Intimations of the Absolute: Afanasii Fet’s Metalinguistic and Aspectual Poetics

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ABSTRACT

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This work explores the poetry of Afanasii Fet from the perspective that careful observation of certain metalinguistic features of his work, most notably his use of verbal aspect, are relevant to understanding his metaphysical strivings and philosophical beliefs. The analytical focus is on a series of representative lyrics from throughout Fet’s career. Each individual analysis is then interpreted in the light of Fet’s biography, his poetic dialogue with his predecessors, and his unhappy romance with Maria Lazic.

The analysis of the poetry considers that Fet’s poetic language often uses the aspectual forms of the Russian verb as a significant organizing principle. Aspect as such in these lyrics interacts with the paraphrasable meaning, while it often stands out in a mathematically or graphically precise form. The introduction reviews Fet’s life and his autobiographical works and offers a new reading of his autobiography to contextualize the metaphysical tension that plagued the poet throughout his long career. Chapter 1 gives linguistic and philosophical foundations for this approach, while Chapter 2 offers a set of individual readings to demonstrate the variety of types of meaning to which aspectual structures contribute in Fet’s work. Chapter 3 considers verbal aspect in Fet’s spring-themed poems, which express some of his most foundational meta-poetic and metaphysical ideas. The imperfective aspect as a principle to which the poet felt compelled to adhere even outside of discrete texts is the subject of Chapter 4. Chapter 5 considers how verbal aspect contributes to Fet’s rewritings of key Pushkinian poems as part of his effort to find his place as a poet and as part of his attempts to re-read and re-define the failed relationship of his youth.
Formal analysis of meta-lingual features leads these readings to new interpretations and juxtapositions of Fet’s poetic persona, editorial practices, spiritual anguish, and failed love.
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Есть в близости людей заветная черта,

Ея не перейти влюбленности и страсти,
Introduction: Fet’s Life and Work

Those who study and love Russian poetry consider that the early 19th century was its Golden Age. A number of deeply talented poets wrote during this time, and their work drew from and accelerated the development of the secular literary language. This Golden Age was so rich that even its poets whom we now assign to the second and third tiers composed works of unusual power and beauty, and so contributed greatly to the Russian literary tradition. They contributed also to the growing consciousness of Russian as a literary language with as much potential as French, German, or English, which languages already had some centuries of secular literary development behind them. Chief among these poets was Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837), whose short stories and prose fragments were a major inspiration to Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) in his work on Anna Karenina, a novel of uncontested significance to world literature. Through the Pushkin-Tolstoy connection, the Golden Age river of literary energy has overflowed its banks and become one with the ocean of which it was once a tributary.

The original bounds and course of that river are now hard to make out for all the activity since. Pushkin’s violent death after a duel in 1837 was the beginning of the end of the Golden Age. When Lermontov, Pushkin’s obvious successor, died during a duel in 1841, and Baratynsky, Pushkin’s most brilliant contemporary, died in 1844, it seemed that the era of deep and brilliant poets was finished. At the same time as these last giants of that era were dying, a young military officer was beginning to publish his own verse, remembered and read to this day.

Afanasy Fet would live far longer than any other representative of the Golden Age of Russian poetry, becoming a link between that period and the Silver Age that blossomed in the last decade of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th. Fet published his first collection
of verse in 1840 and his final collection in 1891, while he was preparing another at the time of
his death – his poetic career stretched over a half-century. Dedicated to his own poetic vision,
sometime unfashionably conservative and sometimes strikingly innovative, Fet disappointed
popular taste for a significant portion of his career – much of the 1860s and 1870s. Yet the
collections published toward the end of his life contained much of his best work, poems that
rivaled those he produced in his early youth.

Having revived himself as a publishing poet in his final decade, Fet died of natural causes
while attempting suicide shortly before his 72\textsuperscript{nd} birthday. In the years after his death, however,
the new generation of poets took his neglected work as one of their primary sources of
inspiration. In the early years of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the Symbolist and Acmeist movements in
Russian poetry century reached back to the Golden Age through its last great representative.
Through the giants of those movements, such as Akhmatova and Blok, Fet’s influence reaches
well into the most popular and inspired Russian verse written in living memory.

Yet in Russian popular consciousness today, Fet’s reputation has suffered from the
‘overplaying’ of a few lyrics in high school literature programs, perhaps because a number of his
best works capture almost unnamable, fleeting emotional states. As there is little in everyday
vocabulary to encapsulate them, Fet’s lyrics do not always reward a quick reading, and yield
their secrets only with difficulty to traditional methods of literary analysis. His work is popular
and still widely read, but among some readers it has a little-deserved reputation for obscurity and
triviality.

Like many great lyrics, Fet’s best poems explicate emotions that are universal but too
specific and personal even to be named. His case is remarkable, however, in that his resistance to
paraphrase makes it especially difficult even to categorize his works. This quality has kept Fet
among the most mysterious of the great Russian poets for 170 years, and the same quality has made some readers uneasy, even in the earliest reviews that appeared during his lifetime. Speaking generally, it is correct to say that Fet’s poetry is often more emotionally specific than is comfortable for readers. Despite the specificity of the emotions and experiences, the language in which they are embodied can appear diffuse or foggy. Unparaphrasable and seemingly unanalyzable, Fet’s lyric poetry can present obstacles to any reader’s approach.¹

The present dissertation has as its main object of study a selection of lyrics written over Fet’s entire career, and pays particular attention to the grammatical organization of these poems and its interaction with the paraphrasable, prosaic meaning. Yet before this discussion can be meaningful, we should draw Fet’s intellectual portrait and briefly explore the factors that allowed him to produce this unusual body of poetry over such a great span of time, across various literary fashions in poetry and even the rise of the Russian novel as a major force in literature. While my immediate method has a structuralist bend, the readings (taken together or separately) grow out of Fet’s biography. To give this context to the readings I present in later chapters, I will examine some key incidents and themes from Fet’s biography in the hope that, once we have taken the wider view of his life, the more narrow view of his poetry and individual works will be more meaningful.

¹ It is interesting to note that Fet is not represented by even one poem in Lotman’s book-length *Analysis of the Poetic Text* (1972). It is conceivable that Fet’s absence from this seminal work is one cause of the relative paucity of structuralist readings of his work since that time.
Early years, first experience of 'two worlds'

Писующий стихотворение пишет его прежде всего потому, что стихотворение -- колоссальный ускоритель сознания, мышления, мироощущения. Испытав это ускорение единожды, человек уже не в состоянии отказаться от повторения этого опыта, он впадает в зависимость от этого процесса, как впадают в зависимость от наркотиков или алкоголя. Человек, находящийся в подобной зависимости от языка, я полагаю, и называется поэтом.

One who writes a poem does so most of all because a poem is a tremendous accelerator of consciousness, thought, perception. Who feels this acceleration once is no longer in any condition to refuse a repetition of the experience. He becomes addicted to the process, like people become addicted to drugs or alcohol. A person who is addicted to language in this way, I suppose, is what they call a poet.

-Joseph Brodsky, Nobel Lecture, Dec. 8th, 1987

Most people depend on and exist within language, and language is one of the main ways people know each other. This is true to an even greater degree with a writer, one who chooses to develop certain linguistic skills at the cost of other professional or personal activities – and still more obviously true in the case of a poet, whose work is so famously difficult to translate or even to paraphrase. Since every piece of information we have about a poet is through language, and his work is itself language, it makes sense to begin an overview of a poet’s life with some notes on his experience of linguistic activity.

Fet is somewhat outstanding in this way among poets of this period, and his idiosyncratic experience of language (the bane of editors in his lifetime) began in his infancy. Despite being raised from earliest youth on a Russian estate where he was immersed in Russian, Fet also learned to speak and read German from his mother, for whom German was the first and primary language (Klenin 10). Today when we see a person raised in a household with one dominant
language and another spoken by one parent, we do not necessarily expect that the child will have a full experience or come to complete literacy and mastery of the one-parent language. From all the data about Fet’s early life available to us (here I am indebted especially to Klenin’s synthesis of several biographical sources), we may judge that Fet’s childhood Russian-German bilingualism was of a sort rather different from what we often witness today in the one-parent situation.

His mother “took charge of teaching him to read German, while he began to read Russian, at the age of six or seven, under the tutelage of a family cook” (Klenin 10-11). These early years of bilingualism had a focus on literacy in German that continued through his formal education during adolescence. At one school, Fet was in the unusual situation of having all instruction in his mother’s tongue, German, while his father’s and family’s language, Russian, was taught only as a compulsory subject, hated by Fet’s German classmates.

Russian was, we may assume, dominant in conversations in Fet’s household, but his German-language training from his mother was more than sufficient for him to enter a boarding school where German was the language of instruction. At home, German was a strong secondary influence, at school, Russian was a required but little loved subject. Fet’s experience of these two languages was not a clear “first and second” situation that one might expect, with Russian in most activities and German confined to the kitchen. Instead of this, we see that by the time of Fet’s education, he had experience in two realms, and in both realms both his languages were important, each being dominant in one realm. The tension of such a polar relationship is key to an understanding of Fet’s work and life.
Adolescent trauma to identity

If we follow Fet’s own claims about his experience of his German-Russian origins in early childhood, we must take it as an idyllic time. He quotes in his memoirs both German and Russian speech remembered from that period (Klenin 2001, 10-15). We assume that his childhood bilingualism was peaceful, but even so, such a situation can set a child up to feel pulled in two directions. His German, learned at home, was part of his life because his father had brought a German woman back from his travels abroad and married her. It was this part of his origin that gave Fet his strong foundation in conversational and literary German, but it also caused him great trouble and made his adolescence and early youth a time of crisis and loss of identity.

It came about in this way: in the childhood I have described above, Fet did not carry the name Fet, under which he would become a poet of renown, but was instead Afanasy Afanasyevich Shenshin, the eldest son of a Russian nobleman. Young Fet / Shenshin had every social and legal right to expect to inherit his father’s lands, serfs, and possessions. When he was fourteen, however, the ecclesiastical authorities received news that he was born some time before his German mother was legally married to the elder Shenshin, and they gave notice to the family that the young Afanasy was no longer a Shenshin nobleman, the heir to his father’s fortune, or even a Russian, and that he must now be known legally by his mother’s name from her first husband, a German called Fet whom Afanasy had never seen. Despite no visible change in his circumstances or immediate prospects, Fet lost every kind of stability in one entirely unexpected blow. He was now a boy without a legal connection to his family or any of the rights of the nobility, and even had become a foreigner in the Russian Empire.
Thus the internal tension between Russian and German expanded from the practical but personal realm of language (the two languages were, in Fet’s experience, hardly at war with each other in his childhood) to encompass also Fet’s legal status within his family and within the Russian Empire. Now he was a German in a Russian family and a Russian at a German school. His social training prepared him to be the eldest son of old aristocratic stock, but his legal status was that of the foreign-born son of a man he had never met. His father was not his father, his mother was not a Russian, and it seemed he would spend his professional life as a foreigner in his native land (Klenin 2002, 13).

The situation has features that describe any adolescence – the young person is pulled between two worlds and feels fully himself in neither. In an ideal situation, the adolescent moves (more or less fully) into the adult world, at least for public occasions. The unpleasantness of being trapped between childhood and adulthood is temporary. In Fet’s situation, the adolescent oscillation between two worlds, promised to continue indefinitely, without a full commitment to either language as a foundation for identity. Never to be legally Russian and never to be culturally German (despite his thorough education in German language and literature) made a rift in young Fet’s sense of himself.

It is difficult to find a similar legal situation in Western culture today, but we can still imagine the bizarre and destructive effects this event had on an adolescent in the 1830s. The ideal future he had imagined and projected himself into was torn away, and the new future seemed alien and incomprehensible. Much of Fet’s activity after this period was dedicated to chasing that ideal future, to restoring himself to the hereditary nobility. At the time, this could be accomplished by achieving a certain rank through military service. After his education, Fet became an officer, intending to regain his nobility through promotion. His entire life after
childhood was dedicated to arranging a restoration of the status of that lost childhood. Fet’s life became, to him, a journey on “the wrong track” and his ideal life was that road on which he would have travelled were it not for this traumatic unmaking of his identity in his early adolescence.

**Romance with Maria Lazic**

There was nothing, however, in Fet’s loss of nobility or his attempt to regain it through advancement in the military that would hinder his entering into romantic affairs, which he did with some success. His most important romance was with a young woman named Maria Lazic. The failure of their courtship defined much of Fet’s thought about himself and his place in the world for the rest of his life.

In 1848, Fet became acquainted with the Lazic family through mutual acquaintances who lived near the town where his regiment was stationed (Sukhotin 1933, 9). After his meeting with Maria Lazic, Fet and she grew close fairly quickly. Their emotional intimacy was founded on their shared enjoyment of music and poetry. While the relationship that blossomed over a period of several months appeared to be the kind that ends in marriage, Fet’s financial situation was uncertain because of his inability to inherit the Shenchin estate and title. Lazic was not wealthy either. This matter was made worse by Fet’s refusal to take any unusual measures or consider marriage without financial stability, and he broke off the relationship rather abruptly. Some weeks later, Fet received a letter from Lazic’s mother in which she openly stated that her daughter’s emotional distress terrified their family, and that they were afraid for her. Fet saw her once more under less than intimate circumstances, and it seems this meeting was traumatic for both (Fet 1893, 424 and Klenin 1991, 144)
Shortly after that last meeting, Maria Lazic suffered an accident that led to her death. Fet relates the story in his memoirs in this way: while reading, Lazic lit a cigarette and dropped the match on the floor. The match was still burning, and her dress caught fire. Rather than trying to extinguish the flames, she panicked and ran outside, where her whole dress blazed up. Lazic was burned very badly and died after four days of conscious suffering. Fet learned of her death some weeks after from an acquaintance. According to Klenin, Fet’s presentation of the circumstances of Lazic’s death shows at least some suspicion of suicidal intent in what was politely understood to be an accident:

Thus, in spite of the overt characterization of Lazic’s death as an accident, the memoir itself covertly suggests a different interpretation, and in the decade following the accident Fet’s poetry shows a previously unknown recurrence to the theme of the lover’s shame and responsibility toward his beloved, as well as to her vulnerability. Although his sense of guilt could have been fed simply by his realization that he had behaved callously toward her, regardless of how she died, the notion of blame and mortal injury expressed in his poetry tends to suggest that Fet believed she had deliberately taken her own life. (Klenin 1991, 146)

I agree with Klenin on this matter, and following Klenin and Sukhotin, I find it telling that Fet includes this episode at all in his memoirs. If the loss of Lazic had not affected him deeply, it would be pointless for him to include this tale of a brief romance that ended quietly before the young woman’s accidental death.

Having lost his status as a Russian and a nobleman, Fet still had the opportunity to make worldly success for himself in a number of ways, even apart from his already-significant poetic career. The financial and emotional instability that came from that loss, however, led him to abandon a young woman who was quite dear to him, and her horrible death soon after made an irretrievable loss out of Fet’s temporary one. Some ten years after losing ‘himself,’ Fet also lost his ‘other’. The coldness with which he tells this story in his autobiography – although he could
have avoided telling it at all – some forty years after Lazic’s death suggests that it was of major importance to him for the rest of his life, even as he tried to distance himself from it in the telling. Several extant letters support this assumption. Consider the increasing detachment from Lazic visible in these letters – they are undated, but are from the time of their romance and just after – the last except is from a letter written after Lazic’s death:

Я встретил девушку — прекрасного дома и образования, я не искал ее, она — меня, но судьба… И мы узнали, что были бы очень счастливы после разных житейских бурь, если бы могли жить мирно без всяких претензий на что-либо -- это мы сказали друг другу -- но для этого надобно как-либо и где-либо… Мои средства тебе известны, она тоже ничего не имеет…

О моей сердечной комедии молчу -- прабо нечего и сказать, так это избито и истерто.

Я не женился на Лазич, и она это знает, а между тем умоляет не прерывать наших отношений, она предо мной чище снега -- прервать неделикатно и не прервать неделикатно -- она девушка -- нужно Соломона.

Я ждал женщины, которая поймет меня, и дождался ее. Она, сгорая, кричала ― Au nom du ciel sauvez les lettres‖ и умерла со словами: он не виноват, -- а я. После этого говорить не стоит. Смерть, брат, хороший пробирный камень. Но судьба не могла соединить нас. Ожидать же подоной женщины с условиями жизни было бы в мои лета и при моих средствах верх безумия. И так мой идеальный мир разрушен давно. Что же прикажешь делать. Служить вечным адъютантом -- хуже самого худа -- ищу хозяйку, с которой буду жить, не понимая друг друга. Может быть это будет еще худшее худо -- но выбора нет. Если мне удастся устроить это дело -- к черту все переводы в Питер, засяду в деревне стричь овец и доживать век.

I have met a girl – she has an excellent family and education, I didn’t seek her out – she sought me, but it seems to be fate…we have determined that we would be quite happy even after various troubles if we could live quietly, without any pretensions – we’ve said as much to each other – but we still need some means and a place to live…you know my financial situation, and she doesn’t have anything either…

I will be silent about my ‘comedy of the heart’ – since there’s nothing to say, and it’s all so trite and familiar.
I will not marry Lazic, and she knows this, but still begs me not to break off our relations, to me she’s more pure than snow – it would be improper to break it off and improper not to break it off – she’s a girl – the matter needs a Solomon to decide it…

I was waiting for a woman who would understand me, and I found her. While she was burning, she cried out “In the name of heaven, save the letters” and died with the words: he’s not to blame – I am. There’s nothing to say after that. Death, brother, is a good touchstone. But fate was unable to join us. To expect a similar woman with money at my age and given my financial situation – that would be complete madness. But my ideal world was wrecked long ago in any case. There’s no use crying about it. In order to serve as an eternal adjutant – the worst of the worst – I seek a wife with whom to live in mutual lack of understanding. Perhaps that will be still worse – but I have no choice. If I manage to make it work – to hell with any transfers to Petersburg, I’ll move to the country to shear sheep and live out my life. (cited from Sukhotin 1933, 7-8; translation mine)

In the first letter cited above, Fet considers his meeting with Lazic to be ‘fate,’ although he is considering practical questions as well. In the second and third letters, he assumes a reserved attitude, viewing the situation as if from afar – the whole matter is trite, and he is ‘stuck’ between two impossible choices.

Consider, however, the bizarre motion of the final letter, written with knowledge of Lazic’s recent death. Fet begins with true love and ends with a strange and cold resignation to his future marriage of convenience. The excerpt begins with a love that was broken off for financial reasons and ends with a dream of a marriage of convenience. Fet’s fantasy, the best he can hope for in the future, is a loveless partnership. To Fet, this irretrievable loss means that even his fantasy life is muted to such a degree that it is hard to keep in mind that it is still a fantasy, not even yet a reality to which he must resign himself. The importance of Lazic’s death is suppressed almost to the point of invisibility, its circumstances being noted only in a dependent clause (сгорая -- “while she was burning”) and where the main clause of that sentence makes special note of her desire to save Fet’s writings (in this case, his letters to her) from the fire.
The loss is too personal to be discussed in any depth, but that depth shows itself in Fet’s utter resignation and loss of all hope for any meaning or understanding in his life. At about thirty years of age, Fet wipes any thought of love from his mind, and focuses his attention on two utterances from Lazic – one, that his writings are worth preserving, and two, that he is not to blame for her death. Regardless of the historical accuracy of the words attributed to Lazic, we see that to Fet they were an important part of the story. The barely-masked feelings of guilt and loss over Lazic’s death followed Fet to the end of his life, when he also tried to end his own life and died of a heart attack during that attempt.

The similarity between Fet’s death and Lazic’s is not simple coincidence. He wrote and published two full volumes of memoirs which pick up his life already in his early adulthood, with no mention of the Lazic affair. The third volume addresses Fet’s early childhood through his late 20s, and the final chapter of that final volume begins with the tale of the death of Maria Lazic (Fet 1893, 543-544). But the chapter and volume end with another story, one seemingly unrelated to Lazic’s death. I find this story to be intimately connected to the tale of Fet and Lazic. It is tied also to Fet’s own death shortly after he finished dictating the book in which he relates it. This chapter is the last in Fet’s last book that was published shortly after his death. Being Fet’s final prose word on himself, it deserves closer attention.

Some context: Fet puts the Lazic story (which I have summarized above) into the mouth of his friend Petkovich, who tells how Maria dropped a match while reading, was badly burned after her dress caught fire, suffered for four days, and died. After Petkovich reports Lazic’s deathbed question about whether Christ on the cross could have suffered more than she, the story ends abruptly, and no more mention of Lazic is made. In the rest of the chapter – that is, his last published prose about his life – Fet tells a story not about himself, but about his acquaintance
Veinberg. This story and its juxtaposition with the tale of Lazic’s death are important to a full understanding of Fet’s final word about his life.

In the Veinberg story, young women are disappearing in Odessa and the police can make no progress in investigating the cause. The father of one of the missing persons receives a letter from a friend who is travelling abroad in Constantinople. The letter describes how he saw a familiar face at the slave market, and after speaking to the young woman in German and French, determined that she was the daughter of one of his acquaintances, the recipient of the letter. He purchases her for three thousand rubles and is writing to her father in order that the latter make arrangements for her transportation back to her family.

This explains the disappearance of the young ladies. Veinberg is implicated (his involvement in the slave trade explains his lavish lifestyle as well as the failure of the police to do anything about the disappearances of well-educated young women) and shoots himself, completing his suicide some time after one unsuccessful attempt (I have paraphrased the matter from Fet 1893, 547-548).

The two stories in this last chapter, Lazic’s death and Veinberg’s disgrace and suicide are thematically connected in that each relates the death of one of Fet’s acquaintances. The Veinberg story is in a way the emotional and moral continuation of what happened with Lazic. In Lazic’s story, a young woman dies and vanishes from the world – we understand that this is due to Fet’s callous treatment of her, though he makes no open statement of his blame. In the second story, young women disappear (many, we understand, cannot be recovered and die in slavery in foreign lands), but this time, the responsible party is identified and kills himself.

Although a reading of the Lazic story without the context of the rest of the chapter may leave some doubt about Fet’s guilt, the Veinberg story gives us Fet’s understanding of the
matter, and the death sentence he deems appropriate for himself – when young women are destroyed, the responsible party commits suicide (in this case, a man who is legally a foreigner with a German name, like Fet). The two portions of the chapter, though Fet does not explicitly link them in any way, present a clear picture of Fet’s feelings about the Lazic matter. It is socially inappropriate and personally unacceptable to name himself as the responsible party, but there is no taboo against telling two apparently unconnected stories and allowing the reader to feel the situational and emotional connection between them. The young woman, whom Fet left against her wishes in an earlier chapter, has been destroyed in a terrible way. Fet ends that story abruptly, breaking it off with Lazic’s deathbed words about her suffering, but giving no details about his own feelings or any condemnation for his callous behavior. By giving a model in the form of the Veinberg story for his feelings and what his response to Lazic’s death ‘should be’, Fet makes a public statement about his own guilt – but this statement is worded with enough care that even the most attentive reader of his day could not respond openly to it.

Even if we choose not to make reference to his personal letters, the final published chapter of Fet’s memoirs points to his guilt over Lazic’s death and his belief that his own death, though long delayed, is the appropriate response to hers. Fet dictated this chapter in the year before his suicide attempt on December 3rd, 1892 (during which he died of a heart attack, while his servant tried to prevent him from stabbing himself), and the final volume containing this chapter was published the following year, soon after his death. I propose that the chapter functions as a public suicide note, testifying that Fet believed himself responsible for Lazic’s death and that his own suicide would be his final word on the matter.
Sukhotin’s monograph on the relationship between Fet and Lazic is the first significant scholarly work to investigate the matter and to treat Lazic’s death as an important part of Fet’s biography. It ends with this passage:

Чувство Фета к Елене Лазич отразилось и в письмах его к задушевному другу Борисову, и в поэтическом творчестве всей его жизни дальнейшей, и в мемуарах, им на старости лет продиктованных. В позднейшей лирике оно, это чувство, разгорается пламенем истинной и великой любви, время и смерть попирающей. Но едва ли в эпоху рокового знакомства Фет горел этой истинной и великой любовью: она превозмогла бы все его предрассудки и тяготение к благам материального свойства, и он не отверг бы чистого сердца, ему пламенно и жертvenно преданного.

Fet’s feelings for Elena Lazic are reflected in the letters to his close friend Borisov, in poetic works for the rest of his life, and in the memoirs that he dictated in old age. In his later lyric poetry this feeling blazes up in a flame of true and great love – a love that squashes time and death. But at the time of this fateful acquaintance, Fet hardly burned with such true and great love: if he had, that love would have overcome all his prejudices and the attraction of material things, and he would not have turned away a pure heart, one dedicated to him ardently and selflessly. (Sukhotin 1933, 47)

The interpretation I have offered of the final chapter of Fet’s memoirs is consistent with Sukhotin’s understanding of this failed romance. I add, however, that towards the end of his life, and possibly for the four decades between Lazic’s death and his own, Fet felt responsible for Lazic’s death. In his final year of life, Fet announced his guilt and his suicidal intent in the form of a manuscript that was published not long after his death. Fet’s suicide was some forty years in the making, and he announces his belief in its inevitability in the final section of his autobiographical writings.

Despite living a long life for his age – and especially for a major nineteenth-century poet – Fet spent over half that life with his own self-destruction in the back of his mind. The losses suffered early in his life--of his birth family and the family he might have started with Lazic--gave cause to his final destruction of himself.
Balance, ideal and real

I follow scholars such as Klenin, Blagoi, and Sukhotin in considering these two losses—loss of his name and loss of Lazic—to be key to a full understanding of Fet’s life and thought. The rest of his life (or at least his life in poetry, which is the bulk of what remains to us now) was devoted to these twin injuries. A human life finds its balance in the relationship between the poles of self and other, and in Fet’s life, both poles were severely wounded in his loss of himself / his birth family and his loss of Lazic. Fet selected thoughts and intellectual positions that would reduce his consciousness of pain, loneliness, and regret.

In the later chapters, I will examine a number of lyrics in which Fet’s poetic instinct soothes his guilt and wounded ego, and in which choices of verbal aspect contribute to the poetic work so useful for this purpose. That is, he works within a new polarity that cannot be broken as it exists outside himself and outside his relationship to Russian society and to Maria Lazic. The arena in which Fet first made a name for himself was also the place where he met with Lazic—Russian poetry. There Fet recreates himself and Lazic in ideal forms that cannot be unmade. Before we look at those ideal forms, let us examine briefly Fet’s philosophical views beginning in the period after Lazic’s death and lasting through the end of his own life. As I have shown above, his understanding of Lazic’s death was the proximate justification for his suicide. It seems, however, that Fet required some justification during the years that led up to his suicide. He found this justification in his philosophical ‘crush’ on Arthur Schopenhauer.

Fet and Schopenhauer
Klenin suggests that Fet’s relative poetic silence in the 1850s, 60s, and 70s was due, at least in part, to his feelings of guilt and regret over his abandonment of Lazic (Klenin 1991). It is interesting to note that, around when his second period of great poetry flourished (that is, his second period of serious love poetry, in which many have found allusions to Lazic – see Klenin 1991, 184-185), Fet developed a strong interest in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. He even made a Russian translation of the entire first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*.

Klenin and Blagoi have studied the history of Fet’s interest in Schopenhauer and its reflection in some of his late poetry. I would like to suggest a pair of reasons for that intense interest and Fet’s vocal admiration of this philosopher. The first is Schopenhauer’s famous essay on suicide – a topic that, as I have suggested above, was of great importance to Fet for most of his adult life in the aftermath of Lazic’s death.

…neither in the Old Testament nor in the new is there to be found any prohibition or even merely a definite condemnation of suicide. Teachers of religion have, therefore, to base their objection to suicide on their own philosophical grounds; but their arguments are in such a bad way that they try to make up for what these lack in strength by the vigorous expressions of their abhorrence and thus by being abusive […] there is obviously nothing in the world over which every man has such an indisputable right as his own person and life… (Schopenhauer 1974, 306)

Even a cursory reading of Schopenhauer’s essay on suicide offered Fet some comfort about Lazic’s death: she had a right to end her life; there is no true moral or religious injunction against it.

In the same essay, Schopenhauer says “In its innermost core, Christianity bears the truth that suffering (the Cross) is the real purpose of life; and therefore, as suicide opposes such purpose, Christianity rejects it…” (Schopenhauer 1974, 309) Reading this passage, we recall what Fet gives as Lazic’s deathbed words (quoted, however, as indirect speech): протомясь
чтево суток, спрашиваля - можно ли на кресте страдать более, чем она? (having suffered for four days and nights, she asked – could one suffer more than she even on the cross?) (Fet 1893, 544)

One essay by Schopenhauer allows Fet to justify Lazic’s suicide morally as well as to keep her within the Christian world she inhabited – she had a right to take her own life, but she suffered very much, perhaps as much as Christ on the cross.

The enthusiasm Fet shows for Schopenhauer’s writings is in part a result of the views offered on suicide. Yet there is another essay in the same volume that must have attracted Fet’s attention: “Sketch of a History of the Doctrine of the Ideal and the Real.”

From this standpoint I, finally, have made a step, and believe that it will be the last; because I have solved the problem upon which, since Descartes, all philosophizing turns, in that I reduce all being and knowledge to the two elements of our self-consciousness, in other words, to something beyond which there can be no further principle of explanation, since it is the most immediate and therefore ultimate… the absolute Real or the thing in itself can never be given us directly from without, in the way of mere presentment, since it is inevitably in the nature of the latter only to furnish the Ideal; while, on the contrary, since we ourselves are indisputably Real, the knowledge of the Real must in some way or other be derivable from within our own nature. And in fact it here appears, in an immediate manner in consciousness, as WILL. The line of cleavage between the Real and the Ideal falls therefore, with me, in such wise that the whole perceivable and objectively-presented world, including every man’s body, together with time, space, and causality…belongs as presentment to the Ideal. But in this case the Will alone remains as the Real…Ethics is therefore with me directly and incomparably more closely knit to metaphysics than in any other system, and thus the moral significance of the world and of existence is more firmly fixed than ever. But Will and Presentment are fundamentally distinct, inasmuch as they constitute the ultimate and basal opposition in all things in the world and leave nothing remaining over. The presented thing and the presentment of it are the same, but only the PRESENTED thing, and not the thing IN ITSELF. The latter is always Will, it matters not in what form it may appear in presentment. (Schopenhauer 1974)

The Real and Ideal, the Will and Presentment (or Representation, in many translations) recall the letter Fet wrote shortly after learning of Lazic’s death: “и так мой идеальный мир разрушен давно” (“But my ideal world was wrecked long ago in any case.”) Fet crushed himself by
bringing out an irretrievable loss early in his life, and saw his life branching into two tracks – in
lay speech, the ideal world was ruined, while the everyday world had deviated far from the
image of the ideal. His familiarity with Schopenhauer helped him to justify Lazic’s suicide –
that familiarity, and his guilt over her death, helped him to take his own life.

Fet saw his world as split into two – an unacceptable here-world and a perfect world in
which he was the continuation of and originator of a family, descendant and progenitor together.
Defined between German and Russian, foreigner and hereditary noble, Fet’s life was made up of
tensions that he could not balance or reconcile. They began early in his life with his
bilingualism, continued with his identity troubles in adolescence, and became permanent when
Lazic’s death resulted in the loss of the one romantic relationship that had been meaningful to
him. Over the course of his adolescence and adult life, Fet saw more and more ways to split
himself into two poles: one real, one ideal.

Fet scholars have long understood that his poetry is intimately bound up with the
metaphysical. Fet is there with Tiutchev and Baratynsky as the most obviously metaphysical of
the 19th century poets. I intend to deepen this understanding, implicit almost everywhere in the
scholarship, by exploring the close relationship between Fet’s metaphysical pursuits and his
meta-lingual poetics. By meta-lingual here I mean: displaying through language an overt,
demonstrable interest in the material of language. To be referred to as meta-lingual for these
purposes, a poetic text should display a significantly greater degree of such interest than an
‘everyday’ speech act.

In this dissertation I focus on the meaning-generating meta-lingual features of Fet’s texts,
especially as they relate to his metaphysical concerns regarding his memories of Lazic and
expected reunion with her, but also as they relate to his experience and re-writing of Pushkin. In
other words, his lifelong dialogue with the dead is one of his most important spiritual concerns. First among the meta-lingual features relevant to these concerns in my view is Fet’s usage of the aspectual forms of the Russian verb.

Russian grammar makes a distinction between Perfective and Imperfective verbal forms. Perfectives denote actions which the speaker perceives as being completed or perfect, while imperfectives are seen as in process, unbounded. Fet has poetic works in which this category contributes visibly to the meaning even in his earliest original poetry, but after Lacic’s death and his later acquaintance with Schopenhauer, he uses it to even greater effect in a number of his finest lyrics. I find that an approach that takes into account the aspectual structure in many cases opens a path to a new understanding that enriches our previous knowledge of the poem. Regardless of the conscious thoughts of the author, verbal aspect appears as a metaphysically organizing principle in many of Fet’s lyrics and makes a significant contribution to meaning. Attention to this side of Fet’s work can offer us another perspective on his metaphysical and spiritual concerns.

The remaining chapters examine this feature of Fet’s poetry, first in close readings of individual poems, but also with a wider perspective in each chapter, exploring a different biographical/poetic face of Fet’s concern with Perfect and Imperfect. Fet’s romance with Maria Lacic was ended by his shortsightedness. My work follows the consequences of that shortsightedness as it fell on the soil of his already-formed poetic personality. In the next chapter, I will show some of the roots of Fet’s early interest in verbal aspect, before turning to his implementation of it in rewriting his predecessors and in his late-life understanding of his relationship with Lacic.
Chapter 1: Dipping Order out of Chaos

When people who practice an art like music become captives of those positive assumptions of system, when they forget to credit that happening against negation which system is, and when they become disrespectful of the immensity of negation compared to system – then they put themselves out of reach of that replenishment of invention upon which creative ideas depend, because invention is, in fact, a cautious dipping into the negation that lies outside system from a position firmly ensconced in system.

- Glenn Gould

Я уверен, что в моих воспоминаниях, как и во всякой другой вещи, каждый будет видеть то, что покажется ему наиболее характерным.

