

# KYIV-MOHYLA HUMANITIES JOURNAL

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The Compositional Aspect

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*Source:* Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal 1 (2014): 205–217

*Published by:* National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy

<http://kmhj.ukma.edu.ua>

# Artistic Temporality in Shevchenko's Lyrics: The Compositional Aspect

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## **Abstract**

Artistic temporality in a work has two functions: the semantic – as a time motif, and compositional – as a means of building a model of the world at all of its levels. The author of the article discusses how this description is evident in the lyrical works of Taras Shevchenko. As an author (including the category of “proper author”), Shevchenko does not convey the real course of events of a historical period or event, but rather experiences time by assigning events in his mind to a certain temporality – consisting of the past, present, and future, with their interplay, movement, and juxtapositions, imbuing this temporal scheme into his works on a thematic level, which differs according to genre – the works of Shevchenko clearly show a noticeable connection between temporal composition and the genre variety of the poetry, with various resultant combinations. Thus, artistic temporality in Shevchenko's lyrical works is a significant factor of the “complex structure of meaning” (Lotman).

## **Key Words:**

Taras Shevchenko, narration, artistic temporality, symbol, literary semiotics, structuralism.

Artistic temporality in a work has two functions: the semantic – as a time motif, and compositional – as a means of building a model of the world at all of its levels. Considering the motif of time in Shevchenko, V. Movchaniuk states: “A content-themed aspect of the category of time in literature is associated not only with philosophical-psychological, ethical, and religious issues in general, but also with the problem of the literary hero, whose worldview objectifies the author's creative intentions, his view of life, social and historical processes, and the characteristics of the experience of time. [...] In Shevchenko's works time is presented in a multifaceted manner – as cosmic (objective, universal) time, which often

symbolizes eternity, time (cyclical) in tune with nature, historical time, and human (subjective, individual) time, in particular authorial time (biographical, creative).”<sup>1</sup>

Artistic time in the second, compositional aspect is a part of the artistic-aesthetic phenomenon – the temporal and spatial model of the world in a book of literary art, which by its nature belongs to the temporal arts. The compositional aspect of the category of artistic time is realized in the time relationship of the compositional components of the system of time with the structural categories of an artistic model of the world. The nature of this relationship is determined by several factors: the genre of the work, whether it is lyrical, or epic; the subjective organization of the work, especially its internal composition (formation of perspective), which subject of transmission carries a temporal point of view, and in what temporal ways its discourse unfolds, and its verbal-speech (or narrative) composition – what compositional-verbal forms it utilizes.

The content of a *lyrical* work is not an objective picture of the world, but its experience as the subject of presentation, the depiction of the psychological process of the experience in the mind of the subject, which in fact, constitutes the lyrical story, which reveals a particularly stressful condition inherent to a lyrical subject – the state of lyrical concentration:

It should be emphasized that the sparingly measured empirical facts and details of a work emerge and are subjected to presentation not so much in their natural order (the principle of traditional epic narration) as they are “emitted” in the course of recall [...], as the direct vision of the subject of the experience.

The story thus unfolds not in its natural way, not in a primary way, but is portrayed through the experience of the hero, who, in terms of the perspective of the depiction, remains in a certain fixed temporal-spatial point that psychologically corresponds to the state of lyrical concentration. We call this point the development of the poem’s story “the main point of reference.”<sup>2</sup>

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1 V. Movchaniuk, “Chas,” [“Time,”] in *Temy i motyvy poezii Tarasa Shevchenka* [*Themes and Motifs in Taras Shevchenko’s Poetry*] (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2008), 136.

2 T. Silman, *Zametki o lirike* [*Notes on the Lyrics*] (Leningrad: Sovetski pisatel, 1977), 8–9.

And further on: this reference point “most naturally occurs at that point of the semantic flow of the work where its thematic development breaks from the sensory-specific, from the singular to the general, from the external to the internal, from the random to the ordered, that is, immediately prior to the moment of “grasping the truth”;<sup>3</sup> and to add, the vector of the rotation in the text of these semantic categories or the semantic movement of the story, may differ.

Thus, the subject of an utterance (or author) does not convey the real course of events, and hence the movement of time, because, being in a fixed temporal-spatial point, he merely experiences time by assigning events in his mind to a certain temporality – consisting of the past, present, and future.

The temporal dominant in the lyrical works of Shevchenko is often associated, first of all, with the genre-thematic basis of the work, and, secondly, with the domain of the subject of the presentation.

