem “The Bully”¹¹ composed by Yesenin in 1920 looks very remarkable.

“I am a bully – like wind
Throwing leaves in the field.
No matter if rain
Will sweep the field again.
I like the forest in blues
And heavy steps of a bulls.
The trees with stomach of leaves
Standing in dust up to knees.
Oh, my Autumn – the herd in red,
Being your trusted friend
I am ready to find
Footprints lost in the night.
O, my country, my biggest love!
I am for all above
The only Poet to leave
Words for you to believe.

⁷ Бердяев Н.А. «Новое средневековье», М., 1990, с. 7

⁸ Бердяев Н.А. «Новое средневековье», М., 1990, с. 13

⁹ Бердяев Н.А. «Новое средневековье», М., 1990, с. 11

¹⁰ Есенин С.А. Собрание сочинений в 3 т., т. 3, с. 159

¹¹ Есенин С.А. Собрание сочинений в 3 т., т. 1, с. 140

Take moon for the milk-jug
When trees in the night jump
And crosses catch you and hold
For words you have never told.
Dark of fear hides in the hills,
Smell of my soul it feels
Waiting for me to hunt.
But I know, it can't.
Blossom boils on April tree.
I will never come to agree
With darkness. In light of Sun
I am ready to be the one.
In the prison of what I feel
I am turning word like a wheel
Just for the sake of the song
To which I have to belong.
But I am a bully – it's great!
I will be never afraid
Ready for any kick.
“Poet” is just a nick.”

In fact “Bully” was a known Yesenin’s nick name in the literary community. It was created like an “avatar” for the poet whose real life was dramatic and full of losses. Historical events of the beginning of the XX century caused a lot of drama in each personal life of those who lived in Russia at that time. Great social shock of 1917 opened a new era of understanding the place of a human being in real life. Losses taking place in reality became the challenge for the basic human values such as love, happiness, calm life. Anatoly Mariengof, one of Yesenin’s most close friends, published in 1928 his novel “The cynics”. The book later on gained very scandal publicity because of its open discussion about the transformation of human mentality in the cause of social changers. Dramatic and funny conversations of the characters in the book show how people in social “blow-up” try to bring their normal human feelings through coming up events. “Love if it hasn’t been strangled with a rubber-made clyster tube is immortal”¹² – replied one on the characters in his diary. The context is the following. In the lack of everything, just the most basic things, people try to put into the place of feelings their efforts of building everyday life. The famous Russian philosopher Nikolay Berdjaev noticed in one of his articles: “Even faces of our fellow citizens have been changed”. Such situation brought into life new style of communication together with the new way of poet’s applying to the audience.

Love lyrics by Yesenin have an example of very original communication with the person whom he loves. We can find here irony mixed with tenderness and philosophy together with real life pictures. In the previous ages love lyrics always were written with pathos, poet manifested his amazement or his despair about unrequited love. But in real life we express our emotions in different way. No matter how strong the passion can be we have to use ordinary language and speak about it like we normally

¹²Мариенгоф А.Б. «Циники». www.lib.ru/RUSSLIT/MARIENGOF/cynix.txt

speak about everything happening in our life – otherwise we would not be understood. Social obstacles of human life at the beginning of the XX century gave a challenge to poetry – it could not stay just the same like a number of decades before. Yesenin was among the first who changed his mind according to the new reality.

“I feel sad looking at you.
O, my pain, o, my sorrow!
Copper of yellow leaves
Is the only thing left for us.
The warmth and trembling of your body
Are taken by the other’s lips
Your soul, a little bit dead,
Is like rainy skies of autumn.
It’s ok, I don’t worry about it
For I know the other happiness,
For I don’t save my own heart
With quite life and innocent smiling.
So short way has been passed
And too many mistakes have been made.
Life is really funny thing,
And it will be the same forever!
The worm of time eats up the garden of youth
As if it was dead bones which lie in a grave.
All of us will stop blossoming once
Being just the guests in the garden,
Don’t be sorry about the flowers
For they never blossom in snow.”¹³

In the new historical context a new kind of poetry should be born. This poetry had to be more close to emotional dialog between the audience and the author. Public did not need declaration any more being faced to the awful outcomes of the revolution. Poet could change nothing in real life but he could give his readers the feeling of sympathy they needed so much. That's why the author of poetic text had to find some other links for communication with the audience "above" the borders between literature and everyday life. Nowadays we see such things in internet resources which the help of thus poets communicate with their readers as if they are friends. But at the beginning of the XX century when the age of IT advantages was far in the future Yesenin used the communicative tools which become widely spread nowadays. First of all Yesenin did not represent himself as a Poet with the capital letter. He was not afraid of being "not ideal", even funny but very open-hearted and frankly in his creations.

¹³ Есенин С.А. Собрание сочинений в 3 т., т. 1, с. 179

After "The Bully" Yesenin published his poem "The Bully's Confession" where the title itself reflected the biggest confidence between the poet and the reader.