- А. Фет

In the mid-1960’s, Richard Gustafson wrote in his monograph (the first serious book-length treatment of Fet’s poetry)

Though Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet is one of Russia’s great lyric poets, his position in Russian literature is unclear, and his reputation uncertain […] Publishing his first collection of poems in the same year as Lermontov’s last (1840) and his last book of poems three years before V. Ya. Bryusov’s first, Fet spans the period of realism and joins Russia’s two major poetic movements, romanticism and symbolism. (Gustafson 3)

From the perspective of 20th- and 21st-century scholarship, Gustafson’s claim about Fet’s uncertain reputation remains true, but not because many of his best pieces are difficult to classify or analyze. That is true of many creative artists, and scholars such as Boris Bukhshtab, Mikhail Gasparov, and Emily Klenin have taken great strides since the mid-20th century in creating a rigorous but vibrant body of critical work on Fet.

Fet wrote many excellent lyrics and served the next generation of Symbolists as a point of contact with the past, and in this way his reputation is certain. We have today a significant
critical tradition on Fet and it seems his place in the canon of 19th-century poetry is secure. Yet despite the decades of scholarly attention and the popular consensus that offers readers ready-made understandings of his works, there is still an uncomfortable obscurity in the experience of reading his work. To put it simply, we may say that the reader gets a sense of unusual nervousness or tension from many of Fet’s finest poems. It seems at times that the inspiration behind and execution/editing of a particular poem generate this tension. In other instances, such as the well-known “Шепот, робкое дыханье” (“Whispers, timid breathing”) the same work can seem to be a tug-of-war between crystalline perfection and frustrating obscurity.

When the tension is expressed to some degree on the surface, the reader’s comfort level is greater, because the difficulty and tautness seem to be the “topic” of the poem and can be subject to a rich biographical or philosophical reading, or a productive formal analysis. Lidiia Lotman writes:

Чрезвычайно важно для поэта было сознание единства таких взаимно противоположных начал, как вечность и мгновение, жизнь и смерть, начало и конец […]. Человеческая личность – бесконечно малая часть вселенной – оказывается равна целому, к которому принадлежит. Замкнутая в пространстве личность — благодаря своей способности мыслить – вездесуща, мгновенная – она вечна, и это-то соединение противоположностей в человеке есть чудо вселенной.

Especially important for this poet was consciousness of the unity of opposing principles, such as eternity and moment, life and death, beginning and end […]. A human being – an infinitesimal part of the universe – turns out to be equal to the whole to which it belongs. A person locked into space, thanks to the ability to think, is omnipresent, and being ephemeral, is eternal, and it is this unification of opposing forces in man that is the wonder of the universe. (L. Lotman 1982, 435 and 444)

Lotman’s overview of the unity of opposing forces in Fet’s poetry is quite concise and accurate, and these principles do turn up often in individual lyrics. Lotman and Shenshina, among others,
dedicate much of their work on Fet to the question of these opposing forces, especially as they appear in his later, more technically philosophical poems.

Apart from those lyrics, however, Fet’s poetry often holds this tension so deep inside the work that the reader senses it, but not well enough to feel he can control, understand, or even see it clearly. His conscious mind finds pleasure or interest in the surface of the work, its visible form and meaning, and enjoys digging into it, engaged by Fet’s obvious talent and skill. The reader’s unconscious mind, however, is startled to feel inside the work an unmistakable but also ungraspable counterpart to itself. While the conscious mind is enlightened, entertained, activated, the unconscious mind is disturbed by finding itself mirrored at all. This murky anxiety in the “unconscious mind” of the poems echoes in the reader’s own unconscious mind and leaves him with an obscure sensation, even the presence of which often evades conscious awareness.

The same may be said to some degree for all great poetry or art, but the experience of reading Fet is somehow especially disturbing, while the disturbance evades analysis or even certainty that there is any unusual stimulation of the reader’s inner self. This is visible not only to the modern reader who brings sometimes anachronistic vocabulary and thought about the unconscious to almost any reading of poetry. Even Fet’s contemporaries had a sense that there was something of another quality “inside” Fet or his work. One of Tiutchev’s poems to Fet suggests a similar structure as the source of Fet’s poetic gifts – that Fet has reliable or regular access to something clearly that his contemporaries and readers were able to sense only dimly.

Иным достался от природы
Инстинкт пророчески-слепой, --
Они им чуют-слышат воды
И в темной глубине земной…

Великой Матерью любимый,
Стократ завидней твой удел –
Не раз под оболочкой зримой
Ты самое ее узрел…

To others, nature has given / a prophetically blind instinct -- / with it they hear the waters / even in the earth’s dark depths…You, beloved of the Great Mother, your lot is a hundred times more enviable - / More than once, beneath the visible shell / you have seen her…(Tiutchev 1911, 199)

Not only Tiutchev made such a claim about an inwardness or “under-ness” at the heart of Fet’s work. Iakov Polonskii writes to Fet in 1890:

По твоим стихам невозможно написать твоей биографии или даже намекать на события из твоей жизни – как нельзя по трагедиям Шекспира понять – как он жил, как развивался; и проч.

Увы!..по моим стихам можно проследить всю жизнь мою. Даже те стихи, которые так тебе нравятся, - “Последний поцелуй”, затем “Безумие горя”, “Я читаю книгу песен” – факты, факты, и факты – это смерть первой жены моей. Мне кажется, что не расцвети около твоего балкона в Воробьёвке чудной лилии, мне бы в голову не пришло написать “Зной, и всё в томительном покое”. […] Так внешнее меня возбуждает или вдохновляет, - ясно, что мой духовный внутренний мир далеко не играет такой первенствующей роли, как твой, озаренный радужными лучами идеального солнца.

On the basis of your poems it would be impossible to write your biography or even to hint at the events of your life – just as Shakespeare’s tragedies cannot help us understand how he lived, developed, etc.

Alas!..one can track my entire life through my poems. Even those poems that you like so much – “The Last Kiss,” “The Madness of Woe,” and “As I read a book of verses” – these poems are facts, facts, facts – they are about the death of my first wife. To me it seems that if that wonderful lily had not bloomed by your balcony in Vorob’yovka, I would never have thought to write “Stifling heat, and all is an oppressive quiet”. […] The external so stimulates or inspires me – it is clear that my internal spiritual world does not come close to playing the primary role that yours plays, being illuminated by the iridescent rays of the ideal sun. (27 December 1890, cited from manuscript in Bukhshtab 2000, 206)

Polonsky opposes Fet’s work to his own visibly autobiographical poetry, claiming that Fet has richer inward experience on which to draw for his work. Bukhshtab says, basing his argument in
part on this correspondence with Polonsky, that Fet “jealously hid away” autobiographical detail in works that were inspired by real events of his life, sometimes recorded quite clearly in his volumes of published memoirs (Bukhshtab 2000, 207-208).

Fet’s response to Polonsky is perhaps more interesting than it looks at first glance.

Ты напрасно думаешь, что мои песенки приходят ниоткуда – они такие же дары жизни, как и твои, с тою разницей, что впечатления ссыпаются в грудь мою наподобие того, как кулак-целовальник ссыпает в свой амбар и просо, и рожь, и что хочешь. Принесут девки орехов, и те давай сюда, все держится до своего времени [...]

You are mistaken in thinking that my songs some from nowhere – they are gifts from life, just as yours are, with the difference that impressions are collected in my breast just as a kulak-innkeeper collects in his barn millet, rye, whatever you like. If the girls bring some nuts, they can go in as well – everything will keep until the proper time. (30 December 1890, cited from manuscript in Bukhshtab 2000, 206)

Explaining the difference between his works inspired by life and Polonsky’s by likening his own to foodstuffs, Fet subtly suggests the process of digestion. As grains and nuts are collected in a barn, so are the impressions of life collected in his chest. When dead food goes through the chest and into the belly, the result is digestion, heat, continuing life for the eater. Polonsky states that Fet has a rich internal world lit by a nonphysical sun. Fet pulls this statement apart into a simple metaphor to separate the sun (in the form of the plants) from his own inwardness, putting the plants into a metaphorical barn and only the “impressions of life” into his own body. While claiming to correct Polonsky’s statement, Fet confirms it. There is an “inward” source or process that creates the inspired part of Fet’s poetry, and he cannot help but demonstrate this even while flatly denying it. Fet’s poems are the product of these repeated visions of something unseeable, and they create for the reader an uncomfortable visionary experience, a dim awareness of the unknown depths of his own being.
Tiutchev’s and Polonsky’s praise for this unusual quality was outmatched in power and influence by Turgenev’s editorial displeasure in the 1850s. Fet’s marked lack of ability and desire to edit or correct his own works gave his friends and editors great influence over the published form of many of his texts (Bukhshtab 2000, 207-208). Turgenev first among these editors was deeply displeased by Fet’s incorrigible pull to what Bukhshtab calls “the irrational impulses of the soul” (иrrационные душеvные движенип). Bukhshtab says further that these impulses were inimical to Turgenev and his circle:

И понятно ожесточение, с которым Тургенев вычеркнул из знаменитого стихотворения Фета строфу со словами:

…не знаю сам, что буду
Петь - но только песня зреет, --

крича Некрасову что в этой строфе Фет "изобличил свои телячьи мозги."

And so we can understand Turgenev’s bitterness when he crossed out the famous stanza with the words:

I myself do not know what I shall sing / but only that the song is ripening.

and shouted to Nekrasov that in that stanza, Fet had “exposed himself as someone with the brains of a calf.” (Bukhshtab 2000, 157

Bukhstab’s penetrating review and explication of the relationship between Turgenev as editor and Fet as poet goes into specific textual variants. In the end, he comes to the understanding that while Fet bent this way and that in response to the corrections and suggestions that he sought eagerly from friends and accepted from editors, there was a point beyond which he would not go in altering his texts.

Fet’s core of certainty in himself was perhaps equivalent to the internal world that Polonsky found in Fet and thought absent in his own work. Fet is of course not unique among
creative artists in that he had regular semi-conscious access to a body of knowledge or wisdom that for most people remains unconscious, and used that knowledge in the creation of a body of public or semi-public works considered to fall under the category of ‘art.’ This is what makes him a creative artist at all. Rather, something in his poetic character tends to make the reader uncertainly yet palpably aware of that tension between the conscious and unconscious portions of his mind, aware of that peculiar inwardness that Fet saw into, according to Tiutchev, or from which his poems were born, according to Polotsky.

To return to where this discussion began, I suggest that this quality of Fet’s poetry is a major cause of what has kept him in such an unusual position in the history of Russian poetry. Being present, Fet is somehow “not there” in a way that is difficult to define. He confirms by denying Polonsky’s understanding of his creative wellspring. He seeks out and accepts corrections for his poems in a way that seems strangely obsequious to our sensibility, but refuses to implement them beyond a certain limit.

Fet's own career as a poet shows a similar tension between approach and retreat, the same tension of being drawn to and pulled away from poetry. Consumed by poetry in his youth, Fet retired from public literary activity for decades, working as a landowner and publishing for the most part as a translator. Later returning to his poetic calling, he prepared the multi-volume Вечерние огни (Evening Lights) collection of his own works. Fet, whose works were praised in their own day as they still are now for their power to evoke the most indefinable, fleeting, ‘corner of your eye’ human emotions, took no small trouble at the end of his life to give a definite shape to his own body of poetry. The poet of “irrational impulses of the soul” occupies the same body as the writer who allowed and even sought out violent emendations to his work.
Fet’s lifelong relationship to poetry, his poetry itself in its several periods and many forms, and even Tiutchev’s and Polonsky’s praise for him all have at their core this unusually palpable strangeness, these opposing forces that define each other as much as they oppose each other. The two principles we find in this core of strangeness can have any number of expressions. One might use the phrase *obscure light*. This obscure light has countless expressions in Fet’s poetry, not limited to those named by Lotman – ephemeral and eternal, limited in space and omnipresent, among others. Since this concept is key to my argument, a brief discussion of the concept of polarity is in order.

**Polarity**

The paired concepts I have listed above, these expressions of great tension in Fet’s work, might be called polarities. The concept of polarity is foundational to the readings I give in the following chapters. My usage follows Owen Barfield in his explication of Coleridge.

Polarity is dynamic, not abstract. It is not “a mere balance or compromise,” but “a living and generative interpenetration.” Where logical opposites are contradictory, polar opposites are generative of each other – and together generative of new product. Polar opposites exist by virtue of each other *as well as* at the expense of each other; “each is that which it is called, relatively, by predominance of the one character or quality, not by the absolute exclusion of the other.” Moreover each quality or character is present *in* the other. We can and must distinguish, but there is no possibility of dividing them.

(Barfield 1971, 36)

That is, a polarity is two opposed forces that are two aspects of the same power. Neither aspect can exist without the other, so while they are ‘opposites,’ they are dependent on each other for their very existence.

In the citation from L. Lotman above, several pairs appeared that might be considered polar opposites – “Especially important for this poet was consciousness of the unity of opposing
principles, such as eternity and moment, life and death, beginning and end…” (Lotman 1982, 435) Another interesting polarity is Russian verbal aspect.

All verbs report histories, histories of states of the worlds and changes in states of the worlds. Aspect is a classification of verbs based on the kind of history that a verb reports. These histories tend to polarize into two types. Some, termed PERFECTIVE, report definitive change over three phases of time: a prior phase in which a state or property does not hold, a phase of change, and a resulting phase in which the state or property resulting from the change is projected to continue indefinitely. Others, termed IMPERFECTIVE, do not report definitive change, but instead report continuity of states or processes over time. (Timberlake 2004, 398)

Not only do the two aspects have the different qualities listed above, they also support each other and define each other’s existence. Without one side, the other would also cease to exist, as Fet suggests in a discussion that does not specifically touch on verbal aspect, but is perfectly applicable to it: “С прекращением борьбы и с окончательной победой одного из противоположных начал прекращается и самая жизнь как таковая” (“With the cessation of battle and the complete victory of one of the opposing principles, life as such also ceases”) (Fet 1867, 48).

Like the ‘metaphysical’ polarities that have been investigated by L. Lotman and Shenshina, verbal aspect holds a significant place in Fet’s poetic work. This dissertation investigates several faces of aspect across the decades of Fet’s career. A set of new readings will show some of the general aspect-oriented techniques Fet uses. More important, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will show these aspectually-oriented lyrics

My claim is not that Fet is the first or only poet to organize a poem in such a way that one might find anything to say about verbal aspect in a seminar or an article. Consider Ogaryov’s “Звуки” (“Sounds”) from 1841:

Как дорожу я прекрасным мгновеньем! — How I cherish this wonderful moment!
All at once, the hearing full of music,
Sounds are carried in a rush,
Sounds pour all around, from somewhere,
The heart strives after them,
It wants to fly after them, somewhere…
In such moments one could melt,
In such moments it is easy to die.

(Ogaryov 1961, 80)

All the verbs in this poem are imperfective with the exception of the last two – растаять (to melt) and умереть (to die). One could explicate the poem with terminology of aspect and say that a ‘definitive change’ is noted as possible in these last two lines. But it is difficult, in looking at the arrangement of aspecual forms in the poem, to see how such analysis adds to the reader’s understanding of the poem, rather than just restating that understanding with a somewhat different vocabulary.

Unlike the Ogaryov poem I have given above, the Fet lyrics I will examine become more deeply intelligible when we consider the perspective of an ‘aspect-oriented’ reading. The lyrics have rather complex and unusual structures built out of the material of verbal aspect, and looking at these structures adds much to the possibilities of analysis and what is more important, to the possibilities of interpretation. I will begin presenting these readings in Chapter 2, but for the end of this introduction I would like to address a question that may present itself to the reader later in this dissertation.
Questions of Interpretation

If you observe the behavior of a neurotic person, you can see him doing many things that he appears to be doing consciously and purposefully. Yet if you ask him about them, you will discover that he is either quite unconscious of them or has something quite different in mind. He hears and does not hear; he sees, yet is blind; he knows and is ignorant. - C. J. Jung

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing, see not; and hearing, they hear not, neither do they understand. - Matt. 13:13

The increasing self-consciousness obvious in art over the last century - poetry not least among its faces – leaves lovers of art from earlier ages in a strange position regarding certain matters. For instance, when one reads poetry from before the early 20th century (pre-Modernism, roughly speaking) and notes certain structural or formal features, there is often a question of whether the author conceived these features in his conscious mind. Every investigator of 19th-century poetry asks such questions about his own work, and they often come up in seminars, discussions with colleagues, or in private correspondence. The rhyme-scheme seems particularly interesting here – or perhaps the interaction between grammatical and non-grammatical rhymes, or between eye-rhymes and more perfect rhymes. Maybe variations in the rhythmic motion of the verse appear terribly important to the meaning of the work.

But the investigator or the reader or the analysis often runs into the question of whether the author ‘intended’ this or that consciously. This question is put well by M. Gasparov in his article “Снова тучи надо мною: методика анализа” when he asks “…неужели поэт сознательно производит всю эту кропотливую работу, подбирает существительные и
прилагательные, обдумывает глагольные времена?” (“…can it be that the poet consciously does all this painstaking work, picking out nouns and adjectives, and pondering the tenses of verbs?”) (Gasparov 1997, 18)

Sometimes it seems that one’s answer to this question serves for the most part to say whether one is inclined to agree with the investigator’s argument. Even so, we should address this matter at a little greater length. Another way to ask the question Gasparov has framed is: “do we imagine that if we could ask the author about this or that feature of the text and whether it has the importance we would like to ascribe to it, what answer would we hear?” It would be nice to hear “yes” if we are attached to a certain analysis, and would be disappointing to hear “no.” Simple enough – or maybe not. In many cases the questioner would be brushed off or ignored. Perhaps the author would politely or not so politely dodge the question, or answer a different question, or claim not to know what was meant by a certain word, phrase, or image. If the author cannot or will not answer such questions, or is dead – then the question is reduced to whether we think the author would claim conscious intent if he could be produced and forced to be honest.

The question becomes more and more ephemeral, and this may be because it is not well-formed, not consistent with our other knowledge of people. A work of art is a part of the artist; it is a portion of spirit that contains the whole. Asking this spirit to explain away its own existence is inviting it to destroy itself. Although the spirit never really answers, we can sense the dormant seed of destruction when we even being to frame such a question. Asking a creative artist what he or she ‘intended’ with a given work seems desirable, but also makes us uncomfortable because it seems to attack the independence of the work.

If we could get an authoritative answer, it would make us wonder whether the question had even been meaningful. Certainly, the casual question of what an author proposed or did not
propose to do consciously can lead down interesting paths. My analytical approach to individual poems does not require that I insist on a position on either side of this question. Surely a combination of what we would call conscious and unconscious thought fuels artistic works. The impulse behind a work may draw some of its energy from conscious concerns and thoughts, and some from unconscious drives, motives, and obsessions. Many of these motives may slip in and out of conscious ‘view’ during the process of composition, while some may be quite invisible to the author’s conscious mind. This is true of works considered as wholes and of individual choices within the work, regardless of whether a given study gives special consideration to those features.

Laferrière makes the question real, and answers it, in a way that might be considered inappropriate today, but is quite useful here:

…whereas the poet is in control of the poetic function and does not lose sight of the other functions, the schizophrenic is overwhelmed by the poetic function almost to the exclusion of the other functions. The poet is only a dabbler in madness, ever escaping the threat of prolonged or permanent loss of mental control, whereas the schizophrenic truly loses control and is “spoken” for extended periods of time. Puškin knew the attractions and dangers of madness, and he grappled with them in his famous “Ne daj mne Bog sojti s uma.” Batjuškov, on the other hand, succumbed – and stopped creating poetry.

There is another distinction between the language of the poet and the language of the ordinary madman: the poet superimposes formal regularities upon his discourse, regularities which the madman does not have the wherewithal to sustain. (Laferrière 1977, 37)

If an artistic work is an organic whole (Lotman 1996, 25), then a study of one aspect of the work will not be deceitful, but will participate in the truth about that work as a whole, including concerns that were relatively more and less obvious to the author as he stood back from the work and considered it. What is chosen consciously will give form to the unconscious, and the unconscious will give weight to the choices of the conscious mind. This is true for the
investigator and casual reader as well as the poet. As we have seen in the initial discussion of polarity in general, each side feeds and gives identity to the other.

There is always the danger that analysis will help us “to know more and more about less and less” (Barfield 1977, 17). That would not be consistent with the desire to promote genuine knowledge. The difficulty for everyone is that fuzzy definitions and understandings are easy to come by and easy to apply (if they are fuzzy enough, they can be applied to anything), but they do not say very much. Precision is relatively difficult to apply, and says something very clear about very little. As always, it seems we are stuck. The works of criticism and philosophy that have been most helpful to me have cut a path through precision and back out into meaning.

Having descended into the underworld of potentially meaningless analysis, they return carrying something new for the sunlit world. That underworld of analysis is as real as the daylight of synthesis, and the present dissertation descends to that place many times, not in search of pinpoint precision but in search of something new for the process that we call literary or cultural history.

In the previous chapter we established the importance in Fet’s life of his loss of identity (Self) and loss of his beloved Lazic (Other). In this chapter we have looked at the similar polarities of Imperfect and Perfect as expressed in Russian verbal aspect. We have seen also relevance that the tension Conscious-Unconscious has for us as readers of literary works. In the following chapters, I will synthesize the importance of these polarities and tensions. As I give the readings that demonstrate the power of verbal aspect in Fet’s lyrics, I will be showing also the importance of all these polarities in Fet’s mind and their conscious expression in his poetry.

The individual analyses and interpretations offered from this point onward will bring parts of Fet’s poetic journey into conscious view. They will also stir the pot and change what
draws attention and is deemed worthy of notice in the conscious or unconscious mind of the reader. The work of art has life in both the conscious and unconscious minds of the poet and the reader, and has multiple aspects in both those places. The analyses and interpretations over the next four chapters will not only demonstrate the pervasive influence of Lazic’s death and Fet’s rebuilding of their relationship in poetry through verbal aspect, but will also allow the reader to break down Fet’s work along unfamiliar lines, and in rebuilding it, to see Fet as author and himself as reader in a new way.

*And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms*
*Come trembling back, unite, and now once more*
*The pool becomes a mirror.*

– Coleridge

*Thou art a monument without a tomb,*
*And art alive still while thy book doth live,*
*And we have wits to read…*

– Ben Jonson
Chapter 2: An overview of Fet’s aspectual techniques

Neither pole of verbal aspect is truly simple and neither has a single meaning covers all its uses (Gasparov 1990 191-193). That is, while the forms of the Russian verb themselves polarize into the imperfective and perfective aspects, neither aspect has only one meaning in context. For example, a negated perfective form may mean that an action was attempted but not accomplished, or without negation may mean that it was accomplished by accident. A non-negated imperfective in the past may mean that an action was in process, while a negated imperfective may serve to say that the action was not even attempted. There is a lot of variety even within the simple polarization of verbal aspect.

Of course, Fet’s use of aspect in lyrics organized around it also has quite a number of expressions and meanings. We find remarkable variety of aspectual organization in his lyrics, although there are certain similarities in his general approach to these compositions. This chapter will acquaint the reader with a few of the aspect-based techniques that Fet uses in his lyrics. This will prepare the way for the remaining three chapters, each of which will have as its focus a larger concern that might be called an ‘aspect of Fet’s verbal aspect.’ Before we turn to any of those greater topics, it is important to look at a few lyrics individually, and so to make ourselves familiar with some of the facts of visible aspectual organization in these texts.

I would like to make it clear that no part of this dissertation advances the idea that such organization on the material of verbal aspect is unique to Fet’s poetry. The aspectual forms are part of the Russian language and are important, even crucial organizational elements from the simplest utterances to the most complex works of literature (see again Gasparov 1990 203-209 for a number of prose examples from Bunin; see also Paducheva 1996 for a few examples from
The idea that I do advance and will demonstrate below is that Fet uses aspectual organization in a number of ways, ranging from quite simple ‘block’ arrangements to much more intricate structures that may not be visible at a glance, but respond well to analysis. We can look at these aspectually-organized texts individually, as I do in several cases below. We can examine them also in groups, as I do in the remaining chapters, in order to see the greater concerns that inform the choice of verbal aspect and of which verbal aspect is a part.

I offer the readings below, then, for three purposes. The first is to show an interesting sequence of such poems – first some with aspect as a relatively simple organizational principle, then some where it becomes more complex -- and so to familiarize the reader with the fact of such texts. The second is to bring to the surface some of the concerns most important to Fet’s poetry, especially those that turn up in these aspectually organized works, which will set the stage for the discussion in later chapters. The third purpose is to demonstrate that verbal aspect and related topics are of enough importance to Fet that they could inform the conscious aspect of composition as well as the unconscious or semi-conscious ‘inspiration’ that is the germ of any work.

*The Road is Paved with Verbal Aspect*

We have two poles of Russian verbal aspect, and it makes sense to begin with a poem that divides them quite neatly, a poem whose structure is fairly simple, and in which the two aspects of the Russian verb are arranged visibly around a clean ‘break.’ This will demonstrate two things that will provide groundwork for further discussion. First, seeing that Fet can indeed build a very simple structure out of aspectual forms will provide at least a small area for us to
stand on. From this place we will have the leverage needed to look underneath even more interesting rocks. Second, a brief look at this poem will establish a certain vocabulary and some habits of mind necessary to the rest of this dissertation. But let us turn to the text itself for a few moments. “Сны и тени,” dated to 1859, was first published in the first edition of *Evening Lights*.

Сны и тени,--
Сновиденья,
В сумрак трепетно манящие,
Все ступени
Усыпленья
Легким роем преходящие,
Не мешайте
Мне спускаться
К переходу сокровенному,
Дайте, дайте
Мне умчаться
С вами к свету отдаленному.
Только минем
Сумрак свода,-
Тени станем мы прозрачные
И покинем
Там у входа
Покрывала наши мрачные.

Dreams and shadows,--
Dream-visions, beckoning
Tremblingly to the dusk,
Passing in a light swarm
All the stages
Of lulling to sleep,
Do not keep me
From descending
To the concealed crossing.
Let me, let me,
Fly away
With you to the distant world.
Once we pass
The dusk of the firmament,-
We shall become clear shadows
And shall abandon
There at the entrance
Our dark coverings.

(Fet 1959, 192)

Fet’s inclusion of this unassuming poem in his first new collection in decades more than twenty years after its composition suggests that it held some importance for him. The stanzaic and metrical structures are fairly unusual for Fet, but not so much that they stand out even among his other unusual meters and line-lengths (Klenin 2002, 281-282). The ostensible subject matter and
its expression here are nothing so new in Russian-language verse, hearkening all the way back to Zhukovsky’s “Весеннее чувство” and “Взошла заря. Дыханием приятным” (Zhukovsky 1980, 97 and 289).

Let us first review the poem in brief for clarity. It breaks neatly into thirds. The first six lines, the first third of the poem, are an address to dreams and shadows. A request that these dreams and shadows allow the speaker to pass to a distant world fills lines 7-12, the next third. The final third describes the sequence of steps that will be taken to complete the transition to that other world. Overall, the poem is a request that these dreams and shadows that beckon the speaker into the dusk, a place of relative darkness, allow him to continue on with them through that state and into the ‘distant world.’ Shadows call the speaker into darkness, but he requests to continue their journey with them к свету отдаленному (to the distant world), which can also be read as ‘the distant light.’ Darkness calls the speaker into darkness and he requests to continue on through darkness into light. They will then become ‘clear shadows’ (тени прозрачные) and remove their dark coverings.

Invocation, request for journey, and projected journey make up the three obvious sections of the poem. The travelers (the speaker and the shadows and dreams that he invokes) blend with the environment in which they are located. When they are in dusk, they are dark; when they enter the world of light, they remove their dark coverings and become clear, letting the light through them. In effect, the speaker desires a simultaneous transformation of himself and his surroundings into unobstructed light. Now that we look at it this way, the poem becomes a little more interesting. Within this simple three-part structure, we find a general concern with a transformation from creatures of darkness into creatures of light, or to be a little more accurate, from creatures of shadow (blockage of light) into creatures of transparency (passage of light).
In addition to the three parts into which the poem falls neatly, there is another break near the middle, between the lines “Мне спускаться” (“Let me descend”) and “К переходу сокровенному” (To the hidden crossing). All the verbs and participles before this break are imperfective, while all those that come after are perfective:

манящие преходящие мешайте спускаться сокровенному дайте дайте умчаться отдаленному минем станем покинем

There is a переход (transition) here, certainly -- or even a religious conversion. The arrangement of the aspectual forms positions the change from imperfective to perfective in the middle of the phrase “Мне спускаться / К переходу сокровенному” (“Let me descend / to the concealed crossing”).

How does this observation enrich our understanding of the poem? The text breaks roughly in half, and this break matches the mention of a transition. The imperfective half of the poem corresponds to the dark, shadowy existence, while the perfective half of the poem corresponds to the world of light. A shadow is not just darkness, but an imperfect passage of light – light passes around the object with no difficulty, but is blocked in a certain area. The result is an imperfect arrival of light, which we call a shadow. Removing what blocks the light – a covering, or simply the quality of opacity – destroys the shadow by allowing more perfect passage of light.
The arrangement of aspectual forms not only corresponds to an opposition visible in a prose paraphrase of the text, it describes that opposition. Shade is imperfect, broken light, while transparency is perfection – no longer just participation of a central light, but almost identity with it. The simple arrangement of aspectual forms in two sections – imperfectives here, perfectives there - is not just an abstract division that gives the poem a little backbone. It encourages the reader to think *into* the familiar poetic categories of darkness and light – rather than encouraging further abstraction, it makes these categories more concrete, more physical. In this more concrete reading, the dark firmament of the night sky itself becomes an opaque ‘covering’ (покрывало) that allows light through only very imperfectly. Once the shadows pass through that covering, they can shed their own covering and become ‘clear shadows.’

Even without reference to the aspectual organization, it is evident that the poem is also about death. The shadows and dream-visions that call the speaker to a certain level of sleep can be asked to take him away from the waking world and into the world of light. Sleep becomes the twilight that precedes the dark state between the familiar daylight world and the distant world/light. So the apparently abstract, bookish category of verbal aspect also makes tangible something as rarified as poetic ruminations about death. The ‘coverings’ that we wear now let in only a little light, as the firmament lets in only the pinpoint lights we know as stars. Passing through these coverings, or removing them, facilitates perfect knowledge of the light. The poem’s slightly deeper organization of the aspectual form makes all this more concrete. Darkness and light stop being metaphors and now truly are earthly life and the expected more perfect existence afterwards.
The text examined above is not particularly new ‘material’ in its paraphrasable content, as I have said above\(^2\). But the aspectual forms arrange and structure that material so that they make it concrete again, rather than endlessly rarified and abstracted, almost without meaning in the world we know. This concretization allows the reader to experience the familiar categories of poetic light and darkness as new again. At first glance, the poem is about the well-worn topic of metaphysical, religious, or post-mortem rebirth. Through its unusual structure, however, it causes such a renewal in the reader’s relationship to these topics. The hardened, opaque jacket of ‘trope’ is made transparent and the true content is again visible. A degenerate, imperfect knowledge through poetry of transitions to another world passes away. A more perfect and renewed knowledge of the real experience of ruminating on the other world replaces it. The poem renews the reader’s participation in poetry just as the speaker’s participation in light becomes more perfect.

The poem unites these renewals – lightness of spirit in the next world and freshness of apprehension of poetry here. There is a similarity between these two transformations of experience. In the speaker’s projected journey with the shadows, his renewal is achieved by going all the way through darkness and ending up in a realm of transparency and light. The reader’s renewal of the metaphors of darkness and light, this world and the other world works in much the same way. The ‘obvious’ three-part structure of the poem seems artificial and appropriate to the threadbare use of darkness and light. The self-announcing clean transition (непеход) from imperfective verbal forms to perfectives appears to further rarify the poem. The end result, however, is that the aspectual forms invite a reviewing of the question of light and

\(^2\) A poem from the English-language tradition that should speak to most readers in connection with the Fetian text examined here is Henry Vaughan’s “They are all gone into the world of light” (Vaughan 1891, 152). While I find no direct influence or connection, it is remarkable to read Vaughan’s exquisite but much longer poem and to see what effect Fet’s poetic use of verbal aspect achieves in a much shorter text.
shadow in terms of perfect and imperfect passage of light. The world of intimate participation in art is analogous to the world of light beyond the vault of sky.3

The foundation of this analogy largely on the strength of the shift from one verbal aspect to the other may seem somewhat contrived, even to Fet’s contemporaries. Turgenev wrote to Fet in December 1859 “Стихотворение <<Сны и тени>> есть -- извините за выражение -- совершенный сумбур” (“The poem ‘Dreams and shadows’ is – forgive the expression – a perfect mess.”) (Fet 1959, 742) If we take it only as a poem about entering the next world, perhaps Turgenev is right in his assessment – it is a little overwrought to no real end. If we take its topic to be the similarity between entering an unearthly realm and renewing a relationship with poetry, then it is much more subtle and stronger work. Such a topic – renewing one’s relationship with the familiar and casting off coverings to see things more perfectly-- also applies to the reader’s relationship to this poem itself.

Described or paraphrased quickly, the poem “Сны и тени” (“Dreams and shadows”) seems unimportant. Even when we map out the clear break between the two sets of aspectual forms here, there appears to be little to say about the matter. It is the interaction between the meanings of these aspectual forms and the lexical content of the poem that gives the reader something new and worthwhile. A graphically simple arrangement and a seemingly worn out topic crash together in an instance of real renewal

3 The metaphorical connection between the notion of completeness and verbal perfectivity is not alien to the Russian language. Idioms such as совершенно верно (‘completely, entirely true / quite right’) show that the term совершенный can be used in both senses. Turgenev uses the term совершенный in the quote above above to suggest that the aspecual division of the poem is somewhat overdone – which means, at least, that it was accessible to him as a reader. Turgenev’s verses in A Nest of Gentlefolk can be taken as a parody of Fet’s tendencies with regard to aspect: “Новым чувствам всем сердцем отдался. / Как ребенок душою я стал, / И я сжег все, чему поклонялся, / Поклонился всему, что сжигал.” (To new feelings I surrendered with all my heart / My soul became like that of a child, / And I burned everything to which I had once bowed, / Bowed to everything I once had burned.)
As a final note, I will say that the poem is also about the survivor’s guilt that Fet begins to express some ten years after Lazic’s death. She is the dream and the shadows, and to him she is both obstacle and companion. His guilt keeps him locked up in one forms of existence, but he desires to travel with the visions of her to the other world.