In the discursive sphere of the lyric *author himself* in Shevchenko, in which an irrational temporal-spatial position and philosophical nature of the subject are most clearly expressed, generally the present time noticeably prevails, which indicates that the action is happening now, and always will happen, because that is how the world is arranged. Much richer than the alternating temporal periods are *meditations* on sociopolitical and historical themes: the lyrical story in them develops “in two or three temporal periods: in his thoughts the author goes back in time from the present to the past, the present losing out in the correlation of these temporal periods; from which emerges the conclusion of the inevitability of a new future.”<sup>4</sup> Criticism of the present and an expanding plan for the future prevails in the poetry of the “Three Years” cycle. All three temporal periods are present in the *invective poem* “The Cold Ravine” (“Kholodny iar”): mention of the sacrificial struggle of the *Haidamaks* carries with it an invective to the present’s “new executioners,” along with the threat of an impending

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3 Silman, *Zametki*, 13.

4 V.L. Smilianska, *Styl poezii Shevchenka (subiektna orhanizatsiia)* [*The Style of Shevchenko's Poetry: Subjective Organization*] (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1981), 29.

punishment for them. In the “Psalms of David,” (“Davydovi psalmy”) adapted by the poet and bound to the present by allusion, for the restoration of social justice, the liberation pathos is based on a juxtaposition of the present (or recent past) and hope for the future intervention of God. The present dominates in the first part of the philosophical meditation “We are Proud and Foolish People” (“Durni ta hordii my liudy”) (lines 1–16), which refers to the self-confident behaviour of highbrow rationalists; but their self-confidence disappears with the emergence of an insignificant temporary collision, they become discouraged and find themselves on the verge of suicide. This second part is related with predicates in the future, present, and past tenses in describing the events of the near future; with the past tense relating to a conditional modus with the meaning “what would happen if...”: “We’d get nicely drunk with evil, / Then burst into tears of pity / And curse both father and mother...” (lines 31–33). In later *imitations of prophets* a plan for the future prevails. An especially complex alternation of temporality can be seen in the poem “Hosea. Chapter 14. An Imitation” (“Osia. Hlava XIV. Podrazhanie”), which exudes real rage and hatred for everyone in power. The dramatism of the collision in it of three intonational themes (the suffering of Ukraine, invectives to rulers, and the theme of revenge) is enhanced by the intense fluctuation of temporality (future–past–present–future–past–present–future), where a cyclical nature of artistic temporality is present, and due to which the significance and likelihood of prophecy grows dramatically.

The free flight of poetic thought-feeling in the *lyrical hero* sphere leads to a demanding rotation and juxtaposition of temporality in various *elegies*: reflections (“Is that Lack of Freedom Fated”) (“Chy to nedolia ta nevolia”), love (“H.Z.”), the public good, in tight fusion with the personal (“It’s all the Same to Me, whether I”) (“Meni odnakovo, chy budu”), the descriptive-meditative (“We’re the Same in the Fall”) (“My voseny taki pokhozhi”). The dominant present is juxtaposed with remembrance of the past and hope for the future. Various gradations of the future tense exist in “The Testament” (“When I Die, Bury Me”) (“Zapovit” “Iak umru, to pokhovaite”) – ranging from close to mortal time – through the inevitable

approach of a national apocalypse – ending with a culminating arrangement of the world in a happy “free, new family.” There is a similar spatial expansion present – from a grave (mound) – across Ukraine with the Dnipro – to a worldwide family of humankind.

In the instantly captured lyrical *sketches* “The Wind Blows in the Street” (“Po ulytsi viter viie”), “The Loving, Dark-Browed Girl” (“Divcha liube, chornobryve”) a *lyrical narrator* presents the story in 3rd person narration. Moreover, the present can be conveyed grammatically through verbs and in the past historical time (“Easter on the Hay” [“Na Velykden na solomi”] – “And They Boast of Renewal”). Play with temporality determines the lyrical subject in examples of meditative-narrative lyrics such as “Don’t Abandon Mother’ – They Said” (“Ne kydai materi!” – kazaly), “And with Accommodation and Beauty” (“I stanom hnuchym, i krasoiu”), “In our Paradise on Earth” (“U nashim rai na zemli”). The lyrical story of the first verse is based on a temporal contrast of the present and past, the present emptiness and decline of the estate and the past familial happiness and bliss and order of a peaceful environment. This juxtaposition takes the form of a dynamic description (description in motion), in the forgotten in the absence of the heroine cottage, water well, and garden. In a series of lyrical questions facing the heroine, dramatic tension is created through the description of detail, which sums up the premonition of her unhappy future. A similar juxtaposition of the present and future can be found in the poem “And with Accommodation and Beauty,” with the difference that the heroine’s state of wellbeing is present as here and now and in continuation, as seen by the narrator, who admires the youthful fun at the ball. But his life experience provides the narrator with an unflattering picture of the future fate of the unfortunate poor defenceless orphan girl; moreover, the narrator-witness’ state of prophetic insight is declared directly in the text: “Something prophetic / lies before my eyes [...] I dreamed: you’ve already given birth, / Not in velvet, not in a ward / Your hungry child...”

