

ANTONYCH: INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY
(A discussion concerning five poems)

Antonych has a cycle of poems, united by theme and images, which conspicuously bear in their title the word **persten**. Of the five poems in this cycle, four appeared in the 1934 collection, *Try Persteni*, while the fifth poem, entitled "Nash persten", was for some reason excluded at that time, although now it appears in the 1967 'Slovo' edition of Antonych's works. The four poems which were originally in the cycle are: "Try persteni", "Elehiia pro persten pisni", "Elehiia pro persten molodosti", and "Elehiia pro persten nochi".

A glance at the titles of the above poems will show that the term **persten** is used in contexts that do not immediately reveal its meaning. While one can by a stretch of the imagination find an explanation for the individual and specific use of the word, it is difficult to find immediately a meaning which would be as transferable as its usage. It is probably safe to say that the poetic imagination of the reader will not immediately make unconscious connections between the literal meaning of the word and its metaphoric implication (something which it can do quite easily, for example, with an expression like "krylata skrypka".)

There is, of course, the possibility that this term need not have any one, all-encompassing signification; it may be possible that **persten** means and implies something different in each title and with each usage within the different poems. This is possible but very unlikely for the following reason: all the poems mentioned above deal with essentially the same theme. Therefore, as variations on a theme, one can expect that the poems will show a certain thematic relationship in the use of this particular word.

What is the theme of these poems? The answer: creativity itself, or more precisely, the creative process. The theme is unquestionably old. But, despite its age, it is handled with a uniqueness that is remarkable.

Antonych consistently focuses on two moments in these poems: the moment before or immediately following the creative or imaginative ordeal, and on the moment itself. This moment of creative seizure is portrayed as a combination of madness and mystical rapture. Antonych has a characteristic manner of describing these moments (which is further proof, if any is needed, of the essential unity of these poems). The description is usually in terms of expansion or explosion, of an upward surge:

Підноситься угору дах,
 кружляє дзбан, співає скриня.
 („Три перстені”)

Розсунулись, мов карти, стіни,
 угору стеля поплила,
 і вікна згасли в синій тіні,
 найближчі речі вкрила мла.
 („Елегія про перстень молодості”)

Хай серце сп'янене в цю мить
 окрилюється і горить,
 нехай зриваються увиш
 думки схвильовані й крилаті!
 („Елегія про перстень пісні”)

With such striking similarity among the poems, it is necessary to expect that the term *persten* will have a more or less constant meaning or signification. The purpose of this paper will be to elucidate this meaning and to apply it to a broad description of this cycle.

The first poem of this cycle, “Try persteni”, must be considered the theme poem, for it contains the kernel of the images and motifs that are developed, expanded and repeated in the other poems. This is also the poem where the word *persten* makes its first ambiguous appearance:

В квітчасті скрині співний корінь,
 п'янливе зілля, віск, насіння
 та на самому дні три зорі,
 трьох перстенів ясне каміння.

As we have already discussed above, it is very difficult to decide immediately what Antonych has in mind in the last two lines of the stanza. On the one hand, the rings are just other objects in the chest. But, on the other hand, they are both more prominent and more mysterious than the other objects. But, leaving for the moment the specific meaning aside, we can go on and speculate that the three rings mentioned in this poem must be the “persten pisni”, “persten molodosti”, and “persten nochi” which are the subjects of the subsequent poems. This is a fair assumption, considering the relationship in themes and images in the poems, and assuming that the number three (appearing twice) is not there by chance.

Unfortunately, at this point we still have not explained the meaning of our word. Nor does the appearance of the term within the four poems of the 1934 collection help us much in deciphering

its mystery. For example, “Elehiia pro persten pisni” has only one overt use of this word in the body of the poem, and that explains almost nothing:

На дверях дому знак зловісний,
на дверях дому — перстень пісні.

Just why **persten pisni** is connected with a bad omen, is something that is not apparent from the context in which it is used.

Of even less help is “Elehiia pro persten nochi” which uses the word only in the title of the poem. Here, without some comparative approach, the title would be permanently obscure.

Just slightly more helpful is “Elehiia pro persten molodosti”, where the metaphor of the **persten** is vaguely developed:

Ось краще бережи
Твої молодості перстень.
Отих хвилин,
коли ще світ, мов серце, був широкий,
коли ще хлопцем сивоокиим
сміявся щиро і дзвінко
та без журби мантачив дні.

Ironically enough, our best conception of what this word signifies comes from the fifth poem of the cycle, “Nash persten”, which was not in the original collection of **Try Persteni**, but which was written at the same time: “Elehiia pro persten molodosti” was written on August 25, 1933, “Nash persten” was written on the 14-15 of the same month and year. This poem has a formulation, **persten, chas** and it reads as follows:

І кров і ртуть — вогонь і холод,
що жилами пливуть крізь тіло —
мов перстень, час замкне навколо
непереможно і всеціло.