Дайте, дайте
Мне умчаться
С вами к свету отдаленному.

Let me, let me,
Fly away
With you to the distant world.

The world in which the reunion with Lazic can occur is the ‘perfect’ world, as suggested by Fet’s correspondence that I cited in the Introduction (“Death, brother, is a good touchstone. But fate was unable to join us. To expect a similar woman with money at my age and given my financial situation – that would be complete madness. But my ideal world was wrecked long ago in any case.”)

The ‘Standout’ Aspect

Decades after the composition of “Сны и тени” (“Dreams and shadows”) we see a stunning development and turnaround of the basic sky-themed text in “Одна звезда меж всеми дышит” (“One star among all breathes”) (1882):

Одна звезда меж всеми дышит
И так дрожит,
Она лучом алмазным пышет
И говорит:
Не суждено с тобой нам дружно

One star among all breathes
And trembles so,
She blazes with a diamond ray
And says:
It is not fated that thou and I
This poem has the unusual feature that, while it features two clearly separate ‘characters,’ the nature of one of them is unclear. The first stanza gives us a frame-speaker who introduces the speech of the star, which fills the rest of the poem. It seems that the star (who in the gloss above I have called ‘she’ to highlight her humanity, for reasons that will be clear below) is speaking to the frame-speaker, but even if this is so, it is unclear whether he is another star, a human being, or even to what gender that speaker belongs. The relationship is about as abstract as one could imagine. Even in its abstraction, however, there is an emotionally engaging syntactical tension in this relationship.

Consider stanzas two through four, all ostensibly spoken by the star. They have seven occurrences of the pronoun ‘we.’ For two full stanzas the syntax and surrounding words keep it unambiguous that the ‘we’ is мы с тобой (literally, “we with you,” – a standard Russian expression of “you and I”) – the star and the addressee. First the с тобой (“with you”) is openly
stated, then the next *нам* ("for us") is followed by the address ‘my love’ (*Любовь моя*). The sentence “Но мы во взорах разгадали / Кто ты, кто я” continues the certainty that the ‘we’ continues to be ‘you and I.’

The final stanza breaks this certainty. “Чем мы горим, светить готово / Во тьме ночных” (“What we burn with is made to give light / In the darkness of nights”) is ambiguous, referring either to the love between the star and her addressee or to the literal burning of the stars in the night. The final pair of lines “И счастья ищем мы земного / Не у людей” (“And we seek earthly happiness / Not with people”) seems at first to refer only to ‘we, the stars’ as opposed to ‘you and I,’ but it recalls the earlier lines “Не ищем мы и нам не нужно / Ни клятв, ни слов” which was quite firmly on the ‘you and I’ side. Recalling their earlier union, this line claims the necessity of their separation.

The two pairs of lines discussed above differ in another way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Не ищем мы и нам не нужно</th>
<th>We do not seek and do not need</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ни клятв, ни слов.</td>
<td>Vows or words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>И счастья ищем мы земного</td>
<td>And we seek earthly happiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Не у людей.</td>
<td>Not with people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first sentence, the verb itself is negated – ‘Не ищем…’ (‘We do not seek’) In the second, the star negates the prepositional phrase denoting a place to seek happiness – ‘Не у людей’ (‘Not with people’). If stars do seek earthly happiness but not ‘with people,’ then where do they seek it? This oddity of the final lines suggests that the character referred to as a star is in fact human, and it is the frame-speaker’s perception of distance from her that casts her speech as that of a heavenly body.
In this light, I suggest that we take “Не у людей” as ‘not with the servants.’\textsuperscript{4} In such a reading, there are no literal stars in this poem – only a woman with whom the speaker feels a bond, but who is from a much higher social circle. The final stanza

\begin{center}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
Чем мы горим, светить готово & What we burn with is made to give light \\
Во тьме ночей. & In the darkness of nights. \\
И счастья ищем мы земного & And we seek earthly happiness \\
Не у людей. & Not with people/the common folk. \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

then takes on the sense that the higher social group is most active in their well-lit activities at night.

Люди эти с самым спокойным духом и уверенностью, что они ничего дурного не делают, но что-то очень хорошее, веселятся на бале. Веселятся! Веселятся от 11 до 6 часов утра, в самую глухую ночь, в то время, как с пустыми желудками валяются люди по ночлежным домам и некоторые умирают […] (Tolstoy 1937 v. 25, 303)

These people with their spirits at ease, and with the certainty that they are doing nothing evil, but rather something quite good, make merry at a ball. Merriment! They make merry from eleven o’clock until six in the morning, in the very dead of night, when at the same time, people lie with empty stomachs in poorhouses and some of them die […] (Tolstoy 1937 v. 25, 303)

The star-woman’s speech at first concentrates on why their love does not need to be fulfilled in union. Within these explanations, the two people are syntactically bound together (as in the implied ‘мы с тобой’) even while the star explains that being bound together is not for them. When they are finally separated syntactically in the last two lines, the ‘мы’ excludes the frame-speaker and includes a whole class of beings to whose company the frame-speaker (the would-be lover among the servants) cannot aspire.

Speaking of separation, we may note that the verbal forms have a remarkably prefixless appearance:

\begin{center}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
дышит & breathes \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{4} The noun люди can mean ‘people’ or ‘servants,’ depending on context.
Of all these verbal forms, all but one are as simplex as they could be – no prefixes or infixes of any kind. The standout verb is разгадали, which does not usually carry a sense of any concrete spatial separation. Ожегов gives two definitions:

1. что. Найти правильный ответ на загадку, загаданное.
2. кого-что. Понять смысл, уяснить характер кого-чего-н.

1. To find the correct answer to a riddle.
2. To understand the sense, to make clear the personality or character of someone or something. (Ожегов 1992, 665)

Both these senses, not spatial in any concrete way, are fairly applicable here. In addition, the prefix раз- is here ‘respatialized’ - in context the разгадали (‘have figured out’) refers to the star’s pushing the idea that ‘you’ and ‘I’ are not ‘we,’ but separate.⁵

One verbal aspect on the background of another can have remarkable structural significance. Here, the two perfective forms – суждено being the only participle and разгадали being the only one with a prefix – are linked in sense as well as in aspect: the separation, which requires the unity of eye contact to be determined, is what is fated. Just as the usage of the pronoun мы brings the star and her abandoned lover closer only to separate them at the same time, so do the perfective forms taken alone show quite clearly what is accomplished with this speech. Eye contact as in

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⁵ See, in light of the use of разгадали here, etymologies that derive words of knowledge and separation (Latin scio, sexus) from Proto-Indo-European *skh₁-e/o (de Vaan 2008, 545, 560; Shipley 1984, 348).
is among the deepest forms of union, but here the star uses it to suggest a very concrete separation in the knowledge of “Кто ты, кто я” (“Who thou art, and who I am”). If we concentrate on the abstract structure of the poem at this point, we see that it anticipates the mutual knowing of eye contact that is developed more fully in “В полуночной тиши бессонницы моей” (“In the midnight hush of my sleeplessness”) (see the discussion in chapter 4). If we focus our attention instead on the social situation between the human frame-speaker and his astralized love, the line “Кто ты, кто я” (“Who thou art, and who I am”) becomes her final word about the impossibility of their union. The words мы and я bear strong metrical and speech stresses and so the line, consisting only of pronouns, makes quite clear their intimate knowledge of each other. While confirming this spaceless union, the star also denies it, telling her love – “Who thou art, and who I am” – which we may paraphrase in this context as “Of course I love you…but you should know your place.”

The carefully composed “One star among all breathes” contains many syntactical and verbal pointers to its situation of separated lovers. The social standings are recognizable only though a ‘slip of the tongue’ in the star’s speech, but the structure of their division is present through the whole poem. The poem abstracts the essence of many physically parted pairs and spreads that structure of together-yet-apartness throughout its length. The result is an unusually dense but light poem – dense in its structure and emotional content, light in meter and tone — the sense of lightness stems chiefly from the speaker’s remarkable restraint and ability to remove any personal information while leaving the essence of their love perfectly visible.
Here the sole prefix in one of two associated perfective forms reminds us of the separation of two faces that define each other, which is the case with the imperfective and perfective aspectual forms. The poem has two lovers, two aspects, and each pair is made of opposites, not contraries, defining and supporting each other. We can take this remarkable miniature in two ways. On its own, it is the consciousness of the abandoned lover and his representation of the woman who has rejected him.6 A little knowledge of Fet’s biography, however, makes this into a Lazic lyric. The lines “What we burn with is made to give light / In the darkness of nights” recall Lazic’s fiery death. In that case, the poem is a recasting of their relationship so that Fet is the abandoned one, and Lazic is the fiery but cold and impossibly distant lover. The biographical guilt is masked in an inversion of the whole situation – the female ‘star’ becomes so cold and distant by her own choice dictated by the social situation, and the abandoned frame-speaker has no responsibility at all. The poem is a carefully-fitted mask for Fet’s own feelings of responsibility and guilt over his actions--now over thirty years past--that resulted in the deadly fire and Lazic’s distance and coldness in death.

**Aspect in Harmony with Other Devices**

Fet uses other analyzable techniques that help to sweep the reader along, even in works in which the organization of the verbs is particularly active in the creation of meaning. This is not surprising when we consider the high informational density of his works. What may be surprising is the tightness of interaction between verbal aspect and other formal features and the

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6 Although I have referred to the frame-speaker / lover with the masculine pronoun, there is no reason within the poem to assign that speaker to the masculine gender. The poem is not about the genders of the speakers, but about the etymological ‘sex’ (connected to Latin *secare*, cut, divide) that holds them apart, defining each in the other’s shape.
way the aspectual texture of the poem supports and is supported by the other matters, which
might appear to be somehow separate, but have their strength in aspect even as it has its strength
in them. Consider the lyric “Встречу ль яркую в небе зарю” (“If I meet a bright dawn in the
sky,” 1882):

Встречу ль яркую в небе зарю, If I meet a bright dawn in the sky,
Ей про тайну свою говорю, I tell her about my secret,
Подойду ли к лесному ключу, If I approach a spring in the woods,
И ему я про тайну шепчу. I tell him too about my secret.

А как звезды в ночи задрожат, And when the stars begin to tremble at night
Я всю ночь им рассказывать рад; I am glad to tell them things all night;
Лишь когда на тебя я гляжу, Only when I look at you,
Ни за что ничего не скажу. I will not say anything, no matter what.
(Fet 1959, 191)

The first stanza is quite rich in the phoneme /u/– 14 out of 36 vowel phonemes are /u/, 39%. All
the rhyme-vowels are у, putting even more emphasis on that phoneme. Then у almost disappears
as we move into the second stanza, showing up only once in всю (all) in the first couplet,
dropping to about 6%. It returns in rhyme-position, however, for the final couplet, reasserting
itself and giving a special weight to the final rhyme-pair. The speaker leads up to that final
couplet with another sound peculiarity as well -- in the first у-filled stanza we have hardly any
words that end in a consonant – the nonsyllabic prepositions в and к (in and to), the pronoun ей
(to her/it), and the particle ль (a non-syllabic question-particle). The first couplet of the second
stanza then, in addition to dropping /у/ down to almost nothing, also introduces a kind of staccato
effect with its rush of final consonants (как, задрожат, ночь, им, рассказывать, рад) (when,
begin to tremble, night, to them, tell, glad). Then, after лишь (“only”), the speaker returns to final vowels for the couplet that reintroduces stressed, rhyme-position /u/.

This final rhyme-pair is interesting also in that it is the only instance of two verbs being rhymed. The dominance, disappearance, and reemergence of /u/ leads up to a verbal rhyme pair at the non-climactic conclusion of the poem. Since our gaze has already been drawn just by the sound structure of the poem to these final verbs, and because they display a particular ‘verb-on-verb’ quality found nowhere else in the poem, we should look more carefully at the verbs throughout the text.

If we view the poem in terms of verbal aspect, the ‘view’ of the situations surrounding the secret, we find an invariant structure in the first three couplets – the first line that initiates the contact between the speaker and the natural phenomenon has a perfective verb (встречу, подойду, задрожат) (meet, approach, begin to tremble), while the telling of the secret is imperfective (говорю, шепчу, рассказывать) (I speak, I whisper, (I am glad) to tell). This draws attention to the reversal of the usual aspectual arrangement in this couplet – the connection between the speaker and the addressee is imperfective (гляжу, ‘look’) and the failure to tell the secret is a negated perfective (не скажу, ‘I shall not tell’).

To say this in more conversational terms: in each of the first three couplets, the speaker notes the inception of a situation that allows him to tell his secret to objects that do not in any concrete sense ‘talk back.’ The speaker is able to be the sender and the receiver for his secret-sharing speech act. His talking must be imperfective, as no distinct party receives any information. The speaker tells his secret to himself. The situations begin, but they have no end. Their purpose is the process of talking that must be initiated but cannot be stopped. Secret-telling is boundless.
In the couplet with the return of prominent /u/ and the only verb-verb rhyme pair, the placement of the aspectual forms is reversed and so changes the entire view of the situation. The banishment and return of the dominant vowel phoneme /u/ coincides with the general dominance of vowel-final words, their being squeezed out by final consonants, and their return. The poem is structured with at least two kinds of dominance in the sound structure, even as the reader is absorbing the aspectual invariance of the first three couplets. When the vowel-final words return after a lull and the imperfective verb appears first in the final couplet, the sound-structure and the alteration of the aspectual invariance make even the sophisticated or very experienced reader expect a perfective climax.

When the speaker gets a ‘real’ second person in the penultimate line at the height of tension and expectation of climax, the confrontation with that person is itself boundless, without beginning or end. The reversal of aspectual positions has led up at last to...a negated perfective non-climax. But this is not a simple failure to communicate love. The rhyme-structure of the poem demonstrates what is really happening here. Consider the first three rhyme-pairs and the referents of each rhyme-word:

зарю (dawn)– 3rd person
говорю (I speak)– 1st person
ключу (spring)– 3rd person
шепчу (whisper) – 1st person
задрожат (begin to tremble) – 3rd person
рад (glad) – 1st person
The referent-invariance in each of these pairs is ‘3rd person – 1st person.’ This invariant matches perfectly with the aspectual invariant of each couplet. When the meeting with the third-person, inanimate object takes place, the speaker does his speaking and treats those objects almost like a second-person addressee. When the true second person appears, not only is the climax negated, but the final couplet (which contains the triumphant return of /u/ and the vowel-final words) is of this type:

гляжу (I look) – 1st person
скажу (I shall not tell) – 1st person

At the moment of greatest tension for which the speaker and the sound-shape and aspectual structure of the poem have been preparing themselves through the whole text, when the second person is finally present instead of a third-person object to hear this secret, the speaker turns in on himself. He is even less engaged in the outside world that he was in the preceding three couplets.

As the aspectual invariant is reversed, so is the arrangement of grammatical persons turned from a communicative act into a self-locking, self-bespeaking loop. The climax of communication is the final sealing-off of the speaker from any interaction. In all the previous couplets the perfective verbs introduced a situation or opportunity for speech, which speech turns out to be open-ended, imperfective. In the final couplet, the perfective verb closes off the possibility for speech. The opportunity opens and closes, and all the speaker has achieved is to end the speech he shares with his surroundings and to be sealed up in his own world.\(^7\)

The aspectual structure of “Встречу ль яркую в небе зарю” (“If I meet a bright dawn in the sky”) is in perfect harmony with the sound-structure and the rhyme-referents I have discussed

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\(^7\) Consider by way of comparison Ogaryov’s “Исповедь” (Мой друг, тебе хотел бы я”) and its similar theme of “failure of speech.” Ogaryov’s earlier poem is entirely respectable but is rather pale and lifeless when considered next to Fet’s “Встречу ль яркую в небе зарю.”
above. None of these structural elements could be removed or altered; they all support each other in leading to the non-culmination of the poem and the finality of the speaker’s isolation.

Of course, there is always an ambiguity in such a poem about the identity of the addressee: does the lone second-person тебя refer to some woman or to the reader? Whichever possibility we decide to privilege, even thinking about the question reminds us that the poem itself is a successful, completed speech act. Does the speaker fall silent and fail to speak when he sees his love or his reader? This ambiguity creates parallel incapacities in the speaker – he is either socially/sexually incapable of self-revelation or incapable of a poetic act that would be completed by a reader. We recall the relative desert of Fet’s middle period and Klenin’s suggestion that

…one overlooked source of the barrenness of Fet’s middle years may have been his reaction to Lazic’s death. He cannot have been totally unaware of the possibility that his failure to respond adequately to Lazic’s love for him reflected not only social circumstance but also his own incapacity – an incapacity at the wellspring of his inspiration as a poet. (Klenin 1990, 167)

\[8\] Tsvetaeva’s “Я — страница твоему перу” is an excellent, even more tense example of this ambiguity. Many readers on a first reading take the lyrical ‘I’ as the historical poet-author, Marina Tsvetaeva, and understand the lyrical ‘you’ as some historical male figure. Various feminist readings can follow from this initial understanding. Returning to the text later, however, causes some readers to rethink the relationship, to take the first line literally – the blank paper is speaking, which puts the historical author, Tsvetaeva, in the position of lord, fertilizer. The initial reading and the vocabulary of the poem bring out the sexual elements even in this secondary reading.

One might also propose a reading in which the text itself is the speaker and the reader is the ‘fertilizer.’ The two readings given above would then be ‘fruits’ of the reader’s fertilization of this reading.

9 Laferriere’s comment about the schizophrenic seems almost applicable to the speaker here: “his ego fails to split into an overall observing component and a regressed participant component. His entire ego, rather than just a component of it, regresses, leaving no possibility for self-perspective, and therefore no possibility for communication with anyone but an occasional friend or physician who has the patience to delve into the details of his life history.” (Laferriere 1977, 37-38). The poetry and sanity of the poet are, in this case, ‘saved’ by the reader who provides a balance to the speaker’s inward-turning, even if the speaker seems not to know it.

Mandel’shtam’s formulation sums up the speaker’s tension of recognizing and not recognizing the true second person addressee: “Итак, если отдельные стихотворения (в форме посланий или посвящений) и могут обращаться к конкретным лицам, поэзия, как целое, всегда направляется к более или менее далекому, неизвестному адресату, в существовании которого поэт не может сомневаться, не усомнившись в себе.” “And so, if individual poems (epistolary or dedicatory) can address specific people, poetry as a whole is always addressed to a more or less distant, unknown addressee, whose existence the poet cannot doubt without doubting himself.” (Mandel’shtam 1971, 240)
“Встречу ли яркую в небе зарю” (“If I meet a bright dawn in the sky”) should be considered a “Lazic lyric,” about Fet’s personal and poetic failures in connection with her, on the basis of Klenin’s suggestion and the reading I have offered above. Even so, we should bear in mind that the poem is, despite its topic, a successful speech act.  It gives material for analysis at any level of attention, but can never yield all its secrets. The poem is like every work of verbal art – complete, but never exhausted. In that way, the boundedness (perfective initiation and perfective closure) of the poem iconically represents not the speaker’s failure, but the nature of any speech act or work of art. It has edges and limits, but is not really bounded (witness the speaker’s unbounded speech in the first three couplets).

This Lazic lyric from early on in Fet’s second great period recognizes Fet’s incapacity as co-existent with the great power of his verbal art. A passage from Coleridge’s notebooks describes the phenomenon very well:

> From my earliest recollection I have had a Consciousness of Power without Strength – a perception, an experience of more than ordinary power with an inward Sense of Weakness […] More than ever do I feel this now, when all my powers still in their integrity are, as it were, drawn inward and by their suppression and compression rendered a mock substitute for Strength – the sprays, boughs, & branches compressed into a branchless leafless Trunk – (Coleridge 1957, ¶ 6620)

Fet’s own words about oxymoronic states are also appropriate here:

> Жизнь есть гармоническое слияние противоположностей и постоянной борьбы между ними: добрый злодей, гениальный безумец, тающий лед. С прекращением борьбы и с окончательной победой одного из противоположных начал прекращается и самая жизнь как таковая.

Life is the harmonious merging of opposites and the constant battle between them: good evildoer, crazy genius, melting ice. With the cessation of battle and with the final triumph of one of the opposing principles, life as such ceases. (Fet 1867, 48)

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10 Successful poems about failed speech acts are, of course, quite common. Pavlova’s “Donna Inesilia”), with its focus on the enclosure and hiding of the feminine subject even as the female author demonstrates nontrivial poetic skill may present interest when compared to the present reading of “If I meet a bright dawn in the sky.”
To Fet’s list добрый злодей, гениальный безумец, тающий лед (good evildoer, crazy genius, melting ice) we might add, after the reading of “Встречу ль яркую в небе зарю” (“If I meet a bright dawn in the sky”) given above, немой поэт (the mute poet). The poem creates a successful communication with the reader. That communication, however, is about turning away from the addressee, about failing to complete the speech act. In this way, the two ‘functions’ of the poem – to be successful verbal art and to display the speaker’s incapacity for real communion – correspond to the ideal meanings of the poles of Russian aspect. “Встречу ль яркую в небе зарю” (“If I meet a bright dawn in the sky”) is complete, perfect, bounded, and is seen as such by the reader. The speaker within this bounded work, however, fails even to attempt the important speech act, leaving his ostensible goal unaccomplished, imperfect.

The two aspects are balanced perfectly in their representation (4 and 4, one verb in each line) and in the meaning of the poem, which floats between a perfective speech act to the reader and a stunted, unripe speech act for the lyrical ‘you.’ The meaning-shape of the poem recalls two very different, but at the same time, similar definitions of the English word absolute:

4) Of authority: free from all external restraint or interference; unrestricted, unlimited.

8) Complete, perfect […] Free from imperfection or deficiency; perfect, consummate.

Unrestricted and unlimited (unbounded) on one hand and complete, perfect on the other. The poem and the word absolute (which I cite only as an example) demonstrate the interdependence of both aspects. In fact, after some meditation on the poem and definitions at hand, one sees in a very concrete way not only that the perfective and imperfective aspects of the Russian verb

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11 Compare to Yeats’s “When You are Old”.
present different views of what may be the same action, if we are speaking of extralinguistic realities, but also that the concepts perfect and imperfect are different views of the same thing.

*The perfect/imperfect whisper*

As long as we are speaking of different ‘views of the same thing,’ we may recall that scholars and critics have noted Fet’s ability to capture a moment and stretch it into a deeper, longer period of time (Klenin 2002, 29-31), taking something that seems instantaneous or complete and changing it into a fuller, less bounded experience. Most such poems have only to do with the speaker’s experience – while there may be an addressee, all the action and mental gymnastics take place in the speaker’s head.

The first book of *Evening Lights* contains a poem unusual in this regard, as the speaker is almost completely subsumed by the thoughts and actions he attributes to the addressee. The observable situation described is unremarkable, while the poem itself deserves a good deal of attention.

Толпа теснилася. Рука твоя дрожала,  
Сдвигая складками бегущий с плеч атлас.  
Я знаю: "завтра" ты невнятно прошептала;  
Потом ты вспыхнула и скрылась из глаз.  

The crowd was crowded. Your hand shook,  
Moving the silk that cascaded down in pleats.  
I know: “tomorrow” you said unintelligibly;  
Then you blushed and disappeared.

А он? С усилием сложил он накрест руки,  
Стараясь подавить восторг в груди своей.  
И часа позднего пророческие звуки  
Смешались с топотом помчавшихся коней.  

And he? With effort he folded his arms,  
Trying to keep down the joy in his breast,  
And the prophetic sounds of the late hour  
Were mixed with the clatter of rushing horses.

Казались без конца тебе часы ночные;  
Ты не смежила вежд горячих на покой,  

The night hours seemed endless to you;  
You didn’t close your hot eyelids for rest,
The narrator is almost not present, appearing only in the phrase “Я знаю” (“I know”). Most of the situation, however, is his fantasy. All the action of the second and third stanzas is interpreted by him or imagined out of nothing, and all this hinges on what he thinks he knows – that she said “tomorrow” unintelligibly.

After this observation, the speaker’s analysis becomes ever less attached to any shared reality. The woman’s blushing and disappearing is an observation – that much we can accept. The narrator then attributes effort and meaning to a third party folding his arms and appearing not ecstatic; he begins to see internal conditions of others at this point. Sounds become prophetic – but what do they prophesy? Meaning has begun to grow in very poor soil – first we have physical observations, then emotions, now prophesy. The final stanza is all fantasy in which the narrator imagines the woman lying awake all night with her eyes open. This much at least is possible to observe in the everyday world, although it is clear that the speaker is not there to witness it. The final two lines, however, are impossible in the shared and modern world where we live: sylphs and fairies are not seen floating above young women in bed.

We know nothing about the narrator except his ability to move by degrees into the internal world of another person. A prosaic explanation might be this: the narrator sees some exchange between the woman and another man, and inserts the word ‘tomorrow,’ which he did not in fact hear. He begins interpreting observed phenomena as if the speech that he made up were factual. Lying awake all night thinking of the young woman and her imagined promise for a meeting with her ‘lover,’ he attributes his own experience to her. His jealous fascination with the imagined tomorrow is turned into her expectation of a lovers’ meeting. Through these three
syntactically simple stanzas the narrator takes a stepwise journey from what is observable and observed through what is observable but not observed and arrives at what is not even observable. He has walked from one world to another with a very measured gait.

There are two poles at either end of the poem, one the pole of the shared world, and the other the pole of quite private visions that have become separate from that shared world. Intermediate stages fill the space between these poles. The speaker’s whole experience the crossing over. The breakdown of the aspectual forms is interesting: while there is no particular order or shape formed by the verbs, we may note that there are eight imperfective forms and eight perfective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>imperfective</th>
<th>perfective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>теснилась (was crowded)</td>
<td>прошептала (whispered)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>дрожала (shook)</td>
<td>вспыхнула (blushed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>сдвигая (moving)</td>
<td>скрылась (disappeared)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>бегущий (cascading)</td>
<td>сложил (folded)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>знаю (I know)</td>
<td>подавить (press down)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>стараясь (trying)</td>
<td>смешались (were mixed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>казались (seemed)</td>
<td>помчавшихся (which began to rush)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>шептали (whispered, imp.)</td>
<td>смежила (closed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The division of the forms in this way reminds us of the division between the world the narrator leaves and the world in which he arrives. The worlds have much in common – they ‘look’ similar in many of their features. One could mistake one for the other in some circumstances – for example, we assume that the young woman does in fact have a bed. The lists of aspectual forms overlap and run into each other, as these two worlds do. At the same time, they are distinct. Bridging the two distinct columns and the two worlds is the aspectual pair прошептала / шептали (whispered / were whispering), the first perfective form and the last imperfective. The narrator imagines that she whispers this word and that by the end of his trip he has transformed her into himself: his final vision contains her observing creatures of the imagination
whispering ‘tomorrow’ (завтра), just as he imagined her to whisper ‘tomorrow’. His imagination contains another act of imagination similar to--but distinct from--his own.

The effect is rather bizarre. The narrator has taken a bounded imaginary act, прошептала (whispered), and built out of it an unbounded world of imagination that contains the imperfective counterpart of its own origin, шептали (were whispering). A fabricated, brief, delimited speech act contains in itself a whole world of mythical creatures. Looking at the narrator’s mind in one way, we would say that he is jealous for no demonstrable reason. But such jealousy is common, it is nothing next to the ability to turn a moment into a whole new world. In a sense, this poem thematizes Fet’s own strengths in lyric poetry, noted and praised in articles from the 1850s to the present day (see Botkin 1891, 352-394 for a review of his general strengths as seen by a contemporary; see Klenin 2002, 29-31 for a note on his control over forms of consciousness).

Yet a certain amount of sadness is present as well – the speaker with this remarkable gift is almost nonexistent as a personality. We know only his talent and nothing else, and his expanding a moment into a whole world is almost frightening. His personhood is sacrificed to a fantasy, to knowledge that has no truth outside his head. The human capacity of discovering in a finite moment infinite resources for poetry, emotional experiences and the creative imagination here is palpably real, and it is odd to see a model of this behavior displayed so clearly in a lyric poem. It is like a model of the capacity to create that is at the foundation of being human. Lotman’s subsequent take on the human creative capacity sounds like a paraphrase of this poem, in some ways.

Древнегреческий философ Гераклит говорил, что психее (душе) присущ самовозрастающий логос. Количество информации в мозгу человека непрерывно растет, даже если никаких источников информации, кроме самого мозга, нет. Это, по-видимому, и есть основной признак интеллекта.
The speaker in “Толпа теснилась. Рука твоя дрожала” (“The crowd was crowded. Your hand shook”) does just this – taking in a limited, ‘bounded’ amount of information, he creates a word that resembles and is born from the original world but is apparently unbounded in its potential.

Sealed off from experience, limiting the receptive features of his brain, he creates a place in which the players have their own experiences, part of and similar to, but not identical to the primary world.

**World-Building of Aspect**

This simple aspectual opposition (some verbs belong to one type, others to the other type) is a tremendously productive force not only in spontaneous speech but in carefully composed works as well. Out of it, Fet creates several interacting and mutually supporting edifices across his poetic career – just as in the poem above, he takes one technique and, by allowing it to interact with other types of information and organization, creates new worlds that reveal the personal and poetic faces of his personality.

The analytical focus of this dissertation is the variety and meaning of demonstrable structures built on the foundation of Russian verbal aspect. We have already seen above several quite different structures: “Сны и тени” (“Dreams and shadows”) uses a simple ‘break’

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12 Compare to Aquinas’s formulation ‘Intellectus est species specierum’ (‘The intellect is the appearance of the appearances’).
arrangement that appears almost trivial but as part of a close reading invites the reader to renew his relationship to poetry and to change. It is about the reader as much as it is about the speaker. “Встре́чу ле́гкую в небе́ зарю” (“If I meet a bright dawn in the sky”), on the other hand, uses the flip-flopping of an otherwise invariant aspectual sequencing to overturn expectations and create a text that displays the states ‘completed speech act’ and ‘thwarted, failed speech act’ and so illuminates both those poles. We will see later on very precise, visibly crafted poems as well as some in which the aspectual beauties are almost hidden beneath ‘normal’ poeticized speech. Yet in every instance we find an inspired text that tells us something surprising about Fet’s work, worldview, and personality.

That personality is one of the most paradoxically mysterious in Russian literature. No matter how many lyrics one reads or how long one lives with them, no matter what biographical information comes across the reader’s path from Fet’s own autobiography or from scholarly works, there remains a feeling that the material is not lacking anything but that it is hiding something. Several major works on Fet have taken an approach that privileges one side of the work in an attempt to understand this self-effacing author better: Gustafson keeps to a more or less intuitive tack informed by knowledge of European poetry and philosophy, while Klenin reads Fet’s career in terms of his bilingualism and ability to draw on two major poetic traditions. Shenshina’s monograph concentrates on time and eternity in later lyrics, and early critics, such as Botkin, Druzhinin, and Grigor’ev, see Fet as a kind of highly developed offshoot of one tiny branch of Pushkin’s career.

As happens with every poet’s literary remains, they are at the readers’ mercy. We have been defining Fet since he began publishing, and especially since he stopped publishing at the time of his death. Over one and a half centuries of Fet criticism, all these views have contributed
to the modern consensus that contains responses from countless readers. The present dissertation attempts to focus its reader’s attention on another aspect of Fet’s work that has until now not received much notice – verbal aspect as an extended metaphor for the tension in Fet’s relationship with his memories of Lazic. The Lazic situation is so pervasive for most of Fet’s career that we will need to look at it through several of its faces to approach the heart of it. To that end, each of the remaining three chapters has a distinct thematic focus apparently separate from Lazic. Each, however, will return us to that failed love with deepened understanding.

In chapter Three, I will look at two ‘spring’ lyrics, one of which is almost paradigmatic for Fet’s poetic world, and read them while exploring the terms in which Gustafson explicates them. In chapter Four, I will examine the tension of Imperfect and Perfect -- as expressed through imperfective and perfective verbs – particularly with respect to Fet’s relations to editors and readers. In chapter Five, I will explore how Fet’s writing reveals him to us as a reader of Pushkin – and how his reading of Pushkin is tied to his continual re-reading of Lazic.
Chapter 3: The Polarity of Spring: Rereading Fet and Gustafson

Considering his standing in the canon of Russian poetry, we would think that Fet has been under-studied for the last half-century or so, especially in Western criticism. Klenin 2002 and Gustafson 1966 are the only major book-length works in English on Fet. To some it may seem that he carried the weight of the Golden Age on his back through much of the 19th century until the 20th century was ready to pick it up after his death. Although Fet links Pushkin’s era to Blok and even Tsvetaeva and, there has been a tendency for published criticism to find his poetry a little less fascinating than one might expect.

As I noted in Chapter 1, Fet seems somehow beyond particulate analysis and at the same time either too obvious or too slippery for interpretation. Fet engages the reader and has done so for some 170 years, but he also makes problems for the reader, some of which are so worrisome that maybe it is they that keep the critical response somewhat muted.

Whatever the reasons for this relative quiet in published works on Fet, Richard Gustafson’s The Imagination of Spring: the Poetry of Afanasy Fet stood for decades as the only major book on Fet in English, and so holds a significant place in the Western understanding of this poet. The very title of Gustafson’s book suggests a focus on the productive power of the poet in the natural world, and that power is in fact central to Gustafson’s understanding of Fet. This tension between the poet’s consciousness and the world around him is a generative tension, and this tension is key to Fet’s poetry throughout his career.

To begin this chapter, I would like to examine the early poem “Я пришел к тебе с приветом” (“I have come to you with a greeting”) which shows this tension as clearly as any of
Fet’s poems. Gustafson’s reading, which I will cite below, is important for my own; while his presentation of the reading is more synthetic and mine is more analytical, two readings are complementary, as I will show below. A cultural note: this poem is still very well-known today, even to the point of being considered rather quaint by many people educated in Russian-language secondary schools (Dvigubski, personal correspondence 2010). Its famous first line also has spawned the modern colloquial use of the phrase “с приветом” (“with a greeting”) which may be glossed as “having rather bizarre ideas and/or behaviors, slightly crazy” (Lubensky 1995, 509). In some circles and even in the mass of modern collocations, this poem has become a bit of a joke. I will address the significance of this fact after my analysis of the poem.