In the interim poem “In our Paradise on Earth,” such a temporal relationship is repeated twice in the fate of the two heroines, more complexly in the second part of the poem. The first part consists of the juxtaposition

of two contrasting periods in the life of an ordinary peasant mother: her young state of motherhood, happy, and proud, when a mother with a child in her arms embodies the image of the Virgin, which the poet devoutly worships. But then comes lonely old age, as the children “grew up and went their separate ways, / for long military service.”<sup>5</sup> Reporting on the fate of children in the past perfect tense, the author-narrator describes the mother’s helpless, hungry, and cold lonely old age in the present tense, when she has strength only to pray for “them, for the children.” The second part of this poem relates the tragic fate of the single mother. First, in a monolog directed at the heroine, the author-witness presents a seeming instant photo of the single mother who secretly sneaks along with her child, protecting it not only from unkind human eyes, but even those of birds, “because a bird can sometimes tell / And chirp: that’s a bastard / She’s taking him to the market.” Later, in a retrospective digression, addressed by the narrator, as is the whole fragment, to the heroine (endowing the presentation with lyrical emotion), he will juxtapose her former maidenly beauty to her present depression and then imagine her tragic future, which will bring only a brief moment of her son’s love and understanding; to be followed by his alienation and hatred when a little older, he finds work as a guide for the blind, and bemoans her at their parting – for having given birth to him and for her devout love for him. And then the homeless mother meets with death under a stranger’s fence, a death which the poet will later reserve for his Mary, the Mother of God (in the poem “Maria”).

The compositional temporal aspect of the lyrical character – in thought and song – does not reach into remote time periods but it is limited to the pressing problems of love, betrayal (“Oh I Went into the Ravine for Water” [“Oi pishla ia u iar za vodoiu”], “I was either Doing Something, or Strolling” [“Bulo robliu shcho, chy huliaiui”]), family life; it occurs in terms of recent events (as in the stylization of the historical song “The Seamstress” [“Shvachka”]), or in intention for the near future (“Oh I’ll

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5 T. Shevchenko, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv u 12 t.* [Collected Works in 12 vols.], vol. 2 (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2001), 194.

Sharpen my Sword" ["Oi vyostriu tovarysha"], "Why Should I Marry" ["Nashcho meni zhenytysia"]). Only monologues of appeal, complaints about fate, cover a continuing situation and are embodied in motifs of abandonment and, especially, loneliness ("Maidenly Nights" ["Divychie nochi"], "Oh I'm Alone, All Alone" ["Oi odna ia, odna"], "My Mother Bore Me" ["Porodyla mene maty"])).

The thematic aspect of the lyrical poems is the basis for understanding the history of Ukraine, in order to find the causes of the catastrophic decline of the nation. The dynamics of lyrical experience especially demonstrates the semantic development of the lyrical story, through the comparison and contrast of images and intonational themes, and through their associations, analogies and contrasts. This pattern of story genre is inherent in both varieties of the lyric poem – meditative-expressive and oratorical, which differ in the degree of the condensation of objectivity, the nature of the generalization of the fabric of the imagery that in both instances acquires symbolic meaning, intonation, and determination of the addressee. The first, meditative and representational genre ("The Dream – All Have Their Own Destiny" ["Son – U vsiakoho svoia dolia"], "The Dream – My High Mountains" ["Son – Hory moi vysokii"], "Irzhavets") is characterized by rich subject matter, which, however, brings the depicted outside of epic concreteness and into the spheres of the dream, symbol and satirical fiction, and the grotesque. A rotation of episodes in the dream of the lyrical hero in the "comedy" "Dream" is not caused by causal relationships or dependent events, but the logical search by him for a haven free from human misery. Similarly, in the second "Dream", which is a synthesis of elegy, invective, confession, prayer, the juxtaposition of the past (free, Cossack), the recent past (ruin, enslavement), and the current decline, is reflected in descriptions and toponyms. The tragedy of Ukraine is reflected in the fate of the old Cossack, who has lost everything, but has lived to a peaceful, though lonely old age. His monolog is characterized by a psychological temporality of recollection and evaluation of experience, while the monolog of the author-narrator tells of the sad state of current society and hope for a desired future.