Of all the poems, this is the only one to formulate a simile with the word **persten** rather than a metaphor, and for this reason the meaning of this word becomes more accessible. The context makes it clear that the ring is an image of a closed circle, and symbolic of continuity, of an eternally repeated time-cycle. In another sense, we can speak of the ring as symbolic of a world, that is, of a realm in which a particular state of existence is unfolded. Thus, basing ourselves on the poems of this cycle, we can speak of Antonych’s poetic ego inhabiting three worlds: the world of the song, the world of youth, and the world of night. These worlds are at once distinct and united, i.e. united in the conscious-

ness of the poet. There is a hint of this unity in “Try persteni”, where among the enumerated objects of creativity (*krylata skrypka, chervonyi dzbanok* — a symbol of creative intoxication) there is a flowery chest, which contains the three rings (see p. 13 for quote) and which, like receptacles in general, seems to be a symbol of the poet’s creative imagination or unconscious.

We must note, however, that this ternary of worlds has an internal division. The division in the ternary is between the ring of the song and the ring of night on the one hand, and the ring of youth on the other. The first two can be united under the single heading ‘art’ since the night is often the time of creative activity and the song the metaphor of that activity. Thus, simply stated, the division of the three worlds amounts to a division between youth and art, with both having a particular semantic connotation and a particular poetic realization.

The ring of youth is consistently used by Antonych to connote a chain of events that evoke innocence and happiness. In “Elehiia pro spivuchi dveri” he writes:

О молодосте, ти одна
незаплямована й хороша.

In “Elehiia pro persten molodosti” we have the same association of innocence with youth (for exact quote see p. 14).

Whereas the ring of youth evokes innocence, the two other rings (‘art’) consistently are associated with death and coldness. Consider the following:

І місяць — мідний птах,
таємна рожка неба, лампа
поетів та сновид
веде мене в сріблених снах
зигзагом мрій та безумства
понад безодню світу.
Мов *ругь* підноситься солодкий жах
до горла і до мізки,
аж струни-нерви задрижать.
Тоді вдаряє пісня стусаном ножа,
тоді лунає пісня різко.

(„Елегія про перстень молодості”)

This passage demonstrates that the moon is the poet’s inspiration as well as the cause of his madness. The inspiration is explained as “sweet horror” and the creation of the song (poem) as the striking of a knife. *Rtut*, or mercury, is a creeping poison and appropriately enough, in another poem, it is associated with cold-

ness: “I krov i rtut — vohon i kholod”. The suggestion above that the moon is somehow associated with death is made more explicit in “Elehiia pro persten nochii”: “Misiats mertvyi, misiats synii...”. Again, in “Elehiia pro persten molodosti”, the poet questions himself if it is worth his while to exist in the cold aura of beauty and art.

Ну, сам скажи,
навіщо це усе,
навіщо мерзти
в краси холоднім сяйві.

It may seem strange indeed to have an artist relating his art to death and coldness. It may seem even stranger if we state that for Antonych, his art and his poetry is in the final analysis an act of sin and like every sin it exhibits the pleasure of transgression, as well as remorse. This is an explanation that in the light of the above dichotomy that we have described is almost inevitable. Put bluntly, Antonych’s poetic ego vacillates between the innocence of youth and the culpability of adulthood. And, as in the Christian concept of sin, the issue is knowledge (“zabazhalos meni naraz chohos neznanoho”) which for Antonych is synonymous with art. We will remember that one of the most striking images in this cycle of poetry is the biblical image of the poet, who, as a youth (!), picks words from a tree:

Вихожу в сад, слова зриваю,
дерев натхненних щедру дань.
(„Елегія про перстень пісні”)

It is this image that connects the three worlds of Antonych’s poetry. Innocence (youth) partakes of the fruit of knowledge (slovo, art) and in a paroxysm of pleasure and pain, dies:

І словом просто в серце тну,
аж трисне кров, мов крик одчаю,
з нестями й щастя умираю.

The connection between fruit, death, coldness, art, sin, and the loss of youthful innocence is demonstrated in the final stanza of the poem “Nash persten”:

До всього людського причетна,
гордючись шляхом утертим,
ось молодість високолетна
зірве холодний овоч смерти.

It is clear that art (epitomized by the word or fruit) is an act of sin, a tasting of the fruit of knowledge, that brings spiritual

death. For this reason, the imagery which is connected with the act of creation is also the imagery of death and coldness. As the cycle draws to an end, Antonych presents no resolution to this problem; there is only the feeling that for the artist the **persten** is just a vicious circle:

І завжди ніч і ніч відвічна
і перша й тисячна й остання.

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