“I have come to you with a greeting” is fascinating for its own structure, but also because it displays the more obviously philosophical ground that makes aspect interesting for Fet and in the context of his entire work. Polarity is also quite visible in this poem, even apart from the polarity of verbal aspect. This familiar text contains the germ of so much of Fet’s poetry – the technical side, subject to analysis, as well as the synthetic or intuitive side that we cannot approach with structuralist tools.

Я пришел к тебе с приветом,
I have come to you with a greeting,
Рассказать, что солнце встало,
To say that the sun has risen,
Что оно горячим светом
Has begun to tremble with its hot light
По листам затрепетало…
Through the leaves…

Рассказать, что лес проснулся,
To say that the forest has awakened,
Весь проснулся, веткой каждой,
The whole forest, in each branch,
Каждой птицей встрепенулся
In each bird has been roused
И весенней полон жаждой; And is filled with vernal thirst;

Рассказать, что с той же страстью, To say that with the same passion
Как вчера, пришел я снова, As yesterday, I have come again,
Что душа всё так же счастью That the soul is still just as ready
И тебе служить готова; To serve fortune and you;

Рассказать, что отовсюду To say that from everywhere
На меня весельем веет, Merriment is wafting onto me.
Что не знаю сам, что буду That I know not myself what I shall
Петь – но только песня зрет. Sing – only that the song is ripening.

(Fet 1959, 259)

Gustafson explicates the general sense of the text, saying

It becomes clear that he was talking about the spring day in order to talk about himself. The boundary between objective and subjective truth is broken: we do not know whether the gaiety wafts around the poet because the spring day is so full of joy and has a beneficent influence on him or whether the day seems so exuberant because the poet himself is full of spring’s desire. It is precisely this sort of experience which Fet considers a truthful one. (Gustafson 172-173)

His observation that “the boundary between objective and subjective truth is broken” and its corollary, the impossibility of locating the origin of spring’s desire in the speaker (subject) or in his surroundings (object), give us a solid foundation for understanding the emotional and intellectual shape of the poem. Not only does the poem break the boundary between subjective and objective truth, it also breaks the boundary between subject and object themselves.

In its lyrical content, the poem starts with and even is a salutation from the speaker to an addressee. The entire poem is an expansion or explication of the first line ‘I have come to you to greet you.’ This greeting-text is not even superficially about the speaker or the addressee as people or even as lyrical personae. The phenomena of the natural world define everything we
can know about the lyrical I, which itself allows the lyrical Thou to exist. The I and Thou of the
poem have their existence only through participation in the natural world, which the speaker’s
subjectivity makes into observable phenomena. The speaker’s attention is focused on partness,
on participation. This is especially visible in the first two stanzas, which are heavily metonymic:

[солнце] горячим светом по листам затрепетало – [the sun] with its hot light has begun to
tremble

лес проснулся, весь проснулся, веткой каждой – the forest has awakened, the whole forest,
in each branch

[лес] каждой птицей встрепенулся – [the forest] in each bird has been roused

Each of the phrases I have italicized above is an instrumental predicate denoting a part of the
whole that is the grammatical subject of the sentence (see also Bukhshtab 1974, 83). In this way
the first half of the poem is insistent about participation within the natural world. Each
instrumental predicate is one aspect of the whole – the light of the sun, the branches of the forest,
and even the birds of the forest. As with subject and object in Gustafson’s explication, the
boundary between whole and part is blurred, and the instrumental predicates горячим светом,
веткой каждой, каждой птицей become the body parts of a living being. Timberlake’s
explication of such instrumental agents contextualizes this phenomenon for us quite well:

A characteristic feature of Russian is the use of the instrumental with predicates
that describe activities in which a human agent moves a body part of the subject
or an immediate extension of the body: махнуть [рукой ~ тряпкой] ‘wave {with
the hand ~ a rag}, трясти [головой ~ рукой ~ пистолетом] ‘shake with the
head ~ hand ~ a pistol.’ The body part is synecdochic to the aspectuality (change)
of the predicate” (Timberlake 2004, 334-335).
These instrumental predicates allow and define the action performed by the nominative subject. Although neither солнце (sun) nor лес (forest) is grammatically animate, they become very close to animated beings in Fet’s usage.13 The birds, branches, and light of the sun all become ‘body parts’ or ‘immediate extensions’ of a body that is greater than any one of the nominative subjects – the suggestion is that all these things listed are immediate extensions of some primary thing that treats them as ‘fingers.’ In this way the poem draws our attention to what is ‘behind’ the phenomenal world.

If we take the speaker’s initial statement quite literally, it is the actions involving these aspectual instrumental predicates that he has come to announce – all these things are the ‘greeting’ of the first line. The poem is one statement, most of which is made up of these predicates, or, as Klenin says, “[the] initial predication bears the weight of four stanzas’ subordinative elaboration” (Klenin 1990, 170). “Я пришел… рассказать… что солнце… горячим светом по листам затрепетало…” The three instrumental predicates even form a kind of sequence of participations in the forest. The sun rises and its light arrives to feed the leaves. The forest awakens веткой каждой (“in each branch”) as the leaves on each twig receive that light. Finally, the forest starts into activity каждой птицей (“in each bird”), as the birds depend on the plant life for part of their food supply. In a very literal sense, these stanzas are simply about a series of partakings.

Partaking in this series through his senses is all that gives the speaker existence. The non-human life participates in the light of the sun, as the speaker participates in the plant and animal life. Throughout the description of these processes there is a tendency to greater and more obvious animacy or even humanity in the motions described:

солнце встало…затрепетало… the sun has risen…begun to tremble

13 Russian nouns fall into two categories – animate and inanimate.
лес проснулся…проснулся веткой каждой the forest has awakened…awakened in each branch
каждой птицей встрепенулся…in each bird has been roused
полон жаждой…filled with thirst…
с той же страстью…with the same passion…

At first there is rising, quaking motion. The forest wakes up and is partially personified by the
instrumental predicates – first by the inanimate branches and then birds. It is then filled with
thirst, a condition usually mentioned in connection with animals and humans. Finally, the poem
names a truly human condition – страсть, passion. The sun is the source of all these observed
partakings and fuels their progression. That progression guides us through increasing animacy
and humanity – in the end, it leads to a distinctly and uniquely human state. Man is the result
and limit of this series of transformational participations.

The joy that wafts toward the speaker, however, does not have a single source:
“Рассказать, что отовсюду / На меня весельем веет” (“To say that from everywhere
merriment is wafting onto me”). It comes from the surrounding world. The speaker participates
in that joy and becomes similar to the trees of the forest as his song ‘ripen’ in the fruit of the
poetic text. The first half of the poem is about the motion of vital energy through the nonhuman
world to human passion, while the second half concentrates that passion into the speaker’s song,
his ever-ripening fruit.

So far we have looked at wholes and parts in this poem, at nominative subjects and
instrumental predicates that function as ‘immediate extensions’ of those subjects. In other
words, the above reading uses the vocabulary of participations and wholes to explicate the poem.
When we consider the verbal forms in the poem, the coincidence of their number with the
number of lines (16) is striking in itself. This alone shows a certain balance in the verbal
organization of the text. When we look at the verbal forms as examples of either the perfective or imperfective aspect, we can see another type of organization. The first part of the poem is almost overloaded with perfective verbs, while the five imperfectives are concentrated at the end.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Russian</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>пришел</td>
<td>have come</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>рассказать</td>
<td>to tell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>встала</td>
<td>has arisen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>затрепетало</td>
<td>has begun to tremble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>рассказать</td>
<td>to tell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>проснулся</td>
<td>has woken up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>проснулся</td>
<td>has woken up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>встрепенулся</td>
<td>has been roused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>рассказать</td>
<td>to tell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>пришел</td>
<td>have come</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>служить</td>
<td>to serve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>рассказать</td>
<td>to tell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>веет</td>
<td>wafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>не знаю</td>
<td>I do not know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>буду петь</td>
<td>I shall sing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>зреет</td>
<td>ripens</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The aspectual forms here give a graphical representation of a “polarity” (as noted in the Introduction, I take the term from Coleridge 1969, 94, after the citation in Barfield 1971, 36).

The poles are not quite isolated -- they bleed into each other at their boundary where служить (serve, imperfective) and рассказать (tell, perfective) have ‘switched places.’ This represents the poles’ interdependence rather than any antagonistic opposition. Repetition of рассказать (tell) and проснулся (has woken up) emphasizes the perfective quality of the first pole, while the quite unusual rhyme on the imperfective auxiliary буду (shall) highlights the imperfective quality of the second pole.

The aspectual ‘theme’ of each pole is consistent with Boris Gasparov’s formulations about the world-views inherent in use of imperfective or perfective forms:

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14 It is interesting to note that there are no participles in the text – as if the text is already sufficiently ‘about’ participation that a part of speech with часть in its name would be just too much.
Thus, the use of Perf. Projects a world view according to which a person assumes the position of an external observer who is not immediately involved in the processes he describes in his message, although his actual experience is inextricable from the continuous stream of time in which all these processes are developing. By approaching reality from this position, the speaker achieves a segmentation of his continuous experience; he singles out from his experience certain entities which become the integral objects of his observation and his description.

In this case [use of the imperfective], the speaker assumes an internal (subjective) perspective in his view of the situation. Such a position projects an “existential” view of the world; it views life as a continuous experience into which every person (including the speaker) is inextricably immersed. Whatever portion of this continuous process (from the present, past, or future) comes into the speaker’s attention, his position in regard to it would be that of a co-experiencer, rather than that of an external observer and “narrator.” No matter what part (if any) the speaker actually took in the described action, he identifies his perception of it with the very process of its continuous unfolding. (Gasparov 1990, 195, italics mine)

As an observer in the first half of the poem, the speaker “is not immediately involved in the processes he describes in his message.” As we move into the imperfective pole, however, we approach the speaker’s ripening fruit-song which we realize we have been observing, simply by reading the text, in “the very process of its continuous unfolding.” Gasparov’s formulations provide a summary of each pole of the poem.

The perfective pole comes first in a linear reading of the text, and the actions named with that abundance of perfective forms allow the pole of imperfective passion and ripening to have existence. This recalls the historical and continuing production of imperfective forms from perfectives. It also describes with some beauty a concept found centuries earlier in Western thought:

It is natural for the perfect to come before the imperfect, as act comes before potentiality; for whatever is in potentiality is made actual only by something actual. And since God first created things not only for their own existence, but also that they might be principles of other things, so creatures were produced in
their perfect state to be the principles as regards others (Aquinas 1945, 907 – for other editions, see *Summa Theologica* Q. 94, Art. 3).

The observed natural world with its perfective verbs is a symbol of what is perfect, actual. At the other end of the polarity, the imperfective process of participating in that natural world is poetic imagination and its fruit. Speaking of the final word *speem*, Maslov’s note on such verbs is noteworthy here:

…процессы, обозначаемые этими глаголами, объективно не заключают в себе необходимости своего прекращения. Они не ведут ни к какому скачку в новое состояние, остаются равными себе на всех отрезках своего протекания и, таким образом, не дают никакой перспективы, кроме перспективы бесконечной себетождественной длительности.

…the processes denoted by these verbs do not, objectively speaking, include in themselves the necessity of their own cessation. They do not lead to any leap into a new state, they remain equal to themselves in all portions of their activity and so give no perspective apart from the perspective of endless self-similar continuation. (Maslov 1948, 309)

The imperfective pole of the poem ends with a verb that does not include an end, only a suggestion of unbounded growth.

The poles live inside each other – they are distinct but overlap where they meet, and more important, each contains the seed of the other underneath its dominant aspect. The perfective pole is all nested inside the perfective *рассказать* (tell), yet the focus of attention in that pole is on these processes of imperfect participations. At the other end, the imperfective pole concludes with the promise of future singing (as the poem is in fact about to end) and the imperfective process of ripening – *speem* – which brings the text to a close, makes it completed, perfect. The poles are graphically and conceptually distinct, but the ‘meaning’ of each gives rise to the other in the reader’s mind, and so the text becomes not a linear experience, but a self-supporting ring with two inseparable sides.
I said at the beginning of this reading that it was significant that the poem had become a joke in certain circles. The poem is ‘about’ and is an expression of the very ground of everything, the tension between being and becoming that allows everything to exist at all. The act of writing poetry is similar to the force that that makes the world. That the poem should become a joke of no importance is consistent with the understanding of the poem above – since the poem is so close conceptually to the ‘origin’ of our world, it is difficult to look at. The reader (over generations, perhaps) turns away from its brightness and makes the text safer, more everyday. The sense ‘everything, whole’ is exchanged for the sense ‘a throwaway nothing.’ In addition, that the speaker’s “с приветом” has taken on the meaning ‘a little bit crazy’ is quite consistent with the meaning of the poem. The fate of that phrase recalls one of Fet’s own formulations about oxymoronic phrases in his discussion of what is necessary for poetry:

Жизнь есть гармоническое слияние противоположностей и постоянной борьбы между ними добрый злодей, гениальный безумец, тающий лед. С прекращением борьбы и с окончательной победой одного из противоположных начал прекращается и самая жизнь как таковая.

Life is the harmonious merging of opposites and the constant battle between them: good evildoer, crazy genius, melting ice. With the cessation of battle and with the final triumph of one of the opposing principles, life as such ceases. (Fet 1867, 48)

The genius of “I have come to you with a greeting” becomes a fool, a crazy person. The fate of the poem in the minds even of individual speakers who have not paid much attention to it is consistent with its meaning and with Fet’s conception of what poetry is.

Brief meditation on aspect in Russian makes the concept of aspect as polarity accessible to the nonspecialist, but the polarity of aspect is suggested also in works of a linguistic character: “Aspect is a classification of verbs based on the kind of history that a verb reports. These histories tend to polarize into two types…” (Timberlake 2004, 398). The framework of verbal
aspect pulls histories apart, as if drawing them towards the two ideal poles of perfective and imperfective. Such interdependence and mutual definition is the heart of any polarity such as Russian verbal aspect, and polarity is at the heart of Fet’s poetic work.

Gustafson calls his book “The Imagination of Spring”; I propose that we call what we have seen above “the polarity of spring.” It is the tension of this polarity (between subject and object, death and life) that supplies the motion and dynamism of a springtime setting. If this poem is paradigmatic for Fet, part of that paradigm is the representation of the polarity of aspect. We will see the poles of aspect interacting in a number of ways in later chapters, but this early poem has set the stage for our understanding of aspect as a productive tension in Fet’s poetry. Published in 1842, “I have come to you with a greeting” predates Fet’s acquaintance with Lazic by at least six years. It is telling that in the spring of his poetic career, Fet produces this programmatic text. The importance of polarity and aspectual oppositions is on display, but the poem concludes with a statement that the speaker does not know into what form these concerns will ripen. As we have seen in the example texts given in the previous chapter, the concept of polarity through aspect later becomes a vehicle in which to explore Fet’s relationship with Lazic.

The Prison Prefix

The poem I examined in the previous section is paradigmatic for poetry in general and especially for Fet’s work, as the rest of this dissertation will show. Now we will examine another lyric that has to do with spring but lies well within the period of Fet’s deepest concern with his memories of Lazic. I have chosen the lyric “Глубь небес опять ясна” (“The depth of
the skies is again clear”)) from 1879 for its subtle intertext with “I have come to you with a greeting.”

This self-referential and speech-referential lyric is one of Fet’s most abstract but also among his most effective. With no major action, no emotional vocabulary, no obvious philosophical content, and no technical fireworks, this poem draws little attention to itself in a collection. Yet upon even the first reading it reveals a strange power, a grip on the reader that is difficult to assess. It is hard to say where this power comes from, so I will only offer a short piece of conscious analysis of the text with the hope that it will complement the reader’s unconscious appreciation of the poem. The two forms of understanding complement each other and form the total impression of the work.

Like “I have come to you with a greeting” the poem is at least on the surface about spring. Here, however, there is no first-person speaker, no observer. The ecstatic quality of observation in that earlier poem is not present.

Глубь небес опять ясна, The depth of the skies is again clear,
Пахнет в воздухе весна, Spring smells in the air,
Каждый час и каждый миг Each hour and each moment,
Приближается жених. The bridegroom approaches.

Спит во гробе ледяном Sleeps she in an icy coffin
Очарованная сном,— Becharmed by a dream,—
Спит, нема и холодна, Sleeps she, mute and cold,
Вся во власти чар она. All in the power of the charms.

Но крылами вешних птиц But with the wings of spring birds
Он свевает снег с ресниц, He knocks the snow from her eyelashes,
И из стужи мертвых грез And from the frost of dead dreams
Проступают капли слез. Step out drops of tears.
(Fet 1959, 140)

It seems to draw on tales of Sleeping Beauty and the myth of Demeter and Persephone, but is so abstract that we cannot insist on any one source. The poem, to put it into prose, is about an unnamed, abstract bridegroom (the sun?) coming to warm a frozen and ensorcelled woman (spring?) in her icy coffin. Her eyelashes are upright plant life, and birds knock snow from them, which turns into droplets of water as it melts.15

Simple enough, it seems. The presence of the seeming metaphorical items in the same space as the literal items, however, feels unusual or unbalanced. It requires a closer look. The birds are birds, but the eyelashes are not eyelashes. If we recall Timberlake’s explanation of ‘aspectual instrumentals’ that I quoted in my analysis of “I have come to you with a greeting,” we see that the same technique is used here, though in a much reduced form. Consider the lines “Но крылами вешних птиц / Он свевает снег с ресниц” (“But with the wings of spring birds / He knocks the snow from her eyelashes”). We can rule out the notion that this bridegroom is somehow using the wings of captured birds as napkins to knock the snow from a sleeping woman’s eyes.

Recalling those aspectual instrumentals in the earlier poem, we see that the same thing is happening here – some force ‘behind’ the birds is using their wings to knock snow from the

15 Bukhshtab notes the somewhat jarring or at least puzzling failure of grammatical gender of ‘personifications’ to coincide with the gender of what they represent – if the жених (bridegroom) is a personification of spring, then the genders do not coincide, and the очарованная (becharmed, feminine) is ‘left hanging.’ If we assign the meaning of ‘sleeping spring’ to очарованная (becharmed, feminine), then the жених (bridegroom) seems out of place, and even fails to coincide in gender with the sun. Bukhshtab’s solution is to say that both the bridegroom and the ensorcelled woman together are symbols of two principles of spring – the one that brings and receives rebirth. This seems reasonable, but the fact that the lexeme весна (spring) is present in the second line scrambles any neat system of personifications even if we rename those personifications ‘symbols of principles,’ as Bukhshtab suggests (Bukhshtab 1974, 129). No system of such equations will serve this poem satisfactorily, which fact leaves our attention on the ‘encasement’ structure surrounding the central lexical and conceptual unit очарованная (becharmed, feminine).
trees. The masculine force is first presented as the concrete bridegroom (“Приближается жених,” “the bridegroom approaches”), but in the final stanza, we understand that this “bridegroom” floats between concrete and non-concrete. He is a man, but also the power behind the activity of birds in spring as they knock the snow from the branches of trees. The poem recalls those aspectual instrumentals that are so common in “I have come to you with a greeting.” With aspectual instrumentals and the approach of spring, we already have two important connections between these two poems, separated in composition by 37 years.

The line “Каждый час и каждый миг” (“Each hour and each moment”) invites us to look at two perspectives on time, so a brief look at the aspectual forms is again in order. As it turns out, the seven verbal forms are arranged in an interesting structure, but this structure is quite different from what we saw in the earlier poem. The lone perfective очарованная (becharmed, feminine) is in the center, surrounded by three imperfective forms on either side. This arrangement matches the semantics of the prefix о-. That sole perfective is immediately bookended by the two occurrences of спит (“sleeps”) – the line Очарованная сном (becharmed by sleep) is surrounded by sleep as its prefix suggests (очарованная строка – a becharmed line). All the verbal forms participate in this mirror-like, embrace-like structure – the three that stand before очарованная (becharmed, fem.) are similar to those that follow it, as the following arrangement shows:

пахнет – inanimate subject
приближается – animate subject,
спит – sleeps (animacy of subject undefined)
очарованная – central, surrounded, ensorcelled
спит – sleeps (animacy of subject undefined)
свеет – animate subject
проступают – inanimate subject
The verbal arrangement of the poem presents iconically the idea of being captured or surrounded by sleep or a dream, and the remaining forms fill out the ‘fortress’ that surrounds the bewitched woman. The full text of the poem is the fortress of sleep and ice even as it describes the release from that capitivity. The line Каждый час и каждый миг (“Each hour and each moment”) suggests these two ways of looking at the poem. Viewed as a moment, the poem itself is a frozen coffin, an unyielding structure, a grave. Viewed in time, where the verbs become sequential in a narrative present, the poem is the tale of release from the coffin that is itself. We can see the poem in both these ways at once – it invites the reader to see both aspects together. The frozen state of rest and the approach of dynamic spring do not come in a sequence – rather, they are each other’s faces.16

The aspectual organization is not only a formal technique here – it is, in a way, identical to the topic of the poem. The only perfective form here is the state of being bounded, surrounded, entropic, bewitched by sleep, dead. Yet the imperfective forms are the very walls that surround it, define it as so bounded and frozen. Here the interdependence of the two aspects of the Russian verb is made quite clear – the perfective form both means and is surrounded, bounded – and it is surrounded by imperfectives. They give the perfective form even as it grounds them in existence and gives them something to surround. The aspectual forms have different functions but these functions support each other. Here we see that perfective is quite literally bounded – but only on the background of imperfective. Imperfective is unbounded and alive only in its ‘release’ of perfective from its prison. As the two poles of verbal aspect define and support each other, so do death and life or winter and spring. Neither can hold onto its own being without the support of the other. They are two faces of the same underlying principle.

16 The situation recalls the aphoristic formulation of American author Ursula LeGuin – “Light is the left hand of darkness and darkness the right hand of light” (LeGuin 1969, 164).
Speaking again in terms of Fet’s loss of Lazic through her death, the ‘sleeping beauty’
side of this poem is a simple wish-fulfillment. The woman is not dead, but only ensorcelled
and frozen. The approach of spring, a natural process, will awaken her. The final lines

И из стужи мертвых грез And from the frost of dead dreams
Проступают капли слез. Step out drops of tears.

are also about Fet’s slow release of his own freezing of Lazic, his unbinding of feelings through
these late-period Lazic lyrics.

Aspects of Aspect

The poems above are about aspect – but only to the degree to which they are about
writing poetry and the approach or arrival of spring. It is through these two aspects of the poems
– verbal aspect and spring – that we approach something invisible that has verbal aspect and the
change of seasons as its expressions. We could call it the ‘ground of being’ or the ‘dynamic
tension of poetry,’ but these would be only words and would not add much to what we have
already seen about the remarkable qualities of Fet’s poetry. For now, it suffices to say that, with
these two works written almost 40 years apart by the same historical author, we have established
that verbal aspect is not only a productive tool for the organization of poetic texts, but also
participates in their production of meaning.

In both these cases, the dynamic tension of aspect resembles very closely the tension of
life that is the very topic of the poem. But the later text is hardly a repetition of the first -- the
vastly different focus, tone, and organization of these two poems could let the reader miss the
connection. Fet has not plagiarized himself, he has responded to himself at a different stage of

17 He went in and said to them, ‘Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.’ But they
laughed at him. – Mark 5:39
life. He uses this apparently simple tool in a number of striking and varied ways throughout his career. The various meanings are in some ways facets of a central insight that cannot be expressed otherwise than in these poems.

“‘I have come to you with a greeting’ is a programmatic poem about aspect and polarity, but it also offers an unfinished teleological statement – something will be born of this spring, but just what that is is not yet known. ‘The depth of the skies is again clear’ is also about the approach of spring, but here spring and verbal aspect have a tangible purpose – the resurrection of a woman who is central to aspectual structures. Through Fet’s rejection of her before her death, she has become central to his life’s work and his relationship with her in poetry is the embodiment of the polarity that so interested him even before their acquaintance.\(^18\).

In the next chapters, I will demonstrate not only that aspect is a productive and analyzable tool for Fet, but also that the polarity of aspect holds a tension which in these lyrics contributes greatly to the energy, and therefore to the meaning, of the text. We have already begun to see – as Fet did – verbal aspect as a tool of and a symbol of a larger and more foundational concern with polarity and with the tension of life and poetry. In Chapter Four, we will see this tension as it grows and pervades Fet’s life not only as an author, but also as a published author and a poet conscious of his role as such.

\(^18\) “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Psalm 118:22)
Chapter 4: The Imperfectivization of the Text – Or, Room for the Reader

Once I said to Pushkin:
-I very much like your poem “Riding to Izhory.”
-Why do you like it?
-I just do – it sounds like it’s fixing to get up and dance.
Pushkin laughed hard:
-Now why not say that in print – “fixing to get up and dance” – it’s so true. How can anyone say that a book is better than conversation...

-from the memoirs of A. O. Smirnova-Rosset

Mikhail Gasparov’s article on Turgenev’s redactions of Fet’s lyrics gives Fet’s readers an opportunity to understand Turgenev in relation to Fet not as a violent editor, but as a literary force (M. Gasparov 2002). To paraphrase Gasparov: Turgenev’s removal of the final stanzas of many poems was an attempt to provide a limiting structure or a sense of complete, aesthetically more perfect beauty. The result was very different: these redactions encouraged Fet to explore the possibilities of poems that give a feeling incompleteness, of saying only a tiny portion of the matter. These arguments contribute a lot to possible understandings of the aesthetic choices in the poetry of Fet’s second wind late in life.

In this chapter I follow Gasparov’s general line of thinking – poor editorial choices or no, Turgenev was an important part of Fet’s growth as a poet – and will examine the functions of verbal aspect as they relate to something outside Fet’s poetry itself – his reception by critics of the day and Turgenev’s notorious editorship of his poems in the late 1850s. The polarity of Perfect and Imperfect may illuminate some of Fet’s choices as an author outside the initial poetic impulse. To open this discussion I will read a fairly early lyric about the speech act itself.
The Aspect of Autoerotica

Let us look at the lyric “O, long shall I…” from 1844 and learn what early Fet has to say about sexual relationships and speech. Here we have a first-person ego inflated almost to the point of madness and a well-developed poetic side to his speech, but his relationship to the lyrical addressee is unstable, as we will see below.

О, долго буду я, в молчанье ночи тайной,
Коварный лепет твой, улыбку, взор случайный,
Перстам послушную волос густую прядь
Из мыслей изгонять и снова призывать;
Дыша порывисто, один, никем не зримый,
Досады и стыда румянами палимый,
Искать хоть одной загадочной черты
В словах, которые произносила ты;
Шептать и поправлять былье выраженья
Речей моих с тобой, исполненных смущенья,
И в опьянении, наперекор уму,
Заветным именем будить ночную тьму.

(Фет 1959, 81)

In terms of its verbal organization, the text is a stack of imperfectives – at one end, we have the auxiliary буду (I shall) to which six imperfective infinitives (изгонять, призывать, искать, шептать, поправлять, будить – drive out, call for, seek, whisper, correct, wake) are attached throughout the poem, ending with будить (wake) in the final line. All these actions are dependent on that буду (shall) for their subject and their relationship to each other. It is almost as if these verbs are made into the auxiliaries – the phrase долго буду (“long shall I”) is the real

19 The imperfective future tense in Russian is made of a conjugated form of the verb ‘to be’ – in this case, the first person singular that means “I shall be” with the imperfective infinitive. The great stretching of the auxilliant “shall,” as we see here, allows it to govern many infinitives, yoking all those actions together. This is a perfectly intelligible but also quite unusual instance of the imperfective future.
master here, as only it defines the person who is to perform these actions. It is surprising how balanced and natural the text seems despite this overload of auxiliary imperfective future.

These imperfective infinitives overlap each other, filling the silence of the night with frantic activity – but most of this activity is silent, purely mental. The words дыша, шептать, and будить (while breathing, to whisper, to wake) appear as the only sounds the speaker produces, and they increase in audibility and clarity as we read. It seems there is a sequence here, ending with a near-climax of waking – first breath, then whispers, then a name spoken loud enough to wake the darkness. Yet the yoking of all these actions to буду (I shall) denies sequence or even any completion of the waking in which they seem to culminate. Graphically and logically they form a sequence of growing sound, but given their syntactical relationship, they are a muddle of overlapping activities. The disagreement between the apparent sequence or growth of sound and the denial of that sequence in the subordination of all the infinitives to the same буду creates tension.

Before we go on to look at that tension more closely, another form of tension is worth noting. In 19th-century practice there are in general more poems of remembrance than of expectation (M. Gasparov 1999, 178). “O, long shall I” is both – the speaker is looking forward to future recall of memories. The merging of these two types is not unheard of, but the hermetic quality of the act of expected remembrance here makes the text unusual, and the combination of expectation with remembrance adds to the tension that comes from the culmination/denial of culmination discussed above. What is all this tension for?

The tension is the nature of the poem, which is a thinly masked description of masturbation with attendant rejection and invitation of thoughts of the beloved.

О, долго буду я, в молчаньи ночи тайной […] O, long shall I, in the silence of a secret night […]

O, долго буду я, в молчаньи ночи тайной […] O, long shall I, in the silence of a secret night […]
A nighttime activity witnessed by no one, performed in secret, and accompanied by heavy breathing and shame – all this accompanied by attractive yet repellent thoughts of the beloved – strongly suggests an autoerotic experience. The tension of the poem, built on a combination of expectation and remembrance as well as the swelling sound that does not really lead up to anything, is quite in line with this reading.\textsuperscript{20}

That said, so far we have only looked at the verbal adverb and the infinitive that are subordinate to the initial \textit{буду}. There are a few participles in the text as well. Looking at all the verbal forms together is revealing:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{буду} I shall…
  \item \textit{изгонять} drive out
  \item \textit{призывать} call, invite
  \item \textit{дыша} breathing
  \item \textit{зримый} seen
  \item \textit{палимый} burnt
  \item \textit{искать} seek
  \item \textit{произносил\'a} pronounced
  \item \textit{шептать} whisper
  \item \textit{поправлять} correct
  \item \textit{былье} former, those that were
  \item \textit{исполненных} filled
  \item \textit{будить} wake, rouse
\end{itemize}

There are thirteen verbal forms here to the twelve lines. All these forms, even the participles, are conspicuously imperfective – with the exception of \textit{исполненных}, ‘full.’ Being the only perfective form and so somehow extra, \textit{исполненных} iconically represents its own meaning. In terms of number, there are more verbal forms than there are lines to hold them. The poem is as full as it could reasonably be.

\textsuperscript{20} The colloquial use of \textit{кончить} (to finish, perfective) about orgasm shows the connection between sexual climax and verbal perfectivity.
The participle исполненных, ‘full,’ of course, does not exist in a vacuum only to suggest the verbal overfullness of the poem or the speaker’s overfullness with memory and sexual desire.

Of our talks, filled with embarrassment

It modifies речей, ‘talks,’ that have been conducted with the beloved. The poem itself also is speech from the speaker to the beloved, so исполненных, ‘full’ also modifies this poem itself under the umbrella category of these ‘talks.’ The participle suggests that the poem is ‘full’ just by standing out from the imperfective background forms whose number matches the number of lines, and by directly modifying a group of speech acts – a group that includes the poem itself.

The obvious dominance of the verbs in this text makes it appropriate to mention the two meanings of глагол in modern Russian – ‘speech’ and ‘verb.’ While the glut of imperfective verbs in the structure is plain, it is easy to forget that each four-line stanza has a focus on speech. In the first period, the speaker recalls the woman’s коварный лепет (crafty babble) and her smile, gaze, and hair – all parts under scrutiny during conversation. The second period seeks meaning in his memories of her speech, and the final period turns to the speaker’s own speech (including the poem at hand). The poem is self-similar and self-referencing even outside its own lexical composition. The word глагол (speech, verb) does not appear, but its meanings are the structure and the topic of the poem.

Just as глагол envelops its own meanings in a self-consuming way – verbs being parts of speech -- the poem is a carefully composed image of one completely wrapped up in an autoerotic, auto-verbal experience. Its focus is not the graphical or physical side of the act (that would be inappropriate for published poetry in the 1840s), but the mental processes that run parallel to it, while only the sounds and the speaker’s shame let the reader know just what is
The aspectual map of the poem is also a map of the speaker’s experience. Only shame is ‘accomplished,’ while the speaker hints at the desirable climax with his fitful breathing and shame. Despite those hints, all the actions run parallel to each other in one giant activity that denies sequence or any real possibility of climax, as the poem insists on the imperfective aspect everywhere except in the successful filling of speech with shame.

The verbal structure of the poem is perfectly consistent with the speaker’s nighttime activity. It is a drawn-out experience filled with shame (“О, долго буду я…” “Досады и стыда румяными палимый,” “Речей моих с тобой, исполненных смущенья” – “O, long shall I…” “Burnt by the blush of vexation and shame,” “Of our talks, filled with embarrassment…” ) that would like to climax somehow, but is locked into its process, its becoming, in a torturous way. The speaking of the beloved’s name in the last line is final only in the graphical arrangement, as it may run parallel to all the other actions. The final verb будить can be taken in the sense ‘to awaken’ or in a slightly higher register, ‘to stimulate, to arouse’ ((pro)будить чувство, (pro)будить желание – to arouse feeling, to arouse desire). Not even waking or ‘arousing’ the night with that name can be accomplished, the ostensible climax of the poem being the unbounded буду…заветным именем будить ночную тьму (I shall…[imperfectively] arouse the night’s darkness). There is a bond between the speaker and his surroundings; his inability to complete his autoerotic act is also his inability to arouse the night that surrounds him. The sexual act and the speech act are each other’s right and left hands.