The poem “Irzhavets” is an invective to all attackers of Ukraine, presented in an emotionally charged way in the past tense, with vivid epithets and lyrical commentary; its story line is strengthened by the motif of tears of the Virgin Mary, who forever mourns the Cossacks killed by the oppressors.

The *oratorical* genre of Shevchenko’s lyrical poetry, including the poems “The Caucasus” (“Kavkaz”), “To the Dead and the Living” (“I mertvym, I zhyvym”), and much later the introduction to the poem “The Holy Fool” (“Iurodyvy”) (1857), is filled with dramatic tension and is the loftiest achievement of the “Three Years” cycle. An open polemical appeal to an internal, explicit (depicted) addressee and a more general external recipient, the actual reader, indicates the absolute predominance of the present tense – the author and reader’s temporality, the relevance of satirical exposure, which, as shown by history, is not limited by the lifetime of the poet, and develops in a paradigmatic, timeless unmasking of the essence of mock-Christian manner in which empires, primarily the Russian empire, mask their aggressive politics as the spread of civilization. It was during Shevchenko’s time that the conquest of the freedom-loving people of the Caucasus was in progress, and it is still in progress today, at the beginning of the third millennium. Temporal relations in the texts are accordingly complex. The opening and closing dedications, addressed to deceased friend Iakiv de Balmen determine the immediacy of the lyrical monolog, and the epigraph from the Bible makes him a martyr. At the beginning of the poem the image of the Caucasus Mountains is connected with the ancient mythological age of Prometheus – the embodiment of freedom and invincibility. The bloody war waged by the Russian empire against the highlanders is God’s allowance, but the poet believes that God knows the truth, that He will help the highlanders: “Shevchenko’s God – is the God of all, who seek the truth.”<sup>6</sup>

The eternal temporality of Christian ethics is at the core of the message of “To the dead and the living,” based on biblical apostolic epistles.

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6 I.M. Dziuba, *Z krynytsi lit: u 3 t.* [From the Well of Years], vol. 3 (Kyiv: Vyd. dim “Kyievo-Mohylianska Akademia,” 2006), 416.

This is first of all an invective, openly addressed to “you,” “my compatriots” – the educated feudal “elite,” and is an indictment of relevant crimes against their younger brothers – the peasants, their anti-national, inhuman ideology, and social practices. It is the indifference of the “compatriots” to the people, their real rather than window-dressed history, and their language that prevents them from initiating a national and social revival for the good of everyone in Ukraine. But the message – is one of the prediction of a future apocalypse if the rulers do not understand their own unrighteousness and injustice and will not turn to face the people. In a lyrical monolog of the “proper author,” the past, present, and future all come together, as do actual and conditional modalities (in a meta-historical sense: “If you learn the way you should, / Then wisdom would be yours”) (lines 91–92).<sup>7</sup> In his emphatic polemical monolog the lyrical “proper author” presents his “compatriots” distorted position on the fateful events of the Ukrainian past and provides a rebuttal, calling to find the truth that will propel them toward brotherly unity.

The satirical introduction to the poem “The Holy Fool” is built on a collision of accusatory, satirical, and glorified themes. Only the first 15 lines, which introduce the reader to the situation, are written in 3rd person narration, which remains clearly subjective and sharply barbed. All of the subsequent discourse is vocatively open and vividly personalized: the ironic “we” appears first (“We watched and kept silent, / And silently scratched our heads” (lines 16–17),<sup>8</sup> an open rebuke is immediately directed toward this “we” (“Dumb mean slaves [...] Informants and Pharisees [...] Oh vain damned clan, / When do you croak?” (lines 18–26). The poet also identifies himself with the national “we,” thus introducing the prospect of a just future: “When / Will Washington dawn upon us / With a new and righteous law? / We’ll see that day” (lines 27–30). Further on the revelational motif of public humility and indifference is presented in a form addressed to “my holy Kyivans,” a reproachful story about the

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7 T. Shevchenko, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv u 12 t.* [*Collected Works in 12 vols.*], vol. 1 (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2001), 350.

8 T. Shevchenko, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv u 12 t.*, vol. 1, 258.

recent past in which the heroic protest of “one Cossack among a million swineherds” not only failed to get general support (initially it read: “Then, fools you should have / At him [the satrap. – *Ed.*] come with pokers, / But you were afraid...”)<sup>9</sup> or even positive feedback, to the contrary the authorities pronounced the brave upstart a holy fool (mad), punished him with a life sentence, left the scandal slip into oblivion, with no protest from anyone. Instead, the poet, who at that time was still in exile and not allowed to leave Nizhny Novgorod, risking everything, dwells on the past: in a passionate 1st person monolog, his lyrical hero recalls the repressions of Nicholas I throughout his reign, beginning with the Decembrists, calls the capital “Nicholas’ wastebasket,” reproaches the tsar and God’s all-seeing eye that did not go blind seeing hundreds of political prisoners exiled to Siberia, and expresses the intention in the near future “to bring them into the world” through new, but unfortunately, yet unwritten lines.