“Not each one can sing
Falling down to your foot
Like an apple.
This is the greatest confession –
Confession of a bully.
I don't style my hair
Carrying my head like a lamp
On my shoulders
lighting your leafless autumn
In the dark.
I like when you throw rouge words
Like stones
Or ice balls in the storm.
I just handle the lamp on
My shoulders

Swinging from side to side.
I am pleased to remind
The lake of green
And the cry of old tree
And my grands live are so far
Knowing nothing about my writing.
They love me like land and life,
Like rain touching grass in spring.
They would stab for every shout
You throw toward me.
Oh, my lovely, my lovely
Peasants
You may lose your
attractive look...
And you never mind
you child
Being the best Russian poet!
Do you remember his naked feet

Frozen in the autumn puddles?
And now his fashion shoes
Admire Moscow public.
But he is still the Bully
From the village of far away,
He is ready to say
"Good day, Mam!"
To the cow from the sign board.
He is ready to carry with care
The tail of every house
Carrying the cab in the street.

I love my mother-land!
I truly love it!
I like it's sadness
And sounds of frogs tonight.
O, my childhood!
I remind you with pain
Dreaming the Autumn evenings,
Dark and wet..."¹⁴

So what is to be a poet? How to save the identity of a poet in the time of great technological challengers and crucial historical events? Yesenin almost at the end of his life writes a poem which looks like a post in "Facebook" nowadays. Like our contemporaries use posts in their "Facebook" to tell about their views the author of the poem speaks about his attitude to fine art as his way of life.

"Being a poet, don't lie
For poetry is the true life.
Wounded skin and blood
Make the fine art.

Being a poet, feel pain
For nothing happens again.
Don't sound like bird tonight
For poetry is the true fight.

¹⁴ Есенин С.А. Собрание сочинений в 3 т., т. 2, с. 82

Being a poet, be great
For people can never wait.
Sound even like frog
To be unique in the talk.

Being a poet, drink wine
For life will never be fine.
Try to be close with God
Just for the sake of Word.

Being a poet, stay kind.
Save love in your mind.
Being faced with a lie
Never pay off and cry.

Take the things as they are
Being a poet so far
Put all your strength in art.
Carry with lonely heart.”¹⁵

Coming back after his long journey around Europe and the United States Yesenin speaks about the great changers in his personal views: “Coming back I’m definitely different. I lost a lot and gained a lot. That what I gained weights more”¹⁶. Yesenin tries to “weight up” the influence of technical progress on literary art. He argues with Vladimir Mayakovsky, his contemporary and friend, who was the ideologist of the other movement of poets who called themselves “futurists”. The “futurists” declared technical progress the main content of their art. By the way Vladimir Mayakovsky took part in creating the first examples of street adds in Moscow. Slogans composed by Mayakovsky are published in collections of his poetry. It’s widely known that texts for advertising are the tools of communication. This communication should be very effective because its aim is making people to give their money for something. But in fact nowadays we live in the world of co-called rare resources where the well-known verb “Time is money” is quite literally. That’s why the author has to communicate with the reader making him to spend time for reading his creation. The poet has to build a community like everyone who does anything to be used by people. Travelling around Western Europe in the beginning of the XX century Yesenin was disappointed by lack of public interest about poetry. In the letters addressed to his friends Yesenin noticed that in Europe almost everything can be published and almost nothing can be noticed by the public. Of course the true picture was different. But the tradition of “book hunting” which still existed in Russia at that time disappeared in the countries where technical innovations were taking the first place. The new reality moved the borders between personal and public life. A number of things belonged to public life before now became very individual and very personal. One of such things was poetry. The poet nowadays has to “buy” his reader in competition with the others who offer whatever they can. We will not insist here whether it is good or bad. We will just say about is like about a social fact. The influence of this fact is not so awful

¹⁵ Есенин С.А. Собрание сочинений в 3 т., т. 1, с. 234

¹⁶ Есенин С.А. Собрание сочинений в 3 т., т. 3, с. 118

by the way. The epoch of poetry as a tribune changed to the epoch of poetry a communicative tool. The outstanding poet of the XX century Josef Brodsky in his Nobel lecture discussed the possibility of sharing a poem. Is it really possible to share a poem like bread or views, or bed, or girl? According to Brodsky sharing a poem is impossible. But reminding the famous saying by Alexander Pushkin: "We can't sell inspiration but we can sell the hard copy", we can say here – the poem is impossible to be shared but it is possible to be transferred. We still need poetry in our everyday life and we will need it as long as we will have the need to transfer our emotions to each other. It's important as well to remind the word "to share" used by Brodsky. It was a little bit earlier till the time of total "sharing" in social nets but the poet could foresee the coming up changers in social role of poetry. We will not speak here about the opinion declared by Brodsky. But we can definitely take out that the communicative function of poetry is a reality we are faced to. The first request of this reality is the link between the form and the meaning. Maybe it was the thing which made Yesenin to call poetry "the wedding ceremony for The White Rose and The Black Frog". "So called form does not exist for the sake of meaning like a jag exists for the sake of liquid; the form does not reflect the subject like a mirror. In fact the form argues with the meaning, it sounds differently, it gives something opposite to the meaning for the meaning is a human life and the form exists to remind about "everything", the Universe, the World of God..."¹⁷ - that is the opinion of the well-known Russian philosopher Sergei Averintsev. According to this statement Yesenin's lyrics are the example of the new, communicative poetry – close with the reader, fit to the real life context, open for the World of God. This poetry is available for sharing and it must be shared by everyone who makes attempts of putting his emotions together with words.

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