Fet constructs the entire poem “О, long shall I…” around this extreme stretching of the imperfective future and the one perfective form. It is interesting to see that although imperfective greatly outnumbers perfective in terms of lexemes, both aspects describe the text

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21 Jakobson and Jones’s monograph “Shakespeare’s Verbal Art in ‘Th’ Expense of Spirit” is an excellent source for those wishing to investigate further the use of tense and aspect in poetry about masturbation (Jakobson 1970).
and the situation quite well. The perfective participle исполненных ‘full’ tops off the poem even as it participates lexically in the filling of speech--which includes the poem-- with shame. The imperfective forms draw out the periphrastic future so far that even as they hint at sequence and the possibility of a climax, those are denied by the relationship among these imperfective forms. They may be taken as simultaneous or mingled, but not as following each other and making a chain of increasing intensity.

The poem is a self-describing speech act, as it is filled with shame and notes that speech acts are filled with shame. But even the speech described is not accomplished: дыша (breathing) is followed by шептать (whisper) … which is followed by the always-unfinished будить (wake, arouse). The speaker’s articulatory apparatus increases its activity, but the treasured name is never completely spoken. So, just as there is a bond between the speaker and the surrounding darkness in that they cannot be aroused to a limit, there is also a strong link between sexual stimulation and speech, in that the speaker cannot complete either. Both can be initiated or in process, but never perfect, never successful.

On the other hand, if we examine it as one of Fet’s poems rather than as the speaker’s half-addressed monologue, “O, long shall I” is a quite successful speech act. Even Fet’s contemporaries were quite taken by this work.
…as a mover and torch-bearer he will not walk the path that the great Pushkin made. In him there is no dramatic nature, no breadth of vision, his worldview is the worldview of any simple mortal, his inspiration cannot sustain long exertion. But these very conditions, though they separate Mr. Fet from the way of poets like Pushkin, Schiller, and Byron, solidify his own realm in which, as we have already said above, he has neither peer nor rival […] Under the poem with which the book begins \(O, \text{long shall I, in the silence of a secret night}\), the name of Pushkin would not arouse any surprise in the reader…

(Druzhinin 1865, v. 7, 121)

The aspectual structure and un-arousing conclusion of “O, long shall I…” seem to have suggested Druzhinin’s vocabulary in this passage: “он не совершит пути…” (“he [Fet] will not complete/make perfect the journey”) “Под стихотворением […] имя Пушкина не возбудило бы никакого удивления в читателе…” (“Under the poem the name of Pushkin would not arouse any surprise in the reader”).

It is quite reasonable to think that Druzhinin’s quite positive response to “O, long shall I…” partakes of the language and structure of the poem, although they are changed and shrunk for his critical prose. There is an infectious quality in Fet’s best verse that alters the worldview of its readers. Botkin’s response to Fet shows a similarly Fetian cast of mind near his discussion of “O, long shall I…”

…главное заключается не в самой картине природы, а в том поэтическом ощущении, которое пробуждено в нас природою […] Не надобно забывать, что призвание поэзии в этом, как и во всяком, случае состоит…в пробуждении нашего внутреннего созерцания природы. Только то и поэзия, что пробуждает это внутреннее созерцание. Отделка подробностей, конечно, имеет важное достоинство, но ведь то, что в действительности можно осмотреть и охватить одним взглядом в описании и не иначе может быть представлено, как в отдельных чертах и одно за другим.

…the heart of the matter is not in the picture of nature, but in that poetic feeling that nature arouses in us […] One should not forget that the purpose of poetry in this, as in every case, is to awaken our internal perception of nature. Only that is poetry which awakens this internal perception. The decorative details, of course, have important merit, but what in reality may be seen and taken in at a glance, in a description cannot be presented but as individual features, one after another.

(Botkin 1890, v. 2, 378-379, italics mine)
Botkin seems to have the poem’s sequenced / simultaneous imperfective infinitives in mind when he discusses the necessity of sequence in a description of what can be experienced as a whole. He also picks up on the poem’s deep concern with fulfillment and arousal and incorporates such vocabulary into his criticism:

Мы не знаем, многому ли в поэзии г. Фета суждено пережить свое время […] --но если бы даже эти милые, свежие цветы поэзии и не могли выдержать охлаждающего действия времени,--разве они не исполнили своего призвания? Они пробуждали и пробудят еще во многих сердцах сладкие поэтические ощущения и даже минуты живейшего наслаждения.

We do not know whether there is much in Mr. Fet’s poetry that is fated to survive its time […] but even if these sweet, fresh flowers of poetry cannot withstand the chilling effects of time – have they not fulfilled their purpose? They have aroused and will arouse in many more hearts sweet poetic sensations and even moments of keen pleasure.

(Botkin 1890, v. 2, 393)

Botkin picks up on the sexual / verbal functions of the poem without writing explicitly about the matter. His criticism is informed by the poem, and his insightful response can also inform further interpretation.

Botkin focuses his attention on the reader’s internal awakening that is the result of true poetry. The reading enriches the reader’s relationship with the ‘world’.. My comments in the basic reading above touched on the ‘nesting’ of all the verbal forms inside one буду (I shall), and the speaker’s enclosure in darkness. Now we should note the unusual similarities between the first and final lines of the poem

О, долго буду я, в молчаньи ночи тайной […]

Заветным именем будить ночную тьму.

Apart from ночь (night), the poem has no lexical or radical repetitions to speak of, but the first and final lines have ночь (night), the idea of the silence, and the similar-sounding буду and
будить (bud-, bud’-) In this way, in addition to its teasing hint at sequence and its aspectual non-sequence, the poem also closes its own circuit graphically and aurally. It forms a loop in which the speaker is locked, a ring filled to its limit with attempt and approach, an always-imperfective becoming that is perfect only in its fullness. The speaker is awake and performing his imperfect sexual / speech act surrounded by darkness and silence, unceasingly attempting to complete something that will ‘spread out’ his overfull consciousness. Compare and consider the meanings of English ejaculate: “To eject fluids, etc. from the body” and “To utter suddenly (a short prayer; now in wider sense, any brief expression of emotion).” (OED, entry for ‘ejaculate, v.’) Both meanings are on the mind of the speaker, and neither meaning is only itself – rather, they are distinct but indivisible faces of one central, overloaded subject.

This incomplete attempt at waking something up / speech / sexual climax may be taken, in line with Botkin’s observations about poetry in general, as the internal seed of poetic consciousness that desires to break out of its enclosure and into the consciousness of the reader. That this poem about poetic consciousness has the form of a poem about the sexual desire of an adolescent or young adult is not accidental.

Такую наивную внимательность чувства и глаза найдешь разве только у первобытных поэтов. Это какое-то простодушие чувства, какой-то первобытный, праздничный взгляд на явления жизни, свойственный первоначальной эпохе человеческого сознания. Поэтому-то он так и дорог нам, как невозвратимая юность наша.

Such naïve attentiveness of feeling and sight you will find only in poets of the ancient type. It is a certain ingenuousness of feeling, a kind of primordial, festive gaze on the occurrences of life, a gaze appropriate to the original epoch of human consciousness. For these reasons it is as dear to us as our lost youth.

(Botkin 1890, v. 2, 379)

The unreleased, unexpressed speech and energy of the speaker are the cries of a young person, the potential for poetic perception that is ready to ‘explode’ in the dark ego-consciousness of the
prosaic reader, and the seed of a type of consciousness forgotten under the accumulated material of civilized life (“наперекор уму…” – “in defiance of mind…”).

That the speaker’s activity is directed towards sexually arousing the night’s darkness – no longer being trapped in his ring of speech – also finds its reflection in Botkin’s writing:

Интимной назвали мы поэзию г. Фета: чтобы чувствовать ее прелесть, надобно любить природу, так сказать, семейной любовью, любить в ее обыденных явлениях, в ее тихой, скромной красоте […] душевное ощущение гармонически сливается с природою и только в ней, в ее бесконечности находит свое выражение.

We have called Mr. Fet’s poetry ‘intimate’: in order to feel its delight, it is necessary to love nature, so to say, with a familial love, to love her in her everyday garments, in her quiet, modest beauty […] the spiritual sensation harmoniously blends with nature, and only in nature, in her endlessness, finds its expression.

(Botkin 1890, v. 2, 384-385)

“O, long shall I…” is a representation of the necessity of blending with the world while remaining oneself, finding expression only in endless activity and unfulfilled yearning.

Druzhinin and Botkin politely sidestep the unmistakable superficial topic of nocturnal masturbation and move to the heart of the matter, of which the autoerotic experience is only the shell: to put it in somewhat abstract terms, the poem is about the pain of becoming oneself within the world, within the polarity and distinction of sex, within a speech act. Participating in these things, but especially in language, is the task of the speaker in this poem.

Whether Fet came to participate deeply in what we would usually call ‘life’ or ‘sex’ after the loss of his family name and Maria Lazich’s death is a question for biographers and, to an even greater degree, readers. We cannot hope to answer it here. He did, however, partake of language to a great degree, and language has partaken of him. The poem we have examined in these last pages was adapted for voice and piano by Rachmaninoff and inspired the autoerotic
face of Brodsky’s “Ниоткуда с любовью, надцатого марторбя” (“From nowhere with love, the nth of Martober”) (Brodsky 2001, 125) in the cycle Часть речи (A Part of Speech).

The unquestionable verbal-ness of the speaker in “O, long shall I” is expressed well in Ulysses Grant’s note during his final illness:

I do not sleep though I sometimes doze a little. If up I am talked to and in my efforts to answer cause pain. The fact is I think I am a verb instead of a personal pronoun. A verb is anything that signifies to be; to do; or to suffer. I signify all three. (cited in Sebeok 1986, 2)

Sleeplessness, efforts to speak, loss of personal identity and being ‘verbal’ – all these recall the text of “O, long shall I...” Seeing man as a part of speech, it seems, can occur during deep poetic experience and when near death, as both these states involve a reduction of the importance of ego-consciousness. Fet’s ‘verbal man’ of “O, long shall I...” may also lie at the roots of the penultimate and central poem of the cycle mentioned above – “…и при слове <<грядущее>> из русского языка” (“…and at the word ‘future,’ from the Russian language”)22 This poem that on one level is about sexual and verbal solitude and failure turns out to have a number of illustrious descendants in the realm of verbal art.

The modern Russian polysemy of глагол (speech / verb) is useful to our understanding of this side of Fet’s work, as it has been in the poem above. Taken as current lexemes (although in very different registers), the two meanings of глагол make an almost ideal example of semantic shift by metonymy: ‘speech’ and a part of speech, ‘verb.’ Verbs are a part of speech and, literally, a ‘piece’ of speech or language. These meanings, whole speech and part of speech, recall the polarity perfect/imperfect, which polarity is itself contained in the Russian verb. The

22 Brodsky, composing this cycle quite near the beginning of his exile from the Soviet Union, could be said to be near a kind of death or rebirth, as was Grant (biologically) and Fet (having recently begun his military career to win back his hereditary nobility.
metonymic relationship between the two meanings of глагол is repeated within the aspectual forms of the Russian verb. Speech is to part of speech as perfect is to imperfect.

All this is implied in “O, long shall I…”: its overarching concern with its identity as a speech act contains its unusual use of verbs, and the verbs break down into their perfective and imperfective aspects in a way that is central to the meaning of the poem. The polysemantic глагол will appear again in one of my readings of a much later Fetian text, but the poem we have read here contains all Fet’s ‘verbal’ oddities in potentia. The basic pairs of speech / verb and perfect / imperfect have been immediately important for this poem, but they also inform the rest of Fet’s work.

This reminds us that there is an interesting relationship between parts and wholes. ‘Part-ness’ in literature we are accustomed to call metonymy, and ‘like-ness’ we call metaphor. That metonymy and metaphor are similar to and part of each other sometimes falls by the wayside. But we may recall that anything that is a part of something must have a resemblance, however imperfect, to the whole. The verb is a part of speech, and so is like speech (глагол / глагол). Speech is a part of man, and so is like man. The verb, then, is like man, and the imperfective and perfective aspects of the Russian verb are what Coleridge would call “two forces of one power” in man (Barfield 1971, 26-40).

The man-sign acquires information, and comes to mean more than he did before. But so do words. Does not electricity mean more now than it did in the days before Franklin? Man makes the word, and the word means nothing which man has not made it mean, and that only to some man. But since man can think only by means of words or other external symbols, these might turn round and say: “You mean nothing which we have not taught you, and then only so far as you address some word as the interpretant of your thought.” In fact, therefore, men and words reciprocally educate each other; each increase of a man’s information involves and is involved by, a corresponding increase of a word’s information.

Without fatiguing the reader by stretching this parallelism too far, it is sufficient to say that there is no element whatever of man’s consciousness which has not
something corresponding to it in the word; and the reason is obvious. It is that the word or sign which man uses is the man himself.

(Peirce 1984, 241)

The word / verb, depending on one’s perspective, is part of man, is like man, and is man. All these aspects of the relationship between verb and man are quite visible in the early “O, long shall I…” as we have examined it. Fet’s use of the perfect / imperfect polarity of the Russian verb in many lyrics represents this tension in man himself – a tendency to contract, and a tendency to expand without limit.

The discussion above leaves us with a poem that is now about a kind of tantric masturbation23 – imperfect that is always about to give birth to perfect. To return to the three aspects (author, poet, reader) with which I began this discussion – we see that the ego consciousness is well represented, as is the poetic heart of that consciousness. We still need, however, a reader. If we remove ourselves from the picture and imagine a woman, then the basic face of the poem is that of a odd love lyric. If we take the page as speaking to an actual (female) reader of the poem, then the other speech acts mentioned are other poems. The author-ego is uncertain of the reader’s response or even identity, and cannot achieve perfection or any balance without pinning down that keystone-person who will give stability to the sexual speech act.

This text is like “I have come to you with a greeting” in that it predates Fet’s acquaintance with Lazic, and thus predicts his future embodiment of the polarity of a sexual / authorial relationship in the aspectual forms of the Russian verb. This, then, is a composition about the necessity of the other for completion of any human activity. Without the reader to complete the act, it is only so much masturbation. With the reader present, a poem about masturbation becomes an invitation to view the continual birth of the perfect.

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23 Here I used tantric in the loose sense, as attested in the OED – “In Western use, also loosely denoting the association of spiritual and erotic practices.”
The Imperfectivization of the Text: another view of Turgenev-as-editor

Противоречивость, недосказанность, неохотность объяснений Фета вместе со странностью и запутанностью обстоятельств его рождения способствовали постепенному распространению третьей версии его происхождения. Согласно этой версии, Фет не был сыном ни ротмистра Шеншина, ни асессора Фёта, а был сыном безвестного корчмаря-еврея, продавшего Шеншину свою жену.

Fet’s contradictions, understatement, and unwillingness to explain, along with the strangeness and entanglement of the circumstances of his birth, all aided in the gradual spread of a third tale about his origins. According to this version, Fet was not the son of Shenshin of the German Foeth, but was the son of an unknown Jewish tavern-keeper who has sold his wife to Shenshin.

-B. Ya. Bukhshtab

Я русский, я люблю молчанье дали мразной,
Под пологом снегов как смерть однообразной…

I am Russian, I love the silence of the frozen distance,
Drab as death under the curtain of snows…

-Fet

Any approach to poetic texts that suggests demonstrable importance for a certain elements of a text’s construction encourages in the investigator and reader a sense that each text
has an ideal, perfect form. Of course, the question of which form is ideal is determined by which brings the text closest to being in line with the claims made by the critic. It begins to seem that in order to support those claims, the crystalline purity of the text must not be “polluted” by alternate readings or editorial interference, whether in the author’s lifetime or in modern editions.

While such a feeling is understandable and to some degree unavoidable, I believe that we can investigate these aspectual structures more fully by recognizing, as Bukhshtab says, that in many cases neither the rough copy nor the published version or versions can be considered ideal (Bukhshtab 2000, 169). Bukhshtab’s work shows many cases, especially in the poetry of the 1850s, in which editorial changes were demanded and accepted by the author although these changes change or even wreck our claims about the poem. We cannot know the most embryonic creative impulse behind any work, and the author as we can know him was also not a perfect crystal, but a living man in contact with other living men.

It is only through working with the information that we do have that we can approach, never attain, knowledge of that living impulse and that living man. That life was not defined only by the historical Afanasy Fet/Shenshin, but also by those close to him in personal or professional relations. Fet himself says in the first volume of his memoirs

…что является почином в природе: разум или воля? Во избежание упрека в злоупотреблении отвлеченностями, придержимся выражения о главенстве воли в христианском учении, что без воли Божьей волос с головы вашей не спадет. Не ясно ли из этих слов, что какова бы ни была личная воля человека, – она бессильна выступить за круг, указанный Провидением. Этот непреложный закон повторяется не только над усилием отдельного человека, но и над совокупными действиями многих людей […] Удачно или нет я начал свои воспоминания со времени личного знакомства с Тургеневым и другими современными мне литераторами, – пусть судят читатели.

…what is the beginning in nature: reason or will? To avoid accusations of misusing abstractions, let us keep to what is said about the primacy of will in the Christian teaching, that without God’s will a hair will not fall from your head. Is
it not clear from these words, whatever one’s personal will may be, - it is powerless to step beyond those bounds appointed by Providence. This immutable law repeats itself not only with regard to the efforts of the individual, but also with regard to the collective efforts of many people [...] Whether I have done well in choosing to begin my memoirs from the time of my personal acquaintance with Turgenev and other men of letters among my contemporaries – the readers may judge. (Fet 1890, v-vi, italics in original)

Nothing will be lost by stating openly that there is a degree of convenient fiction or at least abstraction in the letters A. A. Фет (A. A. Fet) on the cover of any book of poetry. There is also no question that textual changes imposed by an editor can be detrimental to the author’s text. If we have to do, however, only with that variant that is most immediately pleasing to the investigator, we will be promoting the use of an incomplete and misleading abstraction. The scope of this dissertation will not permit going into all variants of Fet’s texts, but I would like to discuss at least one poem, the usual variant of which bears marks of – historically and textologically speaking – a very heavy editorial hand.

The world, in fact, was made, including man, as a thing necessarily unperfect; made to want, thus, interventions and immediate operations, to carry it on and bring it out, in the final realization of its perfected ends.

- Horace Bushnell

“Серенада” (Тихо вечер догорает, 1844) will help us to enjoy a more flexible view of the compositional choices that went into Fet’s texts and the relationship between these choices and his aspectual poetics.

Тихо вечер догорает,  
Горы золотя;  
Знойный воздух холодает, –  
Спи, мое дитя.  

Quietly the evening burns down,  
Gilding the mountains;  
The hot air grows cool, --  
Sleep, my child.
Соловьи давно запели,
The nightingales sang long ago
Сумрак возвестя;
Announcing the twilight;
Струны робко зазвенели, –
The strings have rung timidly, --
Спи, мое дитя.
Sleep, my child.

Смотрят ангельские очи,
Angelic eyes gaze,
Трепетно светя;
Shining flickeringly;
Так легко дыханье ночи, –
The breathing of the night is so light,
Спи, мое дитя.
Sleep, my child.

Так легко и так привольно,
So lightly and so freely,
Страсти укротя,
Having calmed the passions,
В сердце вымолвишь невольно:
You say in your heart unwittingly:
Спи, мое дитя!
Sleep, my child!

Such is the text, apart from changes observed here in accordance with orthographic modernization, of the first printing in 1850 (taken from pgs. 173 and 694 of the 1959 Bukhshtab edition). Some basic comments on the structure are in order. The feminine rhymes are of the simplest type – two verbal pairs on –аeт and –еli (-aet and -eli), the standard очи / ночи (eyes and of the night, a very common rhyme), and then the almost tautological привольно / невольно (freely and unwittingly, whose rhyming components are the same ‘will’ root). Yet in the masculine rhyme-set the monotony creates interest. In each stanza, a verbal adverb prepares the way for the invariable final дитя (child). Across the four stanzas, there is a pleasing embrace-structure formed by the verbal adverbs, in opposition to the alternate rhymes within each stanza. It almost suggests a physical embrace, given the unbroken association with дитя (child) through the refrain-rhyme.
Beautiful even when we abstract it from the text, this embrace is only one of the innumerable features of the text that make it attractive to us.\textsuperscript{24}

Parallel to the hidden rhyme-scheme noted above, “Serenade” has a very pleasing tension between lexical variety and repetition. “Спи, мое дитя” (“Sleep, my child”) is the unbroken refrain at the end of each stanza. Apart from this, the text has a minimum of lexical repetition. The only words to be repeated are так and легко (so and light) – and as for that, легко occurs first as a short-form neuter adjective, then as an adverb. There is also the repeated root, not lexeme, in воздух (air) and дыханье (breathing). Not even и (and) appears more than once. In fact, the scarce repetitions of any kind, prefixes or roots, provide a set of links and a sense of motion through the poem, in opposition to the stasis suggested by the refrain. Stanza 1: воздух (air) leads by the shared prefix воз- to Stanza 2: возвестя (having announced) and Stanza 3: дыханье (breathing), while Stanza 3: Так легко дыханье (So light is the breathing) leads to Stanza 4: Так легко… вымолвишь (So lightly you will say…). Each stanza has an irreplaceable function to fulfill. Although most of its poetic features may be inaccessible to this analytical method, we should look at one more structural pleasure of “Serenade.”

The stanzas alternate in their use of imperfective and perfective verbal forms, apart from the refrain “Спи, мое дитя” (“Sleep, my child”) – imperfective, perfective, imperfective, perfective. Yet again, this structure is neither trivial nor irreducible. The first stanza describes

| золотя   | -   | -отя     | A |
| возвестя | -   | -вестя   | B |
| светя    | -   | -ветя    | B |
| укротя   | -   | -отя     | A |

\textsuperscript{24} See Briggs 1969, 598-599 and Laferrière 1977, 92 for discussions of Fet’s play with alternating and embracing rhyme-schemes.
imperfective processes of change, while the second recalls the perfective inception of that change. The third stanza returns to the imperfective aspect, but not to verbs of changing. 

Смотрят (they look) and светя (shining) are more static – together they create an image of restful waking. The fourth stanza introduces the nonpast perfective and in doing so gives a sense of completion, joining the reader to the speaker with the quasi-second person form, вымолвишь (you will say). Within the strict alternation of stanzaic preference for the imperfective or perfective aspect, we find constantly varying types of action. Yet within that variance, we find again an alternating or embracing structure – perfective stanzas two and four act as bookends to the evening, using verbs of sounding (запели, зазвенели, вымолвишь – began to sing, began to ring, you will say) to mark its beginning and its culmination in a factual, rather than poetic, exhortation to sleep. Upon reading or hearing the last two lines, the reader is joined to the speaker and is fully present in the night.

In “Serenade” the framework of aspeсtual alternation is important but does not stand alone as the only noteworthy face of the poem. It interacts with other structural peculiarities as well as with rise and fall of the speaker’s tender exhortations. The final stanza which concludes the aspectual alternation also contains the striking repetition of легко (light, lightly) in легко… вымолвишь (you will say lightly) from the Так легко дыханье ночи (So light is the breathing of the night) of the preceding stanza, linking the speaker’s/listener’s breath in вымолвишь (you will say) with the air of the night. Following that, the final perfective verb вымолвишь envelops “Спи, мое дитя” (“Sleep, my child”) and turns the refrain into a dependent quotation, causing a nestling of what is imperfect inside what is perfect, and completing the still perfection of the poem as a whole.
It has taken many lines to give even this brief overview of the many faces and overlapping layers of the unimposing “Serenade.” Such a brief look at these structures within the poem serves to confirm the immediate readerly perception that this is indeed a carefully composed and balanced work. Some of the enjoyment and wisdom of the poem can be described with the tools of formal analysis. Yet despite the obvious care with which Fet composed this poem, the effect is not a sense of artificiality, verbal tautness, or a strict adherence to any kind of formula. If anything, the air around this poem is still but not stagnant, fresh but not quite bracing. The detailed structure breathes with a sense of unaffected freedom.

Turgenev may have been insensible to this achievement, or maybe he felt it was inaccessible to readers, or that it was agreeable to the spirit of the times. It may be that he thought the poem, whatever its quality, could be improved for its publication in the 1856 collection of Fet’s verse. Turgenev’s improvement was attained by removing the final stanza, giving the poem its three-stanza form for the 1856 edition and subsequent editions to this day:

Тихо вечер догорает, Quietly the evening burns down,
Горы золотя; Gilding the mountains;
Знойный воздух холодает, – The hot air grows cool, --
Спи, мое дитя. Sleep, my child.

Соловьи давно запели, The nightingales sang long ago
Сумрак возвестя; Announcing the twilight;
Струны робко зазвенели, – The strings have rung timidly, --
Спи, мое дитя. Sleep, my child.

Смотрят ангельские очи, Angelic eyes gaze,
Трепетно светя; Shining flickeringly;
Так легко дыханье ночи, – The breathing of the night is so light,
Спи, мое дитя. Sleep, my child. (Fet 1959, 173)
The embrace-rhymeset formed by the verbal adverbs disappears, the alternation of imperfective and perfective in the nonfinal lines of each stanza is replaced with an imperfective-perfective-imperfective ‘ring’ structure, and climactic reader-engaging ‘вымолвишь’ (you will say) disappears. Following the reading above, one might say that the removal of the final stanza alters the character of the whole poem.

Turgenev’s approval for this three-stanza text was the final step in an unusual process. A technically impeccable, structurally quite remarkable, and aesthetically beautiful poem has already seen print. In editorial review for a new edition, the final stanza is removed without any change in the others. It is as if the final stanza was extra or entirely unsuccessful, as if its inclusion in the first publication was an unlucky mistake.

There is in the final Turgenev-approved text no obvious editorial disaster, such as the type noted by Bukhshtab, in which the Turgenev’s sometimes careless corrections make the text truly confused: “Луна… между листьев… проходит лучом между ветвями” (“The moon… between the leaves… walks in the form of a ray between the branches”) (Bukhshtab 2000,160). In this case, the resulting poem may even be seen to be worthwhile in itself. It is, however, a remarkably different work from the four-stanza “Серенада” of the 1850 edition. Turgenev’s redaction has a descriptive character in which the refrain “Sleep, my child” only hints at the type of emotional involvement that is so present in Fet’s original composition. Apart from the obvious refrain, the three-stanza version has zero repeated words and only one repeated root in воздух (air) and дыханье (breathing) in the first and third stanzas, which displays the centrality of breath to the poem. The three-stanza version has in its own way a certain stark and descriptive beauty but is at heart not at all the same poem that was printed in the 1850 edition.
How could the author of the 1850 “Serenade” allow this? Fet’s biography and own statements show that he was interested in fame and income from his poetic work despite his repeated claims to be an author of “pure poetry.” While Fet’s desire to please his editors up to a limit is related to his desire for literary success, his decades of inability or refusal to write more fashionable poetry show that his claims of “pure poetry” were also real to him. “Pure poetry,” one may guess, does not respond well to unwarranted editorial violence, and I think that the 1856 “Serenade” is only a faint shadow of the poem printed in 1850. But instead of heaping blame on Turgenev for his editorial practices, which are now another historical fact, I would like to consider another possible cause of Fet’s acquiescence to Turgenev’s intrusive corrections and editing.

The intertwined yet individual stanzas of “Serenade” and its unusual self-embracing and self-enveloping structure give the reader a singular experience, a part of the experience familiar to the poet. This passage from Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata* describes the process:

Она, музыка, сразу, непосредственно переносит меня в то душевное состояние, в котором находился тот, кто писал музыку. Я сливаюсь с ним душою и вместе с ним переношу из одного состояния в другое, но зачем я это делаю, я не знаю.

Music right away, immediately carries me into the spiritual state of the composer when he wrote the music. I meld souls with him and move with him from one state into another, but why I do this, I do not know. (Tolstoy 1937, v. 27, 61)

The musicality of Fet’s best verse is well-known. A tightly structured poem with a refrain, such as “Serenade,” can become hypnotic or “убаюкивающее” (lullaby-like) quite easily, putting the reader into the place of the child (дитя is also a term of endearment for a woman, another possible reading in this case) mentioned in the refrain. Creating such a piece in itself is a rather personal event, and the complete “Serenade” creates an intimate relation between the poet and
his (for the most part) unknown reader. It is possible that Fet’s acceptance of Turgenev’s casual truncation of the poem was in line with his general tendency toward obscurity and prevention of intimacy.

Fet’s feelings about sharing intimate knowledge of his personal life seem to have been unstable, at best. He is unusual for a 19th-century poet in that he made a concerted effort to produce three volumes of memoirs. The strangely detached tone of these memoirs, however, hardly invites the reader into the poet’s life. In Bukhshtab’s estimation

[…] многое Фет исказил сознательно. В жизни его было много событий, которые он привык скрывать и замазывать, и центральные факты его личной жизни (происхождение, романы, женитьба, отношения с сестрами и братьями и т.п.) описаны какой-то тайнописью, соединенной с явными измышлениами.

Но и те события, в которых скрывать было нечего [...] описываются лишь внешне правильно: пружины же, двигавшие поступками, неизменно утаиваются. Это определило тон мемуаров: внешне описание событий, создающее, с одной стороны, впечатление композиционной бесхребетности, с другой - впечатление недоумения от противоречия видимой целенаправленности всех решений и поступков Фета с неясностью направляющих целей.

…Fet warped much consciously. There were many events in his life that he had grown accustomed to hide and muddle, and the central facts of his life (his origins, romances, marriage, relations with his brothers and sisters and so on) are described in some kind of secret code along with obvious fabrications.

But those events, too, in which there was nothing worth hiding […] are described correctly only on the surface: the motives that controlled his choices are without exception well-hidden. This defined the tone of the memoirs: the superficial description of events creates, on one hand, an impression of compositional structurelessness, and on the other, a failure to understand the contradiction between the obvious purposefulness of Fet’s decisions and actions and the obscurity of the intended purpose. (Bukhshtab 2000, 191)

In his lifetime and since then, those who write on Fet have found frustrating obscurity in his work. The bizarre, apparent aimlessness of his memoirs seems somehow appropriate, when we consider that he has some confusing (and sometimes unsuccessful) poems. We may ascribe part
of his willingness to have successful stanzas excised from his work to a general distaste for having what was most his own exposed to public view. The filter of friends, poetry enthusiasts, and forceful editors like Turgenev gave Fet an excuse to publish imperfect works in place of completed pieces.

In the case of “Serenade,” then, I suggest that we take the disappearance of the valuable final stanza as a part of achieving the poem’s final, imperfect form. Bukhshtab gives strong evidence that Fet “jealously guarded” the intimate (and even less than intimate) details of his life, while at the same time giving the appearance of sharing decades of experiences (Bukhshtab 2000, 191). While an earlier generation had the dots as a graphical replacement for lines removed by the censor or by the poet himself, or to suggest the appearance of such lines that were never written, Fet’s practice is to filter his immediate poetic experience through acquaintances and editors. The published text then has no ellipses or anything to suggest that the text has been altered or truncated. The author can look at the printed text and feel both that he has said something and that he is not in danger of exposure. The resulting poem appears perfect to the reader who does not know the history of the text, but is to the author distinctly imperfect. Perhaps in this case unperfect, as in the quotation from Bushnell at the beginning of this section, would be more fitting to denote the step back from completion that leaves us with Fet’s truncated Turgenev-texts.

We have established that in a number of lyrics Fet uses the aspectual forms of the Russian verb as an organizational principle, sometimes in a very striking, almost mathematically precise manner. The capturing of the moment and the poetic expansion of that passing moment are an obsessive concern in his lyrics. Speaking in the terms of verbal aspect, we would say that the imperfectivization of the completed moment or experience is of primary importance to Fet. If
a written poetic text is such a finished, perfect experience, then it becomes uninteresting, too revealing about the state of the author at the time of composition, or both. With an editor like Turgenev, perhaps brutal by modern standards, Fet as a poet was drawn to allowing the imperfectivization of his poems (Bukhshtab 2000, 156-157; Klenin 2002, 6), while as an author he was inclined to complain about it later in life, calling the resulting texts “maimed” (Fet 1890, 128).

The idea of Fet’s imperfectivizing a text during its preparation for publication will bear some meditation. Modern critical practice often supposes that it is desirable, though not always possible, to have a correct or at least reasonably correct text for analysis and study. The other common view is that there is no truly authoritative text any more than there is a single correct interpretation. In many cases, of course, scholars will locate themselves somewhere between these two extremes and adhere to a view that is practical for their work.²⁵ Bukhshtab takes a very stable view when he says that Fet’s creative process for much of his career was not complete without obtaining and often accepting the advice of friends, editors, and poetry enthusiasts (Bukhshtab 2000, 169).

I am suggesting a somewhat different perspective: that his creative process (whatever we may think of the result in a given instance) was complete in a real sense, as shown by the publication of these poems in the earlier 1850 edition. The un-completion, un-perfect state of the truncated Fet-Turgenev texts, as they appear in the 1856 edition, is not exactly the result of the poet’s final step in the creative process. Rather, I imagine that the poet Fet completed a text – for example, “Serenade” – and, in its completion, it was somehow undesirable to the author Fet.

²⁵ Barbara Johnson’s article “Melville’s Fist: The Execution of Billy Budd” is one of the best-known studies of an imperfect text that is about the imperfection of a speech act. Lengthy discussion is not appropriate here, but the reader may find it interesting to review her discussion of the text interrupted by the author’s death and compare it with Fet’s Turgenev-assisted imperfectivization of texts in the 1856 edition.
They were productions too intimate to allow the public to have potentially endless access to them through future editions. The author Fet then allowed an editor like Turgenev to “mutilate” (изувечить) the poems and give them forms that were publishable, even if not desirable from a poetic viewpoint. This process satisfied the self-protective desires of the author Fet. It also allowed the poet Fet to continue his preoccupation with the polarity of perfect and imperfect.

The completed poetic text is too perfect and therefore not alive, somehow imbalanced. It is as if it is ‘only’ the aspect of natura naturata rather than also natura naturans, which is unthinkable. If the completed text is the ‘shell’ of the creative act, then Goethe’s maxim,

Natur hat weder Kern Noch Schale,  
Alles ist sie mit einem Male.  
Dich prüfe du nur allermeist,  
Ob du Kern oder Schale seist.

Nature has neither kernel nor shell,  
She is all at the same time.  
Just test yourself most of all,  
Whether you be kernel or shell.  
(Goethe 1983, 236)

makes it much easier for us to think of Fet the poet being comfortable backing away from a one-sided ‘perfection,’ which is not consistent with natural processes and life.