Digressions in the lyrical-epic works (ballads, poems) are also characterized by lyrical artistic temporality. The epos “The Haidamaks” (“Haidamaky”) begins with a proper-author’s philosophical digression (which imprints the “Koliivschyna” events in universal cosmic time: “Everything continues, everything passes...”), and the poem “The Blind” (“Slipyi”), with a philosophical meditation on social problems (lines 39–66). Lyrical subject presentation in digressions occupies a prominent place in the temporal structure of the *historical poems*. In particular, in the epic poem “The Haidamaks” the lyrical proper-author opens up epic time, opening it to the present, reflects on the consequences of rebellion, exalts the Cossack state, and condemns the passivity of his contemporaries (“The hangman prevails, / And they do not remember them” (lines 1242–1243)).<sup>10</sup> The author provides a woeful and uplifting reminder of the heroic figures of Ukrainian history in the words of the character Blahochynny (in the “Feast in Chyhyryn” [“Sviato v Chyhyryni”] section). A lyrical meditation on a historical theme is also present in Iarema’s monolog “Oh my Dnipro,

9 Shevchenko, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv u 12 t.*, vol. 2, 493.

10 Shevchenko, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv u 12 t.*, vol. 1, 158.

Dnipro, wide and strong" (lines 1292–1304). The emotional lyrical narrator comments on events, enters into a dialogue with the girl-readers, thus also involving them in his lyrical temporality (lines 713–762). In the introduction the lyrical hero-poet transposes the characters from the epic poem to his time, overcoming epic distance: the *haidamak* heroes metonymically represent the poem – from the hut of the poet they will go to Ukraine, to their reader.

In the poem "The Monk" ("Chernets"), the hero of which was "Cossack father" Colonel Semen Paly, initially had an impressive epilogue with complex temporal alternations, which was later crossed out by the author from the text of the "Little Book." It was a digression addressed to the reader where the lyrical narrator describes the poet's contemporaneous tragic situation of the decay of colonized Ukraine, the abandonment of Cossack weaponry, the complete annihilation of historical memory, and ends with a harshly relevant address to the hero: "Everything was abandoned by the lazy children / And their freedom and your glory – / The Muscovites ruined the ramparts in Poltava / Destroyed the *Sich*, and the Saviour, / And pound the earth over you."<sup>11</sup> In this manner, due to temporal contrast, the content of the poem reaches into the present, representing a conceptual model of the political history of Ukraine, which formed the basis of the historic-philosophical and political works of the "Three years" period.

Overall, the works of Shevchenko clearly show a noticeable connection between temporal composition and the genre variety of the poetry. In particular, the present and near future dominate in vocative genres of poetry such as the epistle, prayer, hymn, and testament, where the subject is either the lyrical "proper author" or lyrical hero-poet. Elegiac reflections of the lyrical hero, as well as songs and thoughts of the lyrical personage are often built on the contrast of the psychological temporality of a recollection and the bleak present. Fable and story temporality in the works of narrative poetry, with their complex subject matter – in the landscape-poem, portrait ("Perebendia"), satirical portrait ("P.S."), idyll,

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11 Shevchenko, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv u 12 t.*, vol. 2, 404.

and in lyrics with a fable-narrative basis – narrative-meditative sketches (“In the street the wind blows”), and sketches (“The sun rises behind the grove” [“Iz-za haiu sontse skhodyt”]) that belong to the lyrical narrator, relate the immediate situation. They, as A. Shupta-Viazovska believes are “an illusion, needed by the author for the expression, development, and presentation of lyrical experience, in which case the temporal modelling structure is not relevant, since relevance in lyrical experience is expressed by immediacy, the current moment, and existential flashes as the equivalents of eternity.”<sup>12</sup> Artistic temporality in the above examined aspect is a significant factor of the “complex structure of meaning” (Lotman) in Shevchenko’s lyrical works.

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12 O. Shupta-Viazovska, “Khronotopichnist khudozhnioho myslennia Tarasa Shevchenka,” [“The Chronotope of Taras Shevchenko Artistic Thought,”] in *Materialy prats trydtsiat chetvertoi naukovoii shevchenkivskoi konferentsii*, vol 1. (Cherkasy: Brama, 2003), 122.



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