Earlier I described an analysis and further interpretation of “I have come to you with a greeting,” one of Fet’s earliest great works. There we saw the perfective and imperfective poles laid out like the poles of a bar magnet, bleeding into each other in the middle. The climax of this dynamic piece is markedly imperfective, with even a rhyme on the auxiliary буду (I shall). As it turns out, this poem is programmatic not only for Fet’s concern with polarity and its expression in the aspectedual forms of the Russian verb. Its demonstration of perfective fact yielding to imperfective ripening is an early sign of that pull to unperfection to which Fet yielded so many times, not least in his biography and in his literary relationship with Turgenev. When we take

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26 Turgenev also complained of places in some of the poems and had Fet rework them rather than simply striking out stanzas. My claim above about Fet’s murky motivations for allowing these truncations of course does not extend to Turgenev’s motivations in making them and does not insist that the poems are made worse by the alterations. They are, however, made imperfect from one point of view.
this view of Fet’s creative path, it is kind of funny that Turgenev crossed out the two
imperfective stanzas of “Я пришел к тебе с приветом” that contain the lines

…не знаю сам, что буду
Петь - но только песня зрет

I do not know myself, what I shall
Sing – but only that the song is ripening

whose ‘ripening to imperfection’ he aided in so many cases. Gustafson, while not mentioning
Turgenev’s redaction of the poem, perceptively notes that “the second half of “I have come to
you with a greeting,” which opens with a partial repetition of the opening line (“I have come”),
turns from description to statement” (Gustafson 172).

From the historical author/poet’s perspective, the perfection of the text is both desirable
and undesirable: desirable because it is the completed poetic fruit, undesirable because the
continuing process of ripening is the life of the plant. From this perspective, it seems that Fet
accepted Turgenev’s editorial changes and let most of them stand in later editions. These
redactions allowed a desirable degree of literary intercourse with the audience, while preventing
anyone from seeing fully into the poet’s vision. Fet restored the second half of “I have come to
you with a greeting” in the 1863 edition, perhaps because the poem was so programmatic for his
own sense of his work that it was ridiculous to see it in the form

Я пришел к тебе с приветом, I have come to you with a greeting,
Рассказать, что солнце встало, To say that the sun has risen,
Что оно горячим светом Has begun to tremble with its hot light
По листам затрепетало Through the leaves…
A poem that is on the surface about the balance of perfect and imperfect in nature and in the creative act does not need to be imperfectivized by being chopped in half, and Fet undid Turgenev’s editorial decision. “Serenade,” on the other hand, contains an interesting balance and ‘embrace’ formed by the alternation of perfective and imperfective verbal forms, but is not on its surface about such interplay. It can assume this meaning for the author only through the apparently extra-poetic process of imperfectivization, and for the modern reader only through the knowledge of the different redactions in the 1850 and 1856 editions. Turgenev’s excision of the final stanza plus the knowledge of the original text with its embrace result in the fullness of the reader’s engagement with “Serenade.”

We have seen above Fet’s need for engagement of discrete, historical persons apart from the historical author in the creation of the poem. The Turgenev-edited “Serenade” is a poetic expression of the principle embodied in the poem “O, long shall I…” Without the participation of a reader, the text is imperfect. Even a reader who introduced crippling imperfections to the structure of the text is better than no reader at all for these purposes. Fet’s inclination to hiding and to poised imperfection is quite clear to any reader of “O, long shall I”. With “Serenade,” however, we today are in a position to view the historical process of the creation of the Turgenev redaction and so to understand something about the author as poet that a reader of the 1856 edition was less likely to see. Fet’s tendency to imperfectivize his texts so that the reader will
have a place in the final poem takes here the form of the history of the text itself, even after what we would consider the initial poetic impulse and composition.

Even as early as the 1850s, Fet is compelled to involve an editor in the imperfectivization of a perfect text. There is still room to interpret whether this was in order to ‘hide’ the true text and so the true author, or for purposes of ‘making room’ for the reader to complete a now ‘open’ text. The final two readings in this section will shed some light on that question.

The Vanishing Instrumental Author

Until now in this chapter, we have seen the ‘backing off’ or ‘imperfection’ of the author as if to make room for participation in his text. Below we find the destruction of the author and the presence of his ghost. The text I read below may seem at first to be almost too scientific to be a truly inspired poem. Its central idea is “based on evident awareness of the speed of light” (Klenin 2002, 50). Klenin notes that, like a few others from different periods in Fet’s career, this poem partakes of popular scientific knowledge of his day. “Угасшим звездам,” however, is more than an old poet’s rhymed paraphrase of a scrap of popular science.

Долго впивать мне мерцание ваше,  Have I long to drink in your twinkling,  
Синего неба пытливые очи?  Inquisitive eyes of the dark-blue sky?  
Долго ли чуять, что выше и краше  Long to feel that higher, lovelier than you  
Вас ничего нет во храмине ночи?  There is naught in the dwelling of night?  

Может быть, нет вас под теми огнями:  Maybe you are not under those lights:  
Давняя вас погасила эпоха, —  A long-past epoch extinguished you, --  
Так и по смерти лететь к вам стихами,  So shall I fly to you after death in verse,  
К призракам звезд буду призраком вздоха!  To stars’ ghosts, as the ghost of a sigh.
It almost seems wrong to subject this poem to particulate analysis – its tone of hopeful resignation is so gentle and fragile that one fears to break it. With that in mind, I will content myself for now with a brief paraphrase. The speaker wonders how long he will get to observe the stars and feel their great distance and beauty. He considers that the stars as such may no longer be there behind the visible lights, the implication being that the stars may have gone out while the light was still travelling toward Earth. There is a suggestion that the already-extinguished stars could wink out at any time, as the last of their light reaches earth. He then says that he will approach them in the same way after his death, flying in the form of a sigh toward the ghosts of stars.

The poem is balanced and beautiful. It does not demand any special efforts from the reader, who is free to read it and move on. It requires no particular explication or definitions (although it does assume that the reader is also familiar with the idea of a great but finite speed of light). But like all Fet’s works I have chosen to examine, it is strong enough that a little explicit interpretation cannot harm it, and will assist us in our understanding of Fet’s aspects and polarities.

It seems at first to be quite striking, but also just another star poem. The relationship in question is between the poet and the appearances of stars in the night sky. In the first stanza the focus seems to be on the poet’s impending death, as he asks how long he has to take in their twinkling. The topic of the second stanza, however, makes the sense of the first ambiguous: either he wonders how long he has to observe them because he may die soon, or because they
may have already died, and if so, the last of their light could ‘run out’ at any moment.\textsuperscript{27} The speaker’s future death and the stars’ past death are somehow similar; they are on opposite sides of the present, and either death could end this eye contact.

Even as the speaker asks his questions of the stars, he imbues them with his own characteristics: although he is the one who muses about the remaining length of their relationship, he calls them\textit{пытливые}, inquisitive. He says they will fly towards each other after his death, in this way becoming like each other, but they are already like each other now as he gives them epithets that are proper to him. The mutual gaze is there, and mutual approach is expected after death. In other words, as the speaker makes the stars like him by calling them ‘inquisitive’ in the first stanza, so does he make himself like them in the second stanza when he predicts his motion toward them after his death.

The two halves of the poem make the speaker and the stars more like each other until they have the same ghostly nature. They are assimilated to each other, in both main senses: they are made like each other (\textit{пытливые / буду призраком} – inquisitive / I shall be a ghost) and are absorbed into each other’s environments (\textit{впивать мне мерцание ваше / лететь к вам} – \textit{I shall drink in your twinkling / fly to you}). The beings distant from and apparently opposed to each other support each other’s existence and absorb each other’s characteristics.\textsuperscript{28}

So the poem only rides on a piece of popular science, but is not defined by it. Yet it does display this popular science – the author knows it, and the reader must know it to

\textsuperscript{27} This ambiguity of the first stanza seems to be related to the second line in Lermontov’s “Нет, не тебя так пылко я люблю” (“No, it is not you that I love so passionately”). “Не для меня красы твоей блистанье” can be understood as “I do not care for your beauty” or “Your beauty is not intended for my enjoyment” (see Lotman 1996 for a discussion of this ambiguity in Lermontov).

\textsuperscript{28} It is interesting to compare the speaker and the stars here with the formation of perfective verbs from imperfectives and imperfectives from perfectives. The mutual definition and dependence of the Slavophiles and Westernizers earlier in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century also comes to mind. See B. Gasparov’s “История без телеологии (Заметки о Пушкине и его эпохе)” for a non-dogmatic view of the usefulness of such opposed pairs that, in their ideal form at least, resemble the polar opposition\textit{speaker – stars} (B. Gasparov 2003).
understand in what concrete sense the stars can be visible while not being 'there' under their appearances. The reader also has another piece of knowledge obtained from books as a book is the source of the poem itself. “To extinguished stars” is the fifteenth lyric in the fourth edition of *Evening Lights*, and as such it is, in effect, a star or an evening light by which the reader knows the living being behind it. The effect is striking – if the reader reads the poem in his own voice, rather than hearing it in the voice of the poet, the reader becomes the speaker and the poet becomes the vital force behind the ‘lights,’ the poems so named on the frontispiece of the book. “Может быть, нет вас под теми огнями: / Давняя вас погасила эпоха” (“Maybe you are not under those lights: / A long-past epoch extinguished you”) – the reader is aware that the author has died, or in the case of Fet’s contemporaries, that the author may die at any moment, and that this death will not alter the light reflected from the page and received in the reader’s eye.

The most engaging part of the reader-author relationship suggested here is the final two lines: “Так и по смерти лететь к вам стихами, / К призракам звезд, буду призраком вздоха!” (“So shall I fly to you after death in verse, / To stars’ ghosts, as the ghost of a sigh.”)

29 For a recent poetic response to “To extinguished stars,” see Irina Ermakova’s intriguing short poem “Look at me unblinking,” which absorbs and reflects the popular science of Fet’s “To extinguished stars” and Lermontov’s “I go out alone onto the road.”

Гляди на меня не мигая Look at me unblinking
Звезда говорила звезде Star said to star
Мы точки моя дорогая We are points my dear
Две точки в вечерней воде Two points in the evening water

Трап лодочной станции Walkway on a dock
Лето Summer
Зрачками присвоенный свет – Light absorbed by pupils
Две точки Two points
Но этого света But this light
Им хватит на тысячи лет Will suffice for thousands of years

(in Bunimovich 2008, 108)

30 At the end of his monograph on Fet, Bukhshtab skips over the reading that is to me the more obvious and immediate one – the reading in which it is a familiar ‘poet looking at the stars’ poem – and goes straight for the ‘poet is the stars’ reading (Bukhshtab 1974, 135). He also does not discuss the overlay of one reading on another and the increasing similarity of author and reader, which I think are quite important to the form the poem takes over time.
The ambiguities here are fascinating. First, the method by which the flight occurs may be
glossed either as ‘by way of verses’ or ‘as verses.’ The first of these seems more appropriate if
the author is speaking to the stars, the second more appropriate if the reader is speaking to the
author. Yet there are not only two distinct but similar understandings of the instrumental in
such a context, as Jakobson makes clear:

The I case [instrumental case] of various nouns in the same context serves as
a characteristic example of the wide range in variation of contextual
meanings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrumental Case</th>
<th>Preposition</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>on el rebenkom ikru</td>
<td></td>
<td>(he ate caviar as a child)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on el pudami ikru</td>
<td></td>
<td>(he ate caviar by the pound)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on el ložko ikru</td>
<td></td>
<td>(he ate caviar with a spoon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on el dorogoj ikru</td>
<td></td>
<td>(he ate caviar on the road)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on el utrom ikru</td>
<td></td>
<td>(he ate caviar in the morning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on el grešnym delom ikru</td>
<td></td>
<td>(he ate caviar I am sorry to say)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nevertheless, the I in all its variants displays a general feature: a peripheral or
marginal role in the content is attributed to the entity in the contents of the
utterance […]

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31 The second line of Lermontov’s “Тучки” (“Clouds”) is also useful as context for Fet’s “стихами” (verses):

Тучки небесные, вечные странники!
Тучки небесные, вечные странники!
С милого севера в сторону южную.

Heavenly clouds, eternal wanderers!
Through the azure steppe, in a pearly chain
From the beloved north to a southern land.

In “Степью золотою, цепью жемчужною” (“Through the azure steppe, in a pearly chain”) the eye-catching
instrumentals say in a prose paraphrase that the clouds move through an azure steppe and they move as a pearly
chain. The fact that both phrases are instrumentals, however, suggests that they way the way the clouds go is
identical at heart to what they are – their current medium of motion is their being, they have no ‘birthplace’ to which
they would be tied. This piece of declensional information deepens the poem’s conclusion “Нет у вас родины, нет
вам изгнания” (“You have no homeland, so for you there is no exile”).
Mayakovsky’s verses with the I in new and entirely unfamiliar locutions are understandable only because both the poet and the reader, having mastered the Russian language, have also subconsciously mastered the general meanings of the Russian cases, particularly of the instrumental.

Nikto ne mešal mogilami spat’ kudrogolovym volxvam.  
No one hindered the curly-headed wizards from sleeping in/by/like their graves.  
[from the poem Čelovek (Man)]

Stolic sercebienie dikoe lovil ja, Strastnoju Ploscad’ju leža.  
I, lying on/by/like Strastnaja (Passion) Square, caught the wild heartbeat of the capitals.  
[from “Ljublju” (I love)]

Za zevakoj zevaka, štany prišedšie kuzneckim klešit’.  
One idler after another came to have their trousers bell-bottomed on/by/via Kuzneckij Bridge.  
[from “Xorošee otnošenie k lošadjam”]

(WJakobson 1990, 377-378)

With his gripping but slippery use of стихами (instrumental of ‘verses’), Fet plays a fairly advanced role for his time, anticipating Mayakovsky’s usage. The function here, however, is almost ungraspable, like the beams of light from the stars or the speaker’s final exhalation that will outlive him and travel away from the earth after his death. He plans an intangible flight in which стихами (instrumental of ‘verses’) partakes of ideas of identity, accompaniment, medium of travel, time, and manner. Fet as author may cease to exist, but the verses will have a variety of functions.

Second, the dative plural призракам (to ghosts) and the instrumental призраком (as a ghost) are morphologically and orthographically distinct, while their spoken forms are homophones when pronounced with post-tonic {a} and {o} reduced to [ə] by second-degree post-tonic vowel reduction (Timberlake 2004, 45), which pronunciation is consistent with Fet’s rhyming practice (see Klenin 2002, 263-264 for details). The two instances of the lexeme
призрак (ghost) are distinct in their graphical aspect, but indistinguishable in their auditory aspect. Light keeps them apart, sound merges them.

Light and sound, of course, are the two media through which the reader comes to know the poem (silent reading or hearing a reading) and are those through which the stars and the speaker approach each other within the poem. The stars’ journey to earth is as beams of light, the speaker’s journey will be ‘as a ghost of a sigh/exhalation’ (призрак вздоха). The means of travel/transference for the speaker and the stars, the means by which they are kept separate and by which they are united, are the same means that distinguish and merge the case-forms of their common ghostly lexeme призрак (ghost) and the same means by which the reader approaches the text. Light and sound assimilate things to each other even as they form or define the gap between them.

The poem is concerned with pairs whose elements take on each other’s characteristics, while remaining distinct. Poet and stars share curiosity and postmortem travel, reader and poet both gaze at ‘evening lights’ in an attempt to know their source – even dative and instrumental are united by vowel reduction while kept distinct by spelling convention, number, and case. It would be pleasing enough to say that all these pairs are ultimately about poet and reader as they become more like each other. The poet becomes like the reader by being his own reader, the reader like the poet by gazing at the lights on the page as the poet does those in the sky. They remain always distinct, but always approach each other, their distance and approach creating their identity.

As the poet and reader become more like each other, the situation as a whole becomes closer to ‘perfect.’ Each comes closer to embodying everything necessary for the speech act to be fulfilled, but there is no final meeting, only a striving in the direction of a meeting. The
reader and author are joined in their mutual destination (each other) but remain separate. Again, it is the distinction between them that gives them any identity at all. Here, this distinction and the mutually supportive identities continue even after the deaths of the author and the second-person stars. Their union in the text is greater than their limited physical life. Reader and author also represent a polarity that is greater than their instantiations of it.

A biographical reading would also suggest that the poem is addressed to Maria Lazic and that the lines “Может быть, нет вас под теми огнями: / Давняя вас погасила эпоха” (“Maybe you are not under those lights / A long-past epoch extinguished you”) refer to her death by fire. The flames that consumed her body went out decades ago, but Fet still sees them in his mind’s eye, anticipating his own final breath that will allow him to approach her.32

**The Mirror-Text of Late Fet**

По образцу сочетаний ловил, да не поймал; ловил и наконец поймал; ловил, пока не поймал, нельзя сказать — по крайней мере, без введения в контекст дополнительных элементов - *видел, да не увидел; *благодарил, да не поблагодарил; *явился, да не явился. –

On the model of pairings such as tried to catch it, but didn’t; tried to catch and finally caught it; tried to catch it until he caught it, it is impossible to say – at least, without introducing some additional elements of the situation -- *saw, but didn’t see; *thanked, but didn’t thank; *appeared, but didn’t appear.

Maslov 1948:304

И услышал я голос Господа, говорящего: кого Мне послать? и кто пойдет для Нас? И я сказал: вот я, пошли меня. И сказал Он: пойди и скажи этому народу: слухом услышите--и не уразумеете, и очами смотреть будете--и не увидите.

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32 In this reading, вас погасила…эпоха (“an [ancient] epoch has extinguished you”) is descended from любовь угласла (love has gone out) in Pushkin’s “Я вас любил: любовь еще, быть может…” (“I loved you: love still, perhaps…”) Zholkovsky’s list of lyrics related to this Pushkinian predecessor might also include “To Extinguished Stars” (Zholkovsky 1994, 145).
Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not.

Isaiah 6:8-9

The poems we have read until now in this chapter have been readable, even interpretable without the aspectual structures I have analyzed, discussed, and interpreted. The late “В полуночной тиши…” is an entirely different work, and may seem almost like a parody of weaker Fet poems. Somber, foggy, and nonlinear, it seems at first an impressionistic collection of nighttime thoughts.

В полуночной тиши бессонницы моей
Встают пред напряженным взором
Былые божества, кумиры прежних дней,
С их вызывающим укором.

И снова я люблю, и снова я любим,
Несусь вослед мечтам любимым,
А сердце грешное томит меня своим
Неправосудьем нестерпимым.

Богини предо мной, давнишние друзья,
То соблазнительны, то строги,
Но тщетно алтарей ишу пред ними я:
Они - развенченные боги.

Пред ними сердце вновь в тревоге и в огне,
Но пламень тот с быльм несхожий;
Как будто, смертному потворствуя, он
Как будто, смертному потворствуя, он

In the midnight hush of my sleeplessness
There arise before my strained gaze
Former divinities, idols of past days,
With their provocative reproof.

And again I love, and again am loved,
I rush after beloved dreams,
But sinful heart plagues me with its
Unbearable injustice.

Goddesses before me, quite old friends,
Are now seductive, now stern,
But in vain do I see altars before them:
They are gods uncrowned.

Before them, my heart again is in anxious
Flame, but flame unlike the former;
As if, imitating a mortal, they
Сошли с божественных подножий.
Stepped down from their godly pedestals.

И лишь надменные, назло живой мечте,
Disdainful, to spite a living dream,
Не зная милости и битвы,
Not knowing mercy and battle,
Стоят владычицы на прежней высоте
Mistresses stand on their former height
Под шепот презренной молитвы.
To the whisper of a despised prayer.

Их снова ищет взор из-под усталых вежд,
The gaze seeks them again from under tired lids,
Мольба к ним тщетная стремится,
A vain prayer strives for them, and the
И прежний фимиам несбыточных надежд
Former censer of impossible hopes
У ног их всё еще дымится.
Still smokes at their feet.

(Fet 1959, 117)

The reader’s lack of understanding and his inability to track the ‘action’ of the poem mirror the experience of the speaker. Time is nonlinear – the divine figures are now on their pedestals, now off, now on again. Gender is variable, as we have to do with божества, богини, and боги, while these terms seem to refer to the same figures. The first line claims insomnia, but the poem could not be more confused and dreamlike. It seems we have to do with an ungraspable hypnagogic state between waking and sleeping.

The most immediately accessible meaning of Fet’s poem for the first-time reader concludes with a vain supplication, unrealizable dreams, and an attempt at vision that is doomed to failure (Их снова ищет взор из-под усталых вежд -- The gaze seeks them again from under tired lids). Amid all the confusion of the vision given in these six stanzas there is a general feeling of failed devotion, loss of meaning in ritual activity (тщетно алтарей ишу пред ними я -- But in vain do I see altars before them). The sleeplessness, lack of graspable meaning, and the destroyed/not destroyed divinities recall Pushkin’s “Стихи, сочиненные ночью во время
"Verses composed at night during a bout of sleeplessness" as I have noted above, and also Lermontov’s “Расстались мы…” (“We have parted”).

Расстались мы; но твой портрет
Я на груди моей храню:
Как бледный призрак лучших лет,
Он душу радует мою.

И новым преданный страстям
Я разлюбить его не мог:
Так храм оставленный — всё храм,
Кумир поверженный — всё бог!

We have parted; but upon my chest
Your portrait I keep:
Like a pale ghost of better years,
It gladdens my soul.

Even given over to new passions,
My love endures: thus a shrine
Abandoned still a shrine remains,
An idol overthrown – divine!

(Lermontov 1891, 17)

The poem wears a mask of being addressed to a female lover, although the addressee’s gender is never determined. As портрет, призрак, он, его, храм, and кумир (portrait, ghost, he, him, temple, idol) are all masculine, the addressee’s gender leans toward the masculine by association. The only feminine nouns in the poem belong to the speaker (грудь, душа, страсті – breast, soul, passions). Lermontov’s “idol overthrown” (кумир поверженный) refers backwards to Pushkin who died in 1837, the year to which Lermontov dated the poem for publication.

Lermontov’s conclusion (Кумир поверженный — всё бог! – An idol overthrown is still divine!) also reaches forward to Fet’s uncrowned, de-pedestaled divinities (развенчанные боги… сошли с божественных подножий – uncrowned gods…have stepped down from their divine pedestals), that have lost and have not lost their divinity. Fet’s intertexts with Pushkin’s “Verses composed at night during a bout of sleeplessness” and Lermontov’s “We’ve parted” reach back to two deceased poets (Pushkin directly, and Pushkin through Lermontov) as well as
Fet’s own youth - his first collection “The Lyrical Pantheon” was published in 1840, the same year of Lermontov’s collection that contains “We’ve parted”.

On a first reading, then, Fet’s poem is about the loss of the meaning found in cultural icons, about the change from god to idol. When the worshipper ceases to feel a heartbeat and subjectivity like his own in his god, all that is left is a truly vain prayer. The intertext identifies these semi-divine beings as poets who preceded Fet. This first reading is a reading of loss of the connection with the past, isolation in a sleepless night. Fet’s poem continues the lack of understanding in “Verses composed at night” and the lost/not lost divinities of “We’ve parted,” while mourning their authors. It also mourns the ability to feel the connection between present and past, inheritor and ancestor. The poem makes little sense on its own, as do many nighttime experiences. Knowledge of the dreamer’s past is necessary for any reader to begin to make sense of the text.

Even if the reader is conscious of the threads between this text and those by Pushkin and Lermontov, that still seems not to be enough. If “In the midnight hush…” is only a mournful remembrance built on loss, then it remains a basically negative work, a waking dream dedicated only to the past and devoid of present emotion or life. The confusion of the vision calls out for some form of organization that would reveal meaning. The loss and mournfulness are plain enough - but does this poem, composed late in Fet’s life after so much anguish and grief really have only this one identifiable meaning? Is this all we can make of it?

One could impose a reading in the style of a paraphrase, but that would accomplish only a retelling of the confusion and fog in prose. It is unclear just where one might begin with this

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33 See also Pushkin’s “Поэт и толпа” (Poet and Mob) and “В начале жизни школу помню я” (I remember school at the beginning of my life) for fuller background to the idol question.
poem for a formal analysis or even just to associate it with some other work of Fet’s – there is little within his work that it resembles. The very frustration of reading this nighttime vision recalls Pushkin’s

Я понять тебя хочу,  I want to grasp you,
Смысла я в тебе ищу... Meaning I seek in you…

from “Verses composed at night.”

Fet’s text appears to be a mess, but an inoffensive one. What is achieved by composing a poem that mimics the confusion of a half-dreamed vision to no end? Given the prominence of eyesight in the first and final stanzas and the changing faces of the god-figures, perhaps a look at the aspectual forms will help us see the poem in a new way.

Most of the verbs and participles have imperfective forms. No surprise, since nothing really happens in the text. There are, however, six perfective forms neatly arranged throughout the poem, one in each stanza. These five perfective participles and one verb display their own form of organization. They come paired by association, the outermost stanzas forming one pair, the more inner ones forming another, and the innermost stanzas forming a third.

пред напряженным взором – before my strained gaze - A
Неправосудьем нестерпимым – with unbearable injustice - B
развенчанные боги – uncrowned gods - C
----------------------------------mirror------------------------------------------
Сошли с божественных подножий – stepped down from… - C
шепот презренной молитвы – the whisper of a despised prayer - B
из-под уставших вежд – from under tired lids - A
In the A-pair the gaze is strained, then tired from the effort. The B-pair gives negative epithets very similar in tone. In the innermost stanzas the C-pair contains key words in the ‘de-godding’ of the divine apparitions. This structure suggests a reflection of the first three epithets across a mirror-axis at the center of the poem.\textsuperscript{34}

The speaker goes through a semi-coherent collection of nighttime visions and thoughts that is not directional, but roughly circular in its motion. An initial readerly impression may also to deem the poem a half-meaningful mass of sights and censer’s smoke. The author and the secondary reader (the reader who is already conscious of his first reading), however, see this form of organization standing out from the confusion. There is another such mirror, this time with the text at its center.

\begin{verbatim}
Author (conscious of aspectual organization) A
Speaker (unconscious of same) B
------------------------text/mirror-------------------------------
Primary Reader (unconscious of asp.) B
Secondary Reader (conscious of same) A
\end{verbatim}

The A-pair is able to see through the apparent chaos, while the B-pair experiences only a mournful mess. In this way, the secondary reader is linked to the author by having a more perfect view of the organization as well as of the chaos. The history of writing the text and

\textsuperscript{34} See Laferrière’s very intriguing analysis of Fet’s “Месяц зеркальный плывает по лазурной пустыне” (“The mirror-moon swims through the azure desert”) in Laferrière 1977. His non-intuitive but quite convincing presentation of reflection-structures in that poem is an inspiration to anyone who cares to undertake such analysis, whether for only personal edification and enjoyment or also for inclusion in an academic study.
reading it becomes a ‘greeting,’ a form of recognition, from the historical author to the patient
reader (“I have come to you with a greeting…”). In our original reading, the text referred only
backwards to the sources of the dream-vision, to Fet’s predecessors in poetry. Now it is a
message also to the reader, a code oriented toward the future.35

At the same time, the paired, mirrored structure through which this greeting occurs
shows another interesting property. Fet wears two faces – those of the conscious author and
unconscious speaker. One physical reader has two faces as well: he is the naïve reader, and he is
the adult self who knows the poem more fully. The poem allows the author and reader to know
each other through it, and at the same time each knows himself more fully. Fet and the reader
make eye contact through the mirror of this poem, each catching the other in the act of seeing
and recognizing.36 The mutual knowing, the mirror, and the imperfect knowledge enveloped by
more perfect knowledge recall 1 Corinthians 13:9-12.

Ибо мы отчасти знаем, и отчасти пророчествуем; когда же настанет
совершенное, тогда то, что отчасти, прекратится. Когда я был младенцем,
то по-младенчески говорил, по-младенчески мыслил, по-младенчески
рассуждал; а как стал мужем, то оставил младенческое. Теперь мы видим
как бы сквозь тусклое стекло, гадательно, тогда же лицем к лицу; теперь
знаю я отчасти, а тогда познаю, подобно как я познан. А теперь пребывают
сии три: вера, надежда, любовь; но любовь из них больше.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has
come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke
as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man,
I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to
face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And
now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (New
King James Version)

35 The song “Message in a Bottle” by Sting and performed by The Police is similar in some ways to the poem
examined here, and may be useful in teaching this reading.
36 The episode “Blink” from season 3 of the revived television series “Doctor Who” explores the benefits and
dangers of eye contact. Readers may wish to view that episode and explore the tension between two situations: the
ontological paradox in Sally Sparrow’s virtual eye contact with the Doctor, and the Weeping Angels’ need to avoid
meeting the gaze of their own kind.
A full reading of the poem is identical to the arrival of совершенное (that which is perfect), the complete mutual and self-knowledge to which the author and reader are drawn through the action of composing and reading this poem. The perfect, in the shape of perfective verbal forms, is also the structure of the mirror through which the reader and the author come to this perfect knowledge. The culmination of 1 Corinthians 13, and of the face-to-face mutual knowledge that the poem creates, is love.

“In the midnight hush of my sleeplessness” has two faces. In the initial, imperfect reading it is only lifeless memory, an abandoned temple, a lost connection. The negativity and void of meaning are unattractive, almost repulsive. The reader may find it difficult to return to a poem that seems to deny causality and meaning, and his impulse is to detach himself from the poem, to break his tie with this unrewarding and empty work. There are more engaging poems in Evening Lights – why spend time on this one? It seems to be a carefully composed picture of loss that does not even have the aesthetic or acoustic beauty of many of Fet’s works. There is no closure, no harmony of purpose, no beginning or end. Most attempts to impose order on the poem will fail and leave the reader frustrated and empty. He is like someone listening to a dispassionate conversation mumbled in a language he does not know, but thinks he should. The reader looks into this abyss of meaning and feels diminished.

In its perfect aspect the poem reveals another relationship with a text composed at a very distant time and place. It announces that a dim vision in a glass is a harbinger of perfect vision, perfect knowledge. Mature reader and masterful author look at each other across the gap of space, time, and disparate identity and feel their mutual knowledge of each other. Solitude and incompleteness are not failures but precede union and love. The fullness of reading Fet’s poem
makes the central mirror both reflective and clear. Fet’s jangled, insomniac negativity and loss in the first reading flower into the identity of oneself and the other, into the love that is the union of knowing perfectly and being perfectly known. Once you develop the ability to fold time and space as the poem asks us to do across the axis of its mirror-plane, then the imperfections of the past are made whole, and nonsense becomes understanding. The imperfection of seeing only oneself in a fuzzy mirror is simultaneous with the perfection and the union of eye contact made across an impossible distance of space and time. When the poem acts as a piece of glass that allows vision of oneself and the other, the chasm of time and circumstance between the reader and author is erased. Speaker and audience become one; poet and reader as such vanish and Fet can believe for a moment that he has conquered death and time.

“In the midnight hush…” is in the fourth edition of Вечерние огни, the last collection Fet compiled before his death. The foreword to this edition deserves to be quoted in full for its relevance to the perfect aspect of the poem discussed above:

A person who does not draw the curtains of his illuminated windows in the evening allows access to all the indifferent, perhaps even hostile eyes in the street; yet it would be wrong to conclude that he lights his rooms not for his friends, but in expectation of the judgment of the multitude. After the touching and most portentous for us fellow feeling of our friends on the fiftieth anniversary of our
muse, we of course cannot complain of indifference on their part. As for the mass of readers, which establishes so-called popularity – that mass is quite right to share with us mutual indifference. We have nothing to seek for in each other. In opening the small window of a fourth release in a quite limited number of copies, we desire only to say to our friends that we are always glad to meet them and that behind this window the *Evening Lights* have not yet gone out. (Fet 1971, 315)

Fet uses взоры (gazes, eyes) and окна (windows) in the first period for their ‘eye’ meanings, and he replaces взоры with the unambiguous взгляды (gazes) in the second period after establishing the two sets of eyes. Окна (windows), while it does not have the lexical meaning ‘eye,’ has an obvious shared root, similar meaning, and present resemblance with око (eye). The the saying очи (глаза) окна души] (―the eyes are the windows of the soul”) is also at work. The foreword is an invitation from the author “who does not draw the curtains of his illuminated windows in the evening” to the reader willing to make eye contact, the most intimate recognition of self in other. The fourth edition of *Evening Lights* itself prepares the reader for mutual knowledge and love, for the miracle of communion made real in “In the midnight hush…”

Or so it seems. Imagining such a reader is pleasant, but perhaps not historically accurate. Klenin suggests that “no one except ghosts at the end of his career had any real understanding of its beginnings. Since his last poetry was so deeply retrospective, the absence of living witnesses also brings into question the older Fet’s readership, and even his legibility” (Klenin 2002, 191). The ghostlike divinities of “In the midnight hush,” these that rise and fall in the night before the speaker’s strained eyes, are also his early love Maria Lazi (d. 1850), fellow poet and important critic Apollon Grigor’ev (d. 1864), and editor and correspondent Ivan Turgenev (d. 1883). Those intimately connected with Fet’s poetry – whether as inspiration, inspiring critic, or significant editor – are those who appear in this ghostly vision. But, as Klenin asks, who is the reader of the poetic text based on such visions, when so many of Fet’s readers are dead?
In the previous section I offered a reading of “In the midnight hush” and the introductory prose to the fourth edition of *Evening Lights*. That reading says that a relationship is created between the historical author and the reader who looks closely into the mirror formed by the text. The context of the author’s life in 1888, however, suggests that at least as much as he was writing to Polonsky who was still alive and had known Fet in his student years, he was writing also to his past self.

I quoted Corinthians as a source and a goal for the complex structures in the verbal arrangement of the poem, and focused my attention on the arrival of совершенное, the perfect, and the idea of gazing into a mirror. If that passage of Corinthians is indeed a source for the author and a goal for the reader, as I believe it is, then “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face” also describes the older poet making eye contact with his younger self through these dreamlike visions. “И прежний фимиам несбыточных надежд / У ног их всё еще дымится” (And the former censer of impossible dreams / still smokes at their feet). The poem is about a gaze meeting across the mirror-plane of the text despite an impossible gulf of time. “To extinguished stars” shows the author and reader headed toward an area of intersection. Here their gazes meet in the mirror and the mutual knowledge that comes from this meeting defines and enriches both author and reader. The text has an ideal existence of which author and reader are ‘merely’ specific instantiations.
**Fet’s self-imperfectivization: an overview**

In this chapter we have discussed two early poems (“O, long shall I” and “Serenade”) and two late poems ( “To extinguished stars,” and “In the midnight hush…”). These groups fall on either side of Fet’s period of relative poetic silence in the middle of his life. In the earlier two, we find the poet or speaker relatively passive, hovering on the edge of completion and not allowing himself to pass over, or getting an editor to push him back over the threshold he has already crossed. This resistance to completion, displayed in the structures made of aspectual oppositions and in the history of the texts themselves, is the mark of a poet whose defenses are almost as strong as his poetic inclination. In this period Fet is always in danger of squashing his poetic voice entirely, either to protect himself or to allow someone to step in to perfect or ‘unperfect’ his creative act (for Fet these are the same action).

In the later poems, we also find fascinating aspectual structures. But in these later texts, the interpretations that the aspectual structures suggest show that Fet has created works in which the reader and author are almost the same being, both sucked into filling the vacuum at the center of the text. The uncertain but powerful young poet has vanished and in his place is a mature author whose concern with polarity takes him through perfective and imperfective aspectual forms to the polarity at the heart of every creative endeavor – artist and viewer. Yet we see that as he matures, Fet’s relationship with Lazic deepens and is expressed most fully in the enigmatic poem “In the midnight hush of my sleeplessness,” the text of which is a key to the gaze that links author and reader, living and dead, Fet and Lazic. In this late development, Fet finally sees
himself and Lazic almost as two faces of the same being, defining and complementing each other so that their union is the birth of the perfect, of love.
Chapter 5 – Imperfectivization of Pushkin

Inverting Pushkin’s “Nereid”: Fet’s midlife crisis

Fet did not live and certainly did not write in a vacuum, and presents himself as ‘ravenous for verses’ from an early age. To begin this chapter, I would like to examine a short Pushkin text first, because here Fet’s response is a remarkable inversion of the inner structure of Pushkin’s poem. Reading the texts in the order in which Fet experienced them will prove fruitful.

In Pole Star for 1824 and later in the 1826 collection Pushkin published “Нереида” (“The Nereid”) :

Среди зеленых волн, лобзающих Тавриду, Among the green waves that kiss Tavrida
На утренней заре я видел нереиду. At dawn I saw a Nereid. Hid by trees,
Сокрытый меж дерев, едва я смел дохнуть: I barely dared to breathe: above the bright
Над ясной влагою полубогия грудь Water the demigoddess raised her young
Младую, белую как лебедь, воздымала Breast, white as a swan, and wrung
И пену из власов струею выжимала. A stream of foam from her hair.

(Pushkin 1903, 371)

A Nereid is a wave, and the observer sees this Nereid among waves. In his vision, she is somewhere between wave and woman. The split identity волна / нереида (wave / Nereid) is also real for the reader, as we can easily understand all her actions as ‘personifications’ of the familiar motions of a wave, but the speaker also notes that he is hidden among trees, barely able to take a breath, as if he is watching a human bather. Her half-divinity shows up again in the name полубогия (demigoddess). The speaker can be said to be looking back in time at a distant mythological reality or to be looking ‘into’ the present in a way that imitates an older kind of
consciousness, finding subjects everywhere in the environment. As as expression of the speaker, the Nereid’s existence is open among the waves at dawn, and there is nothing ‘pinned down’ about her – even her identity as a wave or humanoid is undefined.

The only two perfective verbal forms in the poem, сокрытый (hidden) and [смел] дохнуть ([dared] to take a breath), apply to the speaker himself. He is bounded, surrounded by trees, hidden, while the Nereid and his vision of her are unbounded, undefined, expressed only with imperfective verbal forms (любил, видел, воздымала, выжимала – kiss, saw, raised, squeezed out). The restriction of perfectives to the speaker, especially сокрытый (hidden), binds and restricts his person although his mythological vision cannot be bound.

The interpretive take on “The Nereid” would have the speaker’s ego-self bounded or hidden (protected?), while his mythological, participatory consciousness is relaxed, open, unlimited. This is reflected in the restriction of perfective forms to his person and the use of imperfectives elsewhere when the Nereid / wave is the subject or object of the verb. This short early poem (dated to 1820) seems so mature in a way that there can be no response – the very boundedness of its speaker and the free-flowingness of his sea-nymph seem to cover all possible states of being in just a few lines. We do, however, find a response to “The Nereid” among Fet’s poems. It is 1865, in the middle of his quieter period in which much of his work is unlike that of his younger and older selves. In reaching back to the anthological poetry of his youth which earned him so much praise from Durzhinin and Botkin, Fet rewrites Pushkin’s “The Nereid” and in doing inverts the aspectual structure in his creation of an entirely different though superficially similar text. Here is Fet’s “Купальщица” (“The Bather”):

37 “For Ia. P. Polonskii, a year older than Fet and the poet’s friend from their youth, the wonder of Fet’s last books is the return of the Fet he had known before: “still the same,” Polonskii marvels, after all those years!” (Klenin 2002, 57)
Игривый плеск в реке меня остановил.
Сквозь ветви тёмные узнал я над водою
Её веселый лик — он двигался, он плыл, —
Я голову признал с тяжёлою косою.

A playful splash in the river stopped me.
Through dark branches I knew above the water
Her merry face — it moved, it swam, —
I knew her the head with its heavy plait.

Узнал я и наряд, взглянув на белый хрящ,
И превратился весь в смущенье и тревогу,
Когда красавица, прорвав кристальный плащ,
Вдавила в гладь песка младенческую ногу.

Она предстала мне на миг во всей красе,
Вся дрожью лёгкою объята и пугливой.
Так пышут холодом на утренней росе
Упругие листы у лилии стыдливой.

She appeared before me for a moment in all her beauty,
All gripped by a gentle, timid shiver.
So do the springy leaves of the bashful lilly
Beam with cold in the morning dew.

(Fet 1959, 294)

Such a text supports a fairly deep analysis. The speaker knows the woman at first, in fact, only through analysis: the first half of the poem (six lines) contains surprisingly many metonymic stand-ins for the bathing woman. These ‘parts’ of the bather and her situation (плеск, лик, голова, коса, наряд – splash, face, head, braid, dress) are the broken pieces that he makes out through the dark branches. A splash, a braid, a head, a dress – all these reach him, but he does not fully recognize her as a person until she steps out of the water and reveals her whole body as she steps into the sand. Once she appears whole for a moment (“Она предстала мне на миг во всей красе” – “She appeared before me for a moment in all her beauty”), then the vision is complete enough to conclude it with a metaphor.

Unlike Pushkin’s Nereid, who is whole and continuous in the observer’s perception, Fet’s bather is broken into tiny pieces that are then assembled into a whole. This opposition is also found in the placement of the identification of the time of day: in Pushkin, “На утренней заре” (“In the morning twilight”) is in the second line, while in Fet, “на утренней росе” (“in the
morning dew’) is in the penultimate line. Fet’s water-woman, unlike Pushkin’s, is also unambiguously human, only at the end likened to a lily with a conspicuous poetic metaphor unlike Pushkin’s less analytical consciousness that sees the Nereid and waves as one. If we consider the large set of similarities between Fet’s poem and its source in Pushkin, it becomes remarkable how many striking reversals fit in Fet’s text.

The background/foreground arrangement of the aspe-ctual forms is also reversed. In Pushkin’s text, we saw that perfective forms were applied exclusively to the observer while the unbounded, undefined wave-Nereid was decidedly imperfective. Fet’s text, in addition to breaking the observed bather up into her metonymic parts, also breaks the experience of observation into a sequence of perfective verbal forms. The splash stops (остановил) the observer, he recognizes (узнал) the bather’s face, recognizes her head as it appears over the water (признал), and finally he recognizes also her dress on the shore (узнал). Then he is turned into embarrassment and anxiety (превратился) when she breaks the surface of the water (прорвав) and then penetrates the surface of the sand (вдавила). She appears before him (предстала), surrounded/held by a shiver (объята).

This long sequence of perfectives that breaks up the observation into discrete events is itself broken by the two imperfectives inserted between dashes -- он двигался, он плыл (it moved, it swam). They remind the reader and the observer that the bather’s motions have a continuous, living quality in themselves, and that it is his perception that divides her motion into events and gives them a sequence. Inset in the sequence of ‘events,’ the imperfectives give a glimpse into the ‘real’ experience from which the speaker is cut off by his anxiety and the dark
branches. He is able to imperfectivize his choppy experience only by resorting to a rather pat poetic metaphor that transforms the bather into a bashful flower:

Так пышут холодом на утренней росе  
Упругие листы у лилии стыдливой.  
So do the springy leaves of the bashful lilly  
Beam with cold in the morning dew.

It seems that the observer knows this woman whom he observes while hidden behind branches – he recognizes her face and head, rather than simply seeing them. But his goal, despite knowing her already, is to keep a his distance from her: he is hidden, he makes her motions discrete, perfective, sequential, and controllable -- unlike the lapping waves of Pushkin’s Nereid. Her bath becomes a flip-book of photographic images in order that the speaker divorce himself from her: she is only a series of moments. We recall Coleridge’s lines:

I may not hope from outward forms to win  
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

(Coleridge 1997, 308)

Pushkin’s Nereid is the continuing life of the water, while Fet’s observer tries his hardest to prevent himself from seeing this woman as an unbounded movement. We recall also B. Gasparov’s formulation, which is again appropriate for the aspectual and emotional difference between the two poems. With Pushkin’s imperfective Nereid,

the speaker assumes an internal (subjective) perspective in his view of the situation. Such a position projects an “existential” view of the world; it views life as a continuous experience into which every person (including the speaker) is inextricably immersed. Whatever portion of this continuous process (from the present, past, or future) comes into the speaker’s attention, his position in regard to it would be that of a co-experiencer, rather than that of an external observer.

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38 Bukhshtab takes these concluding lines ‘straight’ in his 1974 monograph. This is possible, but in my opinion, such a reading leaves the poem rather flat and without meaning. (Bukhshtab 1974, 123).
and “narrator.” No matter what part (if any) the speaker actually took in the described action, he identifies his perception of it with the very process of its continuous unfolding.

While in the vision of Fet’s observer,

…the use of Perf. Projects a world view according to which a person assumes the position of an external observer who is not immediately involved in the processes he describes in his message, although his actual experience is inextricable from the continuous stream of time in which all these processes are developing. (Gasparov 1990, 195, italics mine)

Also unlike Pushkin’s Nereid who squeezes the foam from her hair in a stream, Fet’s bather has a braid that is heavy with water. Even as her actions are in little perfective boxes, so is the water contained in her hair in contrast to Pushkin’s lively wave-nymph. Fet’s observer turns her into an icon, an object of veneration but not intimacy, with the religiously-flavored lik. He can allow himself to know the continuous energy of her experience only by turning her into an inanimate icon or a flower, which is nonthreatening and inanimate. In the light of his perfectivizing and metonymizing the bather into discrete parts, we recall that “the external relation of contiguity (and remoteness) determines the metonymy” (Jakobson 1971, 232). In order to maintain his distance from the human object of his gaze, he turns her into discrete units. Gasparov’s and Jakobson’s views of these two polarities – verbal aspect and metaphor/metonym, respectively – show different sides of “The Bather.” These sides themselves oppose but support each other: the dominant verbal aspect is the perfective, whose name suggests completion, wholeness. But here the sequence of perfectives metonymically chops the observed into little pieces, which are by their nature imperfect.

In addition to the reversals I have noted above, it is important to remember that Pushkin’s Nereid is the water, a personification of the natural world. Fet’s bather just bathes. She is already distinct from her surroundings, unlike the Nereid. The observer only makes her more
distinct, chopping her motions into a neat sequence. At the same time, there is a suggestion that her watery surroundings are her clothing in the unusual line: Когда красавица, прорвав кристальный плащ… (When the beauty, having broken through the crystal coat). Like the inset imperfectives that remind the observer that he is breaking up a continuous experience into a series of images, this кристальный плащ hints that she wears phenomena as a garment, that the heart of the bather is non-perfective and non-phenomenal. Again, the observer is quite well isolated from her heart by the branches, his perfectivization of her, and finally his controlled poeticization of her shiver.

We may take a wider and more synthetic view of the two works to sum up the arguments above. Fet’s observer is a remarkable picture of the detachment of modern man from the world, even from his own senses. He isolates himself from the events observed, turning them into individual photographs or other bounded memory-images. He has some awareness of the unbrokenness of the events in themselves, but prefers to isolate himself from the events and the events from each other. The reader’s final picture is not of a woman bathing, but of the observer who desires detachment above all else, removing himself from the unidirectional flow (он плыл – it swan) that he senses beneath his vision of ‘links in a chain’.

Pushkin’s “The Nereid” is an ‘imitation of the ancients’ (‘подражания древним’ was the title of its section in its first publications) not because it uses two Greek words in rhyme-position, but in that the speaker is only barely removed from the “temporal flow – [the] state of continuous involvement experienced by the subject” (Gasparov 1990, 209). Nothing but the observer is framed as discrete, and the flow of events external to him is in his perception unbroken. Even
his own witnessing is imperfective, unbounded – only he as an ego has some small degree of removal from the Nereid he watches.

The difference between Fet’s and Pushkin’s observers can be found in the two halves of George Rostrevor Hamilton’s poem “Reflection,” the worldview of Fet’s observer being found in the first stanza and that of Pushkin’s in the second.

When hill, tree, cloud, those shadowy forms
Ascending heaven are seen,
Their mindless beauty I from far
Admire, a gulf between;

Yet in the untroubled river when
Their true ideas I find,
That river, joined in trance with me,
Becomes my second mind.

(Hamilton 1952, 33)

That said, we should not ascribe the differences between these two poems to some more ‘perfective’ cast of Fet’s mind. Simple biographical data offers a pat explanation: Pushkin’s composed his “Nereid” when he was about twenty, while Fet wrote his response when he was in his mid-forties. One might say that the youthfully participatory outlook on life, myth, and poetry makes Pushkin’s “Nereid” no surprise, while Fet’s secession from the unbroken flow of events is characteristic of his age. There may be some truth to this claim, but we could never have predicted Fet’s 1865 response basing our guess only on the age of a poet about a quarter-century after Pushkin’s death.

I would prefer to focus the biographical interpretation on the later poet, who is the object of this study. By 1865 Fet had experiences several traumas that left their mark on him and on the
work of biographers and literary scholars – first, the loss of his name, nobility, and even his legal identity as a Russian (Klenin 2002, 12-13). Maria Lazic’s horrible death followed before Fet was even 30 in 1849 – approximately the same amount of time passes between his birth and the loss of his name as between the loss of his name and Lazic’s death. Fet’s refusal to marry Lazic, of course, was intimately connected with his loss of nobility and the rights to the Shenshin property. Her presence in many of Fet’s finest lyrics after this period is unmissable. Finally, the 1850s and early 1860s were for Fet a time of seeing his poems sometimes improved but often wrecked (in his own estimation) by Turgenev’s editorial practices. By 1865, historical chance and his own character had cut Fet off from his family and fortune, a devoted girlfriend, the preferred forms of his own poems, and even his literary audience and identity as an active poet (Klenin 2002, 191). He had become an observer of his own repeated detachment from everything that held any meaning for him.

Pushkin’s text was a literary and emotional fact in Fet’s life – it is, after all, dated to the year of his birth and was first printed when he was toddling around, learning Russian and German and still bearing the legal name Afanasii Afanas’evich Shenshin. It is quite likely that Fet knew “The Nereid” from a young age. The part of the poem that has to do with observation is familiar, perhaps comforting, but the unbounded freedom of the events witnessed are at odds with Fet’s experience of life. He returns to “The Nereid” after a life of crises as if to his own highly praised ‘classical’ poetry of the early- to mid-1840s, but rewrites it in the form of a discrete chain of events in which the observer fears any real engagement. Major events in his

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39 Klenin follows all the surviving documents and Fet’s retelling of them with precision; the interested reader should look to that article for details about this matter (Klenin 1990, 141-144).
40 That Fet submitted his work for such editing and accepted many of the new redactions does not mean that the experience of seeing his work hacked apart was not quite destabilizing for his own relationship with poetry. The Turgenev period preceded a significant downturn in his literary productivity and identity as a poet – a downturn whose beginning coincides closely with the writing of “Купальщица”.
life had come in roughly 15-year intervals – the loss of his name at around age 15, Lazic’s suicide when Fet was almost 30. About 15 years after Lazic’s death (1849), Fet composes “The Bather.” In it he refers to and rewrites a Pushkin text that surely inspired the stark beauty of his own anthological verse of the 1840s. In this rewriting, the observer/poet can approach a woman only through a series of images that conclude with a poetic simile, a likeness that focuses his attention on one aspect of the bather – her ‘coldness.’

“The Bather” is a personal response to Pushkin. It is an aspectual inversion of “The Nereid” and so embodies a very different outlook on events and images of women, the speaker being removed both physically and emotionally through in his choice of verbal aspect. In other words, “The Bather” is very much about images of the past – a deceased poet, the successful poetry of Fet’s own youth. But why the tight control the observer keeps over his own perceptions? Why the unusual inset imperfectives that make so obvious the artificiality the observer’s perspective on the events in the river? Is “The Bather” also, through its very aspectual detachment, about Fet’s own emotional response to his memories of ‘loving and leaving’ various women, especially Lazic whose death weighed on him so?

Klenin does not include “The Bather” in her discussion of possible “Lazic lyrics,” but we should consider her careful treatment of the question of Fet’s barren middle period in our understanding of the poem. In her article “Fet and Maria Lazic,” Klenin writes

…one overlooked source of the barrenness of Fet’s middle years may have been his reaction to Lazic’s death. He cannot have been totally unaware of the possibility that his failure to respond adequately to Lazic’s love for him reflected not only social circumstance but also his own incapacity – an incapacity at the wellspring of his inspiration as a poet. (Klenin 1990, 167)

“The Bather” is about just this incapacity. Unable to feel the fullness of experience or to approach the obviously human, non-divine bather, the observer remains hidden away as he
shatters even his experience as a witness into tiny pieces. Despite remaining aware of the true nature of things – the imperfective motion of which he is inextricably a part, not merely an observer – he is strong in his resolution to keep the vision a chain of discrete perfective forms. His final attempt to poeticize his chain of experience makes only a token gesture at seeing something free of that chain – an uninteresting closing simile. It is the observer’s social, emotional, and poetic failure that makes “The Bather” one of Fet’s unusual successes, especially for this barren period. The speaker’s failure is given in such perfect form that the reader can experience his self-exile from life and human interaction. But the poet’s very control over his observer’s experiences and images recalls another portion of Klenin’s examination of Lazic in Fet’s poetry.

…he prefers to treat her death as accidental, and yet, not only his view of the truth, but also his view of the ‘life of the poet’ favored his presenting himself as the bereaved lover in the more dramatic story of a suicide – the desperate end of a beloved woman tragically separated from him by cruel circumstance […] Given the care Fet so obviously exercised in trimming his memories into memoirs…the ambiguities in in Fet’s presentation of her death reflect his ambivalence, not so much about whether he believed her death to be a suicide as about how he should respond publicly to it. In spite of his sober better judgement, he cannot, for whatever reason, resist, on the eve of his own death, telling us what he wants to know: it was not a suicide, or if it was, then it was not his fault, or if it was his fault, then at least he must have suffered terribly…(Klenin 1990, 149)

Biographically speaking, “The Bather” is an intermediate step between public silence about Lazic and his emotional withdrawal from her and the very late period when he “suddenly chose to say a great deal” (Klenin 1990, 149). This poetic embodiment of his own withdrawal and incapacity – as a lover, as a poet – is an important point in Fet’s late return to the powers of his youth, in some ways even strengthened by his period of relative incapacity. Polonsky remarked on the strange sameness of late Fet and the young man he knew as a student:

Пока у нас в снегах весны простыл и след,  
Там — те же соловьи и с ними тот же Фет…
While we in the snows cannot see even spring’s old footprint
There – there are the same nightingales and with them, the same Fet…

Surely Fet’s failed romance with Lazic and her death were a major cause of Fet’s poetic breakdown. “The Bather” allows Fet to come to some knowledge of his own withdrawal from her and gives him a chance to practice altering his perspective on the situation, a skill he put to more public use some twenty years later in composing his memoirs. In preparation for his later take on the story that inspires Klenin’s neat formulation “if it was his fault, then at least he must have suffered terribly,” “The Bather” is Fet’s Lazic-period attempt to turn himself aspectually into “an external observer who is not immediately involved in the processes he describes in his message” (Gasparov 1990, 195). This culminated in the detached description of Lazic’s death and Fet’s encoded confession of his own deadly guilt that I have described in my first chapter.

Verbal aspect, then, is a tool in this poem – a tool with which Fet serves his own emotional need to separate himself from his poor treatment of a woman who died a third of his lifetime ago. Klenin’s article contextualizes the themes and lexical choices of the poetry of this middle period in terms of their possible relation to Lazic. To her work I add this analysis of “The Bather” in which the emotional withdrawal of the viewer is so important. Fet’s use of aspectual tricks here reminds us of compositions we have examined from as early as 1842, well before he even knew Lazic. But again, Fet employs a familiar instrument in a new way. He rewrites Pushkin, suggests a change in consciousness appropriate to middle age rather than early youth, and fulfills a personal emotional need that was, at the time of publication, visible to hardly anyone. The careful biographical work of scholars like Bukhshtab and Klenin, as well as the biographically informed poetic analyses of Venclova and Toporov allow the present study to recognize the unique place of “The Bather” in the Lazic period.
Fet’s Aspect-Powered Pushkin Prophet

I have shown in the section above that Fet responds to and rewrites Pushkin’s “The Nereid” in the general topic, but also by inverting the aspectual map and so displaying an entirely different worldview on the part of his speaker (see Gasparov 1990, cited above, for details on the ‘worldview’ question). In the instance examined above, the relationship would be fairly obvious even in a prose paraphrase of the two poems. Below I will show an instance of a much deeper ‘aspectually-powered rewrite’ of Pushkin from a little later in Fet’s career.

In late August of 1885 Fet composed “Я потрясен, когда кругом” (“I am shaken, when all around”) a poem that has relationships with Derzhavin, Pushkin, and the Old Testament, as well as its own compositional peculiarities. 41 I offer a reading of this very unusual poem that at first glance may seem like “just more Fet.”

41 I am grateful to Boris Gasparov for his mentioning the Pushkin intertext during the prospectus meeting in April 2008.
Я потрясен, когда кругом
Гудят леса, грохочет гром
И в блеск огней гляжу я снизу,
Когда, испугом обуян,
На скалы мечет океан
Твою серебряную ризу.
Но просветленный и немой,
Овеян властью неземной
Стою не в этот миг тяжелый,
А в час, когда, как бы во сне,
Твой светлый ангел шепчет мне
Неизреченные глаголы.
Я загораюсь и горю,
Я порываюсь и парю
В томленьях крайнего усилля
И верю сердцем, что растут
И тотчас в небо унесут
Меня раскинутые крылья.

I am shaken, when all around
The woods roar and the thunder sounds
And I look from below to the fires’ splendor,
When, gripped by fear,
The ocean casts onto the crags
Thy silver garment.
But I stand lightened and dumb,
Surrounded by an unearthly power
Not during this grave moment,
But in that hour, when as if in a dream,
Thy bright angel whispers to me
Unspoken words.
I catch fire and burn,
I feel compelled and soar
In the anguish of extreme effort
And believe in my heart, that there grow
And shall immediately carry me to the sky
Outstretched wings.

Even without any particular analysis, we may say that the poem at least recalls Pushkin’s “Пророк” (“The Prophet”) with its Biblical tones and transformation of the speaker, though both are more pronounced in “The Prophet.”

The voice of God also speaks aloud to Pushkin’s narrator (“И Бога глас ко мне воззвал” – “And the voice of God called to me”), while here only it is the angel who speaks, and his speaking is as speechless as possible, as he only whispers “unspoken words.” Pushkin’s prophet is transformed and sent on a journey on the earth.
«Восстань, пророк, и виждь, и внемли, — "Arise, prophet, and see, and hear,
Исполнись волею моей, — Be filled with my will,
И, обходя моря и земли, — And, traveling over seas and lands,
Глаголом жги сердца людей». — Burn men’s hearts with the word.”

(Pushkin 1937-59, T. 3, 30)

while Fet’s speaker is transformed less violently in order to leave the earth and enter the heavens.

The political and social undertone of Pushkin’s poem is unmistakable – despite the violent transformation performed by a supernatural entity, the climax of the work is grounded on the earth and in the hearts of men. “I am shaken, when all around,” on the other hand, climaxes with no event and no speech, but a hope that transformation will allow the speaker to escape from the earth. The two poems are similar in that the climax is only potential: Pushkin’s voice of God gives an order that we never see fulfilled, while Fet’s speaker only believes that his transformative climax and escape will happen, but they are almost opposite in the result of that climax: Pushkin’s poem is the beginning of a prophetic ministry, while Fet’s looks forward to the end of the speaker’s earthly life.

Fet’s “I am shaken…” is a response to Pushkin’s “The Prophet,” but is so different in its tone and orientation that it is almost as if Fet took “The Prophet” not as inspiration, but as a foil. We should consider first the end of Pushkin’s text to give us direction in our reading of Fet’s.

“Глаголом жги сердца людей” (“With the word, burn the hearts of men”) – the line has a restrained majesty appropriate to the voice of God. Part of its power comes from the very natural use of the old-style глагол with the meaning word, speech. God fills the prophet with his own will and gives him the gift of this unearthly глагол, replacing the function of the lost грешный язык (sinful tongue). In Pushkin’s “The Prophet,” глагол is clearly used only in the higher registers — there is no way to understand that Pushkin’s usage here makes any reference
to verbs. The word глагол, of course, in an everyday register usually means just that -- ‘verb. Fet wrote a response to Pushkin’s “The Prophet” in which the keystone is a double-register usage of the word глагол. It bears meaning simultaneously in the high-style sense speech and the everyday sense verb. My discussion below examines the poem’s obsessive boundary-crossing and demonstrates how Fet draws the reader into this double-register world. I will discuss also the implications of this double-register framework for deeper interpretation of the poem.

The verbal forms in “I am shaken…” turn out to be quite revealing. Let us step back from the religious, spiritual, and intertextual implications of the poem for just long enough to consider the arrangement of verbal forms in a purely analytical way. While a strict analysis may seem somewhat out of place in relation to this poem, I will show that the side of the poem subject to this kind of examination is integral to a complete reading of Fet’s unusual conversation with Pushkin.

The text has 19 verbal forms but only 18 lines. If \( V \) is the number of verbal forms and \( n \) the number of lines, then \( V = n + 1 \). The poem is not quite perfectly balanced in this way – there is an “extra” verbal form somewhere (as in the autoerotic poem discussed above). If we consider each 9–line half of the poem, we see that in the first half, there are 9 lines and 9 verbal forms, while the second half has 10 verbal forms to its 9 lines. So we see that this extra-systemic, apparently superfluous form is -- purely in terms of number -- in the second half of the poem. The verbal structure of the poem will help us narrow it down a little more, if we look at the breakdown of aspectual forms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imperfective</th>
<th>Perfective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>гудят - roar</td>
<td>потрясен - shaken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>грохочет - sounds</td>
<td>обуян - gripped</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

42 It is possible that the 1874 and 1880 publications of Pushkin’s two-register “В глушь, измучась жизнью постной” was the impetus for Fet’s composition.
гляжу - I look  просветленный - lightened  
мечет - throws  овеван - surrounded  
стою – I stand  неизреченные - unspoken  
шепчет - whispers  унесут – they will carry off  
загораясь – I catch fire  раскинутые - outstretched  
горю – I burn  
порываюсь – I feel compelled  
парю – I soar  
верю – I believe  
растут - grow  

--------  
12 7

12 and 6 would total to a pleasing 18, the number of lines. As we have 19 verbal forms to account for, however, the number 7 in the perfective column sticks out. So it seems this ‘extra’ verbal form is in the second half of the poem and is perfective. That still leaves us with some choice in the matter. A second glance at the columns above, however, shows us which perfective form is not like the others.

The imperfective column has only finite personal verbs, while the perfective column is filled with participles – except for the lonely perfective personal verb – унесут (“they will carry off”). This унесут is the “+1” of the verbal party here. Fet’s text is organized so that all the personal forms are imperfective and all the participles are perfective, except for this one breakout perfective verb унесут that crosses the otherwise unbroken boundary between the categories. That is, there is a perfectly reliable overlap of the categories ‘imperfective’ and ‘verb’ and the categories ‘perfective’ and ‘participle’ –reliable, that is, with the sole exception of this perfective verb. It is interesting to note that it is this verb alone that carries the speaker from earth to the heavens: the crossover word in the organization of the verbal forms describes the transportation of the speaker to another realm.
The structure I have shown above is not only consistent with, but expands the superficial meaning of the poem. The verb унесут straddles two formal worlds that otherwise do not intersect: imperfective verbs and perfective participles. The speaker is torn between human life and the heaven-bound existence of a winged angel, and his awaited transformation and transportation hinge on that унесут (“they will carry off”). The final but most central fence straddling is the word глагол (speech / word) itself. In Pushkin’s “The Prophet” it has the high-register meaning ‘word’ or ‘speech.’ Fet makes even this word do double duty.

А в час, когда, как бы во сне,  
Твой светлый ангел шепчет мне  
Неизреченные глаголы.  
But in that hour, when as if in a dream,  
Thy bright angel whispers to me  
Unspoken words.

I have glossed the lexically shortest and most striking line in the poem, неизреченные глаголы, as “unspoken words.” We may also understand it as “not-completely-spoken verbs” or “imperfect(ive) verbs.” The term не-из-реченный even recalls не-со-вершенный in its internal structure: не (not) + prefix + root + participial suffix. So the angel’s words are not only an evocative oxymoron being whispered, but unspoken – they are also the worldly, formal category of imperfective verbs.

The speaker believes that wings, appropriate to an angel, are growing from his body and will carry him away into the sky. That is, he expects to be transformed into an angel, the same creature who set his transformation in motion with its неизреченные глаголы. The perfective column shows another interesting breakdown with regard to the speaker/angel distinction. Those in the first half of the poem are all singular and modify the speaker (потрясен, обуян, просветленный, овеян – shaken, gripped, lightened, surrounded). Those in the second half (неизреченные, унесут, раскинутые – unspoken, will carry off, outstretched) are plural and metonymically associated with an angel – his words, angelic wings, and the action of those
wings. Human experience on earth advances through совершенство, perfection, to a point of breaking away from that life, an advancement or elevation to another level.43

The poem, then, has its life in breaking the tension between a number of pairs: earth/sky, human/angel, imperfect/perfect, verb/participle, глагол (word) / глагол (verb), and even singular / plural. Earth and sky are to be joined when the speaker crosses from one to the other, a man expects to become an angel, the imperfective verb and perfective participle categories break into each other, глагол has meaning in two distinct registers, and the participles change from having singular referents to plural referents as they cross the middle of the poem. In its paraphrasable content and in its formal organization, the entire poem is about bridging gaps between areas that appear to be cleanly divided. By taking Pushkin’s high-register “Глаголом жги сердца людей” (“With the word, burn the hearts of men”) as if глагол were in the everyday register and composing a poem of angelic transformation around a unique organization of глаголы (verbs) and participles, Fet sends his speaker – at least in thought – into the sky.

The secondary, everyday register of “I am shaken”, although it is integral to the poem, is invisible to the reader during initial experience of the text. Not so, of course, with Pushkin’s “В глушни, измучась жизнью постной” (“In the wilderness, tormented by ascetic life”), which even on its surface displays the Slavonic and Russian meanings of certain words, making humorous

43 Blagoi’s interpretation of this lyric (Fet 1971, 558) and subsequent discussion of Fet’s flight from the unsatisfactory ‘real’ world into a world created by art emphasizes the ‘passive’ element of it. I would say that the flight in “I am shaken…” is simultaneously active and passive. It looks passive in that it is the wings that carry the speaker away and the angel who initiates the transformation, but active in that the speaker’s transformation into an angelic creature suggests that he, in some sense, ‘lifts himself by his own bootstraps’ by appearing ‘earlier’ and initiating his own transformation. The angel’s неизреченные глаголы (unspoken words / imperfective verbs) are his angelic, otherworldly un-words as well as the poet’s category of imperfective verbs. In that case, the poem is about the poet-self transforming and uplifting the everyday ego-self. The picture is much more active than Blagoi suggests. Perhaps this self-transformation should be assigned to the ‘middle voice.’

Readers may enjoy reviewing Robert Heinlein’s story “By His Bootstraps” (1941) in connection with Fet’s near-ontological paradox in this poem. The loops of causality featured prominently in Doctor Who also may be of interest. The episodes “Blink” (season 3) and the two-part “The Pandorica Opens” and “The Big Bang” contain the most intriguing examples.
disharmony between high-style meanings and the vocabulary appropriate to a bout of intestinal distress (for example – понос, which means ‘diarrhea’ in modern Russian but ‘pride’ in Church Slavonic). “I am shaken…” blends the transformative, prophetic power of language in the canonical Pushkin poem “The Prophet” (first published in 1828 and therefore known to Fet from his earliest experiences with Russian poetry) and the crude but effective biregistrality of “In the wilderness, tormented by ascetic life” (published almost half a century later in 1874). Instead of the jocular overworking of biregistrality in “В глуши, измучай жизнью постной”, which Pushkin wrote to Vyazemsky and did not intend for publication, Fet makes biregistrality the hidden mechanism by which his speaker is launched from everyday existence into another world. After all, it is the angel’s high-style, mysterious “unspoken words” that initiate the speaker’s transformation into an angelic creature, and the everyday “imperfective verbs” that provide the ground for the breakout verb that will carry the speaker away. The biregistrality of глагол allows it to act as the godlike speech that inspires and transforms the speaker, as well as the ‘ground’ of the poem from which the wings carry the speaker away.

Fet has achieved here a powerful synthesis of two Pushkin texts – a synthesis that cannot have come about except in another genuine work of poetry. His “I am shaken…” is, in the end, deeply different from “The Prophet” in that “The Prophet” describes an effected transformation, while Fet’s speaker only dreams of being carried away in angelic flight. In fact, Fet’s speaker has his continued existence in the tension of his belief that this supernatural event will happen. His life is in the tension between continued earthliness and the possibility of ascension to heaven, while Pushkin’s speaker receives inhuman attributes in order to speak to the human inhabitants of this world.
If we are speaking of synthesis, the centrality of the word глагол in the speaker’s hovering between two realms of existence is even more interesting in light of Jakobson’s and Samarin’s discussions of religious glossolalia. The poem synthesizes the two functions of glossolalic utterances, which “connect the human and divine worlds on the one hand as prayers from the former to the latter and on the other hand as messages transmitted from the divine power to the assembled human body in order to inspire, unify, and emotionally exalt it” (Jakobson 1988, 214). The poem connects two worlds – it is a hopeful prayer from an earthbound mortal and at the same time it shows the arrival of messages from an angelic, heavenly being. The word глагол almost depicts this double function iconically in its phonetic makeup, which has the form it does because of its origin as an intensifying duplication (Preobrazhensky 1910, 124). Reduplication is common in early attempts at glossolalia:

We have seen that although glossolalia sees to come easily to some people – others, by their own report – begin speaking tongues by stammering, babbling, or uttering syllables repetitiously. One man reported that his first words were ab ab abba abba; another, that his first utterance consisted of “only two words or sounds.” (Samarin 1972, 74)

The reduplicative ‘babble’ sound of глагол and its meanings that span two registers make it the centerpiece of the poem. In fact, in terms of its function here, the only thing that separates глагол from a glossolalic utterance is that it has lexical meaning. These verbs/words/speech that are the lexical keystone of the poem recall the features and functions of lexically meaningless speech that uses much duplication. Pushkin’s глагол is used in two registers here

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44 Samarim gives several examples of glossolalia that display heavy duplication and near-duplication in developed utterances: “finda finda ova ova […] lama lama” (Samarin 1972, 256), “filā sāndrūzhāntrākāmālā sīndri patāto sāntrākū zhāndre” (77).

45 The use of неизреченные глаголы (unspoken words) recalls the silent quality of some glossolalists’ speech: “…one person says that her speech comes from within the solar plexus: ‘It is as if there it is spoken softly, without sound.’” (Samarin 1972, 29)
and takes on two lexical meanings, but at the same time it recalls vocalizations that have no
lexical meaning.

Fet’s speaker, then, has an experience similar to that of Pushkin’s prophet – similar but
quite distinct, this distinction represented iconically by the two meanings and syllables of the
word глагол. But Fet the poet very much resembles that prophet, carrying out God’s injunction
to burn the hearts of men with…verbs. It is Fet’s verbal art by which he attains this height of
poetic homage and rewriting, while weaving his rewriting into a rich meaning for the reader who
is pulled between everyday, earthly concerns, and the ethereal richness of Evening Lights, the
stars in the heavens. I would like to end this discussion with two citations that may be
stimulating when read in the light of what we have examined above.

The pun, or to use a more erudite, and perhaps more precise term – paronomasia,
reigns over poetic art, and whether its rule is absolute or limited, poetry by
definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible: either
intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual
transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic
transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into
music, dance cinema or painting. (Jakobson 1971, 266)

You can put it whichever way you please. You can say that by Transposition our
humanity, senses and all, can be made the vehicle of beatitude. Or you can say
that the heavenly bounties by Transposition are embodied during this life in our
temporal experience. But the second way is the better […] If flesh and blood
cannot inherit the Kingdom, that is not because they are too solid, too gross, too
indistinct, too “illustrious with being.” They are too flimsy, too transitory, too
phantasmal. (Lewis 1980, 69)

Fet’s “I am shaken…” hinges on a pun and with that pun and the surrounding material sets its
speaker, reader, and itself afloat between two worlds. Such is the nature of the poem. By its
very existence the poem demonstrates that “poetry by definition is untranslatable” -- because
poetry is the act of transposition.
The reading above suggests that the speaker somehow lifts himself from the everyday world – the angel that appears and whispers to him looks very much like the speaker as he imagines himself to be in the future. He is transported by a copy of himself from an imagined future.  

The situation recalls an English-language saying about bootstraps: “2. Colloq. phr. to pull (lift, raise, etc.) oneself (up) by one's (own) boot-straps: to raise or better oneself by one's own unaided efforts; hence allusively.” (OED, entry for ‘bootstraps, n.’) The poem itself is part of a long tradition extending back to Pushkin’s “The Prophet” and to the book of Isaiah. In that sense, it would be unfounded to say that the poem lifts itself by its own bootstraps.

As a part of this tradition, however, it has a new view of the visionary’s transformation in which the visionary becomes like/is the very creature that initiates his transformation. In this way, “I am shaken…” is to Pushkin’s “The Prophet” as the angel is to the speaker – it reaches back and remakes the earth-bound “The Prophet” into something pulls itself into the sky.

Fet appropriates the power of Pushkin’s programmatic poem for poets but twists it into the self-supporting, balanced loop of aspect, motion, and energy that we find in “I am shaken…” Fet composed this poem at a relatively advanced age to which Pushkin did not live, an age by which the poet had seen his readers, lovers, and friends die off slowly. A purely biographical reading might assign “I am shaken…” to a set of death-wish lyrics.

The reading above, however, might temper the strict death-wish interpretation and find in the poem a desire to imitate Elijah and be carried to heaven without dying, as in 2 Kings 2:11 – “And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into

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46 Neil Young’s song “Comes a Time” presents an interesting 20th-century counterpart to this poem. In that song, the rhyme-structure interacts with the lyrical content to create a striking analogy: God’s lifting up of Christians from the earth in the event known as the Rapture is shown to be like an adult lifting a baby from the ground. The adult is a child projected into the future and as such facilitates the child’s growth.
heaven.” The end of Fet’s rewriting recalls, in its similarity to Elijah’s transportation to heaven, Elijah’s earlier experience in 1 Kings 19:11-12:

And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (KJV)

This recalls the experience of the speaker in “I am shaken…” in that he finds transformative power not in the majestic, awful phenomena of the natural world, but in the un-voice of the heavenly being. Where the passage above gives “and after the fire a still small voice” the Church Slavonic translation has “и по огни гласъ хлада тонка” (“and after the fire a voice of gentle cold”). The replacement of fire with cold and the hope that the tension of aspect will launch the speaker into the heavens makes this another post-Lazic lyric.

Pushkin’s text contains a fire-hearted and fire-spoken prophet based on the prophet Isaiah:

И он мне грудь рассек мечом, And he cut open my chest with a sword,  
И сердце трепетное вынул, And pulled out my trembling heart,  
И угль, пылающий огнем, And a coal, burning with fire  
Во грудь отверстую водвинул. Placed into my open chest.

(Pushkin 1937-59, T. 3, 30)

Fet balances this with his Elijah-prophet who responds to quiet and is taken to heaven without death. Pushkin’s “Глаголом жги” (“Burn with the word”) gives way to “гласъ хлада” (“a voice of cold”). The subtlety of the transformation of Isaiah into Elijah is a testament to Fet’s power of

47 The 1545 German-language Lutherbibel has “Und nach dem Feuer kam ein stilles, sanftes Sausen” (and after the fire came a quiet, soft whisper).
balanced rewriting – speech / unspeech, fire / cold. The ‘unpacking’ that the text requests from us results in a greater vision in which Fet’s activity as a rewriter of Pushkin offers some hope of a bodily reunion with Lazic, an ascension to heaven without death. The text presents reading and rewriting as the creative activity that, apart from death, allows hope for union with those who have moved on to another world. Since our aspectually-focused reading of “I am shaken…” has led us to the replacement of fire with cold, let us look at another poem – this time, one with a less obvious reference to Pushkin and a more obvious concern with cold weather.\(^48\)

**The Aspect of Snow**

Нам кажется, весьма ошибаются те поэты, которые...ищут фантастического во внешних предметах, в облаках, в воздушных Наполеонах и т. п.; напротив, оно живет в душе нашей, слито с нашими чувствами...

It seems to us that those poets are mistaken who seek the fantastic in outward forms, in clouds, in floating Napoleons, and so on; on the contrary, the fantastic lives in our soul, blended with our feelings...

-Василий Петрович Боткин

…just as English uses derived terms for a variety of forms of water (liquid, lake, river, brook, rain, dew, wave, foam) that might be formed by derivational morphology from a single root meaning ‘water’ in some other language, so Eskimo uses the apparently distinct roots *aput* 'snow on the ground', *gana* 'falling snow', *piqsirpoq* 'drifting snow', and *gimuqsuq* 'a snow drift'.

-Franz Boas

In the sections above, we have seen the retreat of the speaker from experience through excessive perfectivization of a Pushkin lyric and the complex motions of rewriting and self-

\(^48\) See Robert Frost’s “Fire and Ice”.
lifting in response to Pushkin in “I am shaken…” In this section I will read a poem with a strong but relatively diffuse Pushkinian undercurrent. To begin my reading of the lyric “Жизнь пронеслась без явного следа” (“Life has passed without obvious trace”) I would like to treat it at first as a descendant of Pushkin lyrics and only then to discuss its special internal structure.

Жизнь пронеслась без явного следа. Life has passed without obvious trace.
Душа рвалась — кто скажет мне куда? The soul rushed – who can tell me whither?
С какой заранее избранную цель? With what goal, chosen beforehand?
Но все мечты, всё буйство первых дней But all dreams, all the riot of the first days
С их радостью — всё тише, всё ясней With their joy – ever quiet, ever clearer
К последнему подходят новоселью. Approach their final home.

Так, заверша беспутный свой побег, So, having completed its dissolute escape,
С нагих полей летит колючий снег, Stinging snow flies from the naked fields.
Гонимый ранней, буйною метелью, Driven by an early, riotous storm,
И, на лесной остановясь глушь, And stopping in the woody wilderness,
Сбирается в серебряной тиши Collects in the silver quiet
Глубокой и холодною постелью. In the form of a deep and cold bed. (Fet 1959, 106)

In obvious theme the poem is related to Baratynsky’s “На что вы, дни!” (“What good are you, days?”) though is so different in tone and execution that it seems any strict comparison would be fruitless. Perhaps the clearer source is Pushkin’s “Я пережил свои желанья” (“I have outlived my desires”) although that lyric, too, seems to offer little that is not trivial or obvious for a reading of “Life has passed without obvious trace.”
For an interpretive paraphrase, we might say the following: the dreams and riot of youth, recalled in the first stanza, are heading for their final home. One assumes that this means the speaker is looking ahead to his grave and the ‘burial’ of all he carries from his youth. But it is the ‘dreams’ themselves that are heading there. The second stanza, with its metaphoric restatement of the initial situation compares the journey of these dreams and riotous youth to the movement of stinging snow as it is blown around and finally comes to rest and collects. The fire and energy of youth, all this that the speaker carries with him into middle age, are not flowers or wine or moments of great joy, but stinging snow. The tone formed in the relations between the two stanzas is almost mechanical, and the comparison in the second stanza seems lexically unprepared by the first. In this way it recalls Pushkin more by contrast than anything else:

Я пережил свои желанья,  I have outlived my desires,
Я разлюбил свои мечты;    I have fallen out of love with my dreams;
Осталось мне одни страданья, Only suffering remains for me,
Плоды сердечной пустоты. The fruits of the heart’s barrenness.

Под бурями судьбы жестокой  Under the storms of cruel fate
Увял цветущий мой венец —   My blossoming crown has faded --
Живу печальный, одинокой,   I live grieving, lonely,
И жду: придет ли мой конец? And wait: will my end arrive?

Так, поздним хладом пораженный, So, struck down by a late frost,
Как бури слышен зимний свист, When the wintry whistle of the storm
Один — на ветке обнаженной Is heard, alone on a naked branch
Трепещет запоздалый лист!.. Trembles a late leaf!..

(Pushkin 1937-59, T. 2, 165)
In this lyric the plant-images (плоды, цветущий венец – fruits, flowering crown) have already prepared the way for the last stanza and its image of the last leaf. Fet’s “Life has passed…” refers to this text but seems almost broken or machinelike, in that the immediate comparison feels unprepared. There is, however, some inter-textual—, as well as intra-textual—preparation.

First, the intertext with Pushkin’s “The Cloud” prepares the way for the mention of the snowstorm even in the first line. That line, “Life has passed without obvious trace,” recalls the description and motion of the storm cloud in Pushkin’s text. I have italicized the roots and prefix below from Pushkin’s text that appear all together in that first line:

“Последняя туча рассеянной бури! Final cloud of a dispersed storm!
Одна ты несешься по ясной лазури… Alone you are carried through the clear azure…
Земля освежилась, и буря промчалась… The earth is renewed, and the storm has passed…

The reader already feels in this first line the presence of Pushkin’s text and the past storm that it discusses, so the talk of snow in the second stanza of Fet’s text is prepared by the reader’s knowledge of Pushkin’s already classic poem.

Within Fet’s text alone, though partly on the strength of the intertextual relationship with Pushkin described above, the без…следа (“without trace”) also suggests the disappearance of footprints as they are covered by snow, which suggests the type of storm to come in the second stanza (snow, rather than Pushkin’s lightning and rain). The snow of the second stanza, then, is strongly anticipated in the first, but most of that anticipation is on the strength of the reader’s knowledge of earlier poetry. When one reads the poem with that cultural preparation, the transition to the second stanza makes sense, although it may be difficult at first to say why.

With the strong Pushkinian current identified, it is interesting to note that the speaker in “Life has passed…” appears only once in any form, and that instance does not even identify any
of the life, soul, or dreams as his. The phrase “кто скажет мне куда?” (“who can tell me whither?”) is a rhetorical question about the obscurity of the passing of this life, and does not really link the speaker to any of the aspects of the life in question. The abundance of first-person pronouns and verbs in “I have outlived my desires” looks almost crazily self-aggrandizing when compared to the ‘selflessness’ of Fet’s text – or one could say that the observations in Fet’s text are detached from the observer, almost to the point of temporal dysfunction. The life mentioned in the first line of Fet’s poem, without any real owner in its own text, is more closely linked to Pushkin than to the speaker here or the historical author. The text is about Fet because he is the historical author and such a relationship is just assumed, but it is drawn just as strongly to Pushkin. In the mid-1860s it could appear that Pushkin’s literary life had passed “without obvious trace,” given that the societal powers of poetry were widely considered to have faded. The poem also seems to describe Fet’s life, or the truncated life of Maria Lazic.

We do not need to pick a concrete referent – it is enough to say that the poem is about a burned-out life that was in some way connected with the poetic tradition. This strong but subtle connection to Pushkin in the first line is similar to the connection between the apparently metaphorical ‘tracelessness’ of that first line and the footstep-covering snow of the second stanza. There is a trace or a track, though perhaps it is not so ‘obvious’ as one might like – Pushkin’s poetry is alive in Fet and Polonsky even in the 1860s, and there is a track between the first and second stanza when we look closely.

Speaking of the first and second stanzas, they are separate, as is easily observed: the second is the obvious ‘metaphor’ for the first. At the same time, there is a subtle linear linkage between them, an anticipation that we feel the through the idea of covering up footprints and through the lexical relationship to Pushkin’s “The Cloud.” The unity / disunity of the stanzas is
also felt in the arrangement of aspevtual forms. The poem displays an interesting balance of
imperfective and perfective forms, but without any obvious structure or iconicity in their
placement. Let us see to what thoughts the aspectual arrangement will lead us.

The poem as a whole has five perfective and five imperfective forms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perf.</th>
<th>Imp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>пронеслась - passed</td>
<td>рвалась – rushed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>скажет - will tell</td>
<td>подходят - approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>избранною - chosen</td>
<td>летит - flies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>заверша – having finished</td>
<td>гонимый - driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>остановясь – having stopped</td>
<td>сбирается – collects, builds up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first stanza has three perfectives and two imperfectives, while the second stanza has two
perfectives and three imperfectives. They add up to one balanced whole by being
complementary in this way. But in this case the reader may ask “So what? Does it really matter
that the aspectual forms fall in this way?”

In terms of its stanzaic opposition, the poem is a statement and a metaphorical
restatement – simple enough, at least when taken in the grossest way. In terms of the ‘owner’ of
the life discussed, the poem again presents two faces or aspects – we are pulled to associating it
consciously with Fet, and pulled to associating it unconsciously with Pushkin. These aspects –
reality and metaphorical restatement, Fet and Pushkin – are not quite presented in an ‘order’ but
are blended together. Just so are the aspectual forms mixed together, but in a manner that
displays balance and integration when we view them from above.

If we consider the whole poem, we see a wavering between completion and
incompletion even in relation to what is more or less the same action. That is, we find a number
of perfective verbs followed by a near-restatement in imperfective terms. Fet mentions an action that is complete, and then immediately discusses the same action in imperfective terms. For example:

1) “Жизнь пронеслась… Душа рвалась...” (life has passed, the soul was rushing)

2) “С какой заране избранною целью?.. все мечты...К последнему подойдут новоселью” (the goal was chosen, now they approach the goal)

3) “Так, заверша беспутный свой побег, / С нагих полей летит колючий снег” (having finished off its flight, the snow is still in motion)

4) “И, на лесной остановясь глушки, Сбирается в серебряной тиши” (having stopped, it collects)

The first two examples are not that gripping in themselves, as the grammatical subject changes and the difference in perspective seems natural. They merely set up the aspectual peculiarity we encounter in the second stanza (examples 3 and 4).

In example 3, the snow has completed its ‘escape,’ but is still in motion. We can propose that the escape is defined in such a way that motion can continue once the escape is complete, but such a proposal requires that we look back at the first stanza for a ‘model.’ That model is the opposition “Жизнь пронеслась без явного следа” -- “Но все мечты...К последнему подойдут новоселью” (“Life has passed without obvious trace” – “But all the dreams continue to their final place…””) Escape/life is past, but dreams/stinging snow continue moving.

Example 4 is the strangest among these aspectual pairs. The snow has stopped, but is still ‘collecting.’ The verbal adverb остановясь (having stopped) seems to have as its logical subject each снежинка (snowflake), while the verb собирается (is collecting) has as its logical subject the snow as a whole. The final aspectual opposition demands that the reader look at the
snow in two ways – as discrete units and as an uncountable mass. It is divided and at the same time, in the same sentence, not divided.

The aspectual oppositions become ever more unusual as we read the poem to the end. This insistence that the reader see the snow in two very different ways in the same sentence is the culmination of the motion of the poem. Recalling that the stinging snow ‘is’ the dreams mentioned in the first stanza, the final image is one of a set of painful dreams, settling individually and as a mass forming a cold resting place. These dreams, going through a metaphor of snow to become a bed in the end, return almost to their original dream-identity, although the text hides this well. At the same time, the aspectual structure of the poem draws the reader’s attention to the increasingly strange perfective/imperfective pairings I have noted above. Those pairings culminate in the final two lines in which the snow is seen as a collective mass and as individual elements. These ‘dream-snowflakes’ sting when driven by the wind, but together in a mass they form a place of rest. Whether we take the stinging snowflakes as memories, fantasies, or dream-visions, they are a mass of distinct but collective mental states. Looking closely, we see that the analogy is: snowflake (discrete unit) is to mental picture as snowy bed is to Life.

The aspectual arrangement is very unusual even among those poems I examine in this dissertation. Rather than the unusual ‘launching’ structure of “I am shaken” or the striking perfective metonymization of the observed in “The Bather,” “Life has passed…” offers a gripping increase of tension between perfective and imperfective. The ‘difference’ between the poles of verbal aspect becomes more and more visible as we approach the end of the poem, until the tension is so great that it forces a truly polar opposition in the reader’s perception of the
snow. That opposition, expressed through aspectual forms, also demonstrates the self-supporting power of another polarity – metaphor and metonym.

That is, metaphor and metonym alternate and support each other throughout, demonstrating how easily each turns into the other. First, the мечты (dreams) that head for their final home are like the snow as it completes its journey (metaphor). Then the aspectual tension breaks that snow into its component flakes (metonym). Taken together, these flakes become ‘like’ a bed (metaphor). This bed is associated with сны, грёзы, мечты (dreams, daydreams, cherished dreams) (metonym) – with which Fet began the journey back in line 4.

If we look again after this discussion at the general layout of the poem, it looks quite different. We have just traced the metaphoric/metonymic motion from “But all the dreams” through the end of the poem, where it makes a metonymic leap back to the мечты from which it started. Those lines form a closed loop of similarity/metaphor and contiguity/metonym. The three preceding lines now appear to be an invitation for the reader to see this loop. Life left no ‘obvious’ trace…the soul rushed, and who can name its goal, chosen beforehand? The non-obvious trace or track that ‘life’ has left is the trackable loop of the rest of the poem, and the chosen goal is the starting point, as the snowy bed turns back into dreams.

The poem is deceptive – it appears to state that life has passed, when in fact it curves back on itself like a ring. It seems that life and time have passed, and instead we have eternity.49 The end is the beginning, and those dreams that form a death bed in the end/beginning are grounds for fresh dreams. On a first reading, the poem is what Turgenev calls it: “a nuanced and true comparison” (тонкое и верное сравнение). One thing is like another, simple enough. But a closer look at the aspectual structure reveals that the poem works the polarities

49 “I saw Eternity the other night, Like a great ring of pure and endless light” (Vaughan 1891, 126)
perfective/imperfective and metaphor/metonym to make the apparent comparison into a beautiful structure that is at once whole/perfective (the loop moves smoothly from life to a metaphorical snowstorm) and part/imperfective (the poem does split neatly into two stanzas that appear separate).

With all the reaching and looping back to Pushkin that the first line suggests, “Life has passed…” is its own tenor and vehicle, to use Richards’s terms (Richards 1936, 32-34). It holds itself and is perfect in itself – and at the same time reaches back to Pushkin, showing that his time has not passed and that the movement that appears to lead away from him leads back to him just as surely. Return to Pushkin, return to youth. Parts (snowflakes, stanzas) turn to wholes (snow, poem) that turn to parts again. Life has not passed, it has only returned to where it started. “Life has passed…” is a bold demonstration of the continuity of life and mind despite their apparent discreteness. The trackless is trackable, the discrete is continuous, what appears to be an end is a beginning. As it makes its loop, the poem recalls the proverb Какова постель, таков и сон (‘As the bed is, so is the dream” Dal’ 1903, entry for постель, bed). For Fet’s text, however, it might just as appropriate to say the unattested *Каков сон, такова и постель. (“As the dream is, so is the bed”). The bi-directional similarity is self-supporting.

50 Although in standard Russian мечты are usually not sleep-dreams but fantasies or treasured hopes, the connection here is valid in poetic usage. See his “Как здесь свежо под липою густою” (1854) with its final lines where мечты are associated with sleep:

И, как мечты почиющей природы, Болнистые проходят облака.

See also “Смерти” (1884) with its association of мечты and постель through the double identification of death as “Ночь безрассветная и вечная постель!” and “Игрушка шаткая тоскующей мечты.”

Сны и мечты, in fact, have a long association. See also, for example, Vyazemsky’s “Прощание с халатом”:

С тобой меня чуждались суеты, Ласкал сны и нянчили мечты. (Viazemskii 1958, 105)
We saw in the previous section the ‘self-lifting’ of the speaker. Here there is a similar chicken/egg structure in which causality is blurred beyond repair. In both poems the combined power of metaphor and metonym, hung on a skeleton of verbal aspect, return to their own beginning, but without an obvious ring-structure. The ringlike perfection and closure is in the inwardness, the experience of these poems, not in their superficial appearance.

The unspecified life discussed is assumed to be that of Fet himself, but in the light of the Pushkinian subtext and the importance of Lazic’s short life to Fet in this period, they together work well in the slot of ‘referent.’ The dead are more important than the living in that their lives, being perfect, are ready to give birth to the imperfect in the dreams that will come out of the cold bed of death.

*Fet’s Aspectual Rewritings Reviewed*

The readings I have offered above of Fet’s “The Bather,” “I am shaken,” and “Life has passed” demonstrate that Fet takes Pushkin texts and keeps them as a very solid foundation. No matter how deep we go into interpretation, the Pushkin text is right there, never fading in importance. This much we can say of many Russian poems. Yet the Fetian texts, with their concentration on verbal aspect and the tension between perfect and imperfect, demonstrate a kind of striving away from the original text while remaining attached to it. Even this striving is familiar to any reader of post-Pushkin Russian poetry, but one unusual feature here is that at least two of the poems (“I am shaken,” “Life has passed…”) seem to be about the striving itself.

Consider the reading of Fet’s “I am shaken…” in this chapter. There we saw that Fet’s rewriting of Pushkin was built on the material of the opposing poles of verbal aspect, while the
interactions with Pushkin’s text and Biblical writings responded to Pushkin’s text by balancing it – Pushkin’s destination is the earth, while Fet’s is the sky; Pushkin speaks with fire while Fet speaks without speech and listens to a voice of cold. One could argue that Fet’s response to Pushkin presents an instance of Harold Bloom’s “Tessera”:

Tessera, which is completion and antithesis; I take the word not from mosaic-making, where it is still used, but from the ancient mystery cults, where it meant a token of recognition, the fragment say of a small pot which with the other fragments would re-constitute the vessel. A poet antithetically “completes” his predecessor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as if the predecessor had failed to go far enough. (Bloom 1973, 14)

I have listed above the several ways in which Fet “completes” or balances Pushkin’s text. By balancing Pushkin so neatly, Fet moves parallel to him and becomes part of him. Fet’s text expands the world of “The Prophet” and so participates in its power. At the same time, the epigraph from Derzhavin distracts the reader from Pushkin, inviting thoughts of a work that has rather less to do with the poem at hand. The response to Pushkin is perfectly obvious, but the epigraph can stunt its growth in the reader’s mind (“Well, I guess I should think about Derzhavin instead…”). Even the fact of dialogue with Pushkin is displayed but hidden, balanced. There is a sense of completion and wholeness in the relationship between these two complementary texts. It is as if they “re-constitute the vessel” that was prior to them both.

When we view the relationship between the two ‘prophet’ poems in this way, it becomes easier to see the three Fetian rewritings in this chapter as ‘complements’ to Pushkin. In the case of Pushkin’s “The Nereid” and Fet’s “The Bather,” the two world-views (see Gasparov 1990 194-195, 200-201 as cited in that section for details) represented by the dominant aspects are complementary. Pushkin’s speaker is ‘inside’ the vision as the Nereid is the wave, while Fet’s
speaker is distanced from his metonymized vision. The bather herself is distinct from her element (a human in the water, no longer an embodiment of water itself). Pushkin’s “The Nereid” shows man at one with his gods, and presents the gods as identical to the elements. Fet’s “The Bather” separates the speaker from the woman, the woman from the water, and even the woman from herself in the metonymization of what the speaker knows, in some way, is a whole vision. Fet’s text is a shattering of the wholeness of mythical, primitive experience. Pushkin’s “Nereid” and Fet’s “The Bather” together present a picture of perfection experience and imperfection of experience, the opposite of their dominant aspects. This recalls how the opposite poles of any polarity consume and produce each other. The relationship between the two texts appears to be built on a difference in worldview that is visible in the aspectual choices, but the result is a pair of very natural texts that support one another.

Perhaps the strangest of the three examples here is “Life has passed,” in which Fet builds an unobtrusive intertext with Pushkin’s “The Cloud.” This poem offers a view of apparently linear life as a self-feeding, self-starting force. The apparent start and finish points are only links in a self-supporting chain. For all its use of verbal aspect to increase tension, the poem functions as a negation of causality and time. I propose that we use this poem to rethink the relationship between Pushkin and Fet that comes through in these six poems. We may consider Fet in these texts to be a kind of critic-poet. He applies a recognizable set of techniques in creating his responses, but in each instance the result is something fresh, unpredictable. The difference in poetic consciousness and gaze, clearly traceable through the aspectual structure of the work, in each instance produces a text that changes the classic Pushkin poem.

51 Again, see note 36 on the ontological paradox.
In the end, each Fetian response is a growth of the Pushkin canon, which remains, at the same time, neither altered nor reduced. Pushkin’s literary work grows while being unchanged. The relationship between Fet and Pushkin is a perfective imperfection, a continual ripening that again recalls the paradigmatic lines:

Что не знаю сам, что буду
Петь, — но только песня зреет.

That I know not what I shall
Sing, but only that the song is ripening.

Yet at the same time, these three rewritings of Pushkin have Maria Lazic at their core. Each poem in this chapter invites analysis, and the analyses reveal each text to be a synthesis of the dead poet and the dead lover, both profoundly important to Fet the poet and Fet the man. In blending his inheritance from Pushkin with his deepening relationship with Lazic, Fet comes to a synthesis of himself in this late period. The biographical concerns (money, family name) that seemed to be at odds with the poetry of his romance with Lazic are reconciled to it, as Fet unifies his main poetic predecessor with the woman to whom he hopes to be joined in the afterlife.
Concluding Remarks

We have seen that the polarity of verbal aspect is a key organizing principle in a number of Fet’s lyrics, some of them among his finest. This aspectual organization takes several forms. We have seen ‘breakout’ instantiations of one aspect on the background of the other, numerically intriguing divisions of aspectual forms, twisted expectations and even embraces formed by aspectual variation, and many others. In addition to all these, we have seen different but complementary aspectual organizations of spring as a principle.

Perhaps most interesting and ripe for future work are the themes that grow from those earlier readings in Chapters 4 and 5: Fet’s strong pull toward the ‘imperfectivization’ of his texts which allows room for the reader to participate in the text rather than simply observing and analyzing it, and his own responses to Pushkin that open up classic texts. Significantly, these communicative gestures—forward, toward readers, and backward, toward the poetic tradition of the past—are paired with aspectual organization that suggests the perfect/imperfect tension between classic, historically deceased writer and his living inheritor, as well as the very tension between life and death that was so strong for Fet in the decades after Lazic. The metalinguistic view I have taken here allows us to see Fet’s metaphysical yearnings in a new light and in many instances to consider new interpretive possibilities, especially regarding his relationship with Lazic. What appears to be an hermetic reading grows into others informed by the same approach, and finally they all join with the arc of Fet’s life and the tension of his spiritual strivings.

Of course, such readings themselves present an interesting tension – the tension between analysis and interpretation. We first know the work through a kind of readerly intuition, a first interpretation that informs us about what kind of analysis might be productive. When we
analyze the poem, break it down to know it better as a dead object, we find ourselves knowing it better as a whole and living work. Our interpretation has passed through the realm of the dead and returned more living than before.52

The process described above never really ends and is a natural and self-feeding cycle. It is also a model for how we know many other things: when we exert a little effort of memory to recall how a person or a work of art looked at the time of our first acquaintance, the similarity / dissimilarity surprises or even confuses us. If this exercise is performed while the experimenter is walking, the shock of what Dick (1995: 99) calls “dysrecognition” can be so great that it will stop the experimenter cold. The bare ‘image’ in our memory is the same, but its meaning is so unlike the meaning we now know that one remembers the richness of experience that is hidden behind phenomena – in the shape of a face or the arrangement of ink on a sheet of paper.

Something has been opened and revealed since that first memory was formed, and to re-close the flower of intimate knowledge is somehow beautiful and horrifying at the same time. It is this re-closing that must take place at the end of an analytical / interpretive work in order for the cycle to be complete. None of the poems I have examined here was especially cryptic or unreadable at first glance. Each of them had some meaning to its reader, however much or little that meaning seemed. The dissection of these works seemed to kill them for a moment, but their reassembly reveals them as more alive than we knew. If these readings are successful, then each of these texts has been destroyed and remade. Each of them now presents in the reader’s memory two faces – the old face of one kind of knowledge, and the new face that contains both the old knowledge and the new.

52 Luke 24:5 as well as other texts that suggest a passage through death and back to life provide a model for the usefulness of analysis, often said to “kill” a poetic work.
I hope that the faces I have favored will themselves be broken down and made anew, either in academic works or in the experience of the reader. As Chapters Four and Five demonstrate, the life of art is in the cycle of perfection and imperfection as they yield to each other. This is true of all poetry, all art. But there is some beauty in this face of Fet’s poetic work, as these lyrics, which are so infrequently ‘about’ art in their superficial meaning, display formal, analyzable structures and depths of unanalyzable meaning that renew our relationship to art and to reading.

Fet too is remarkable for the continual renewal of his poetry quite late in life. When other poets had died and Polonsky had continued to rewrite himself for some decades, Fet continued his painful and miraculous synthesis of imperfect and perfect, biography and inspiration, life and death. The teleological power of the pre-Lazic lyrics examined here suggest that Fet was seeking a synthesis from quite early in his life, most likely as a result of his bilingual childhood and the social difficulties he endured after losing his nobility and name. The Lazic-period lyrics, however, show Fet in a quite new light – a poet who attention was on the thousand details and connections behind and inside his texts as least as much as it was on the superficial music and meaning.

These later lyrics are almost three-dimensional diagrams of four-dimensional objects. The information about that fourth dimension is encoded within the first three. The content of that extra dimension defined by the text is, of course, much of what engages us in any poetry. Fet’s slow return to a full relationship with Lazic, however, is accomplished in great part through his application of the polarity inherent in the aspectedual forms of the Russian verb. For another poet, such a grammatical device would serve a few times, but the productivity of verbal aspect is
such that Fet is able to use the most binary of distinctions in dozens of ways to bring himself
closer to knowing his lost lover, and closer to knowing himself.

The study of the various languages of the earth misses its point if it does not continually
keep its eye on the development and organizational forms through which the human spirit
educates itself and sees its true aim therein. The painstaking sifting of the tiniest elements in the
languages and the noting of differences among them, indispensable as it is to a recognition of
language in its peculiar influence on the history of ideas, becomes petty without the larger view
and sinks to the level of mere curiosity seeking. Neither can the study of languages be separated
from that of their literatures, since grammar and lexicon yield only their dead skeleton. Their
living structure is visible only in their works.

-Wilhelm von Humboldt
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