

Tea Gamrekeli (Tbilisi)

THE PRINCIPLE OF CIRCULAR ARRANGEMENT OF ELEMENTS IN KONSTANTINOS CAVAFIS' POEMS

It is common knowledge that poetic world offers infinite variations of compositional patterns i.e. combinations of successions of elements. Among ancient patterns of compositional organization known since Homeric times is the circular arrangement of elements.¹ Studies reveal that the bigger the distance between Homer's immediate period and the Greek epic tradition the more altered are the principles of compositional organization.²

The mentioned device is frequently applied in works by poets of different epochs either in its pure form or partly altered. To our mind, Cavafis' poetry represents an interesting material to consider in this respect. 18 out of his 154 works are structured to the classical type of the principle of the circular arrangement of elements. However, since the format of a single paper excludes a possibility to consider all poems of our interest, we shall confine ourselves to the illustration of ten pieces structured to the circular composition. In the following analysis, we shall attempt to reveal the original composition-building style of the poet, sometimes even subconsciously realized in his verse.

To begin with, we should mention that the structure of the poems follows the *ABCBA'* pattern. The central element is encircled with other elements leading to the beginning and the end of the poem. The elements seem to reflect or even repeat one another. Here the operating principle may be either that of resemblance or complete analogy, or polarity, or the principle of recurrent key words.

¹ Τ. Γκατζρεκέλι, Η δομική οργάνωση στα ποιήματα του Κ. Καβάφη, Phasis, 2-3, 2000, 121.

² Р.Б. Гордизиани, Проблемы композиционной организации в раннегреческом эпосе, (А.Ф. Лосеву к 90-летию со дня рождения, Тбилиси, 1983, 74)

To our mind, the device is fully realized in *The Windows*³ (1903), which is an eight-line verse and has five sense fragments:

ΤΑ ΠΑΡΑΘΥΡΑ

Σ' αυτές τες σκότεινές κάμαρες, που
περνώ
μέρες βαρυνές, επάνω κάτω τριγυρνώ
για νάβρω τα παράθυρα. – Όταν
ανοίξει
ένα παράθυρο θάναι παρηγορία. –
Μα τα παράθυρα δεν βρίσκονται, ή δεν
μπορώ
να τα βρω. Και καλλίτερα ίσως να μην
τα βρω.
Ίσως το φως θάναι μια νέα τυραννία.
Ποιος ξέρει τι καινούρια πράγματα θα
δείξει.

THE WINDOWS

A (1-2a) [In the dark rooms where I
live out
empty days,]
B (2b-3a) [I circle back and forth
trying to find windows.]
C (3b-4) [It will be a great relief when
a window opens.]
B' (5-7) [But the windows are not there
to be found – or at least I cannot find
them.]
A' (8-9) [Perhaps the light will prove
another tyranny. Who knows what new
things it will expose?]⁴

The leading pathos of the poem is a strong desire to open windows, and also the fear of the consequences after finding them. The central element is the third *C* fragment expressing how great a consolation it would be to open the windows. It is preceded by *B* sense fragment picturing the moment of searching for the windows, and followed by *B'* fragment that reveals that the windows were not found. The first *A* fragment expresses how torturous is to live in "the dark rooms", and the fifth *A'* fragment renders fear of light that may "prove another tyranny". The analysis of the poem emphasizes logical links between the central sense fragment of the poem and its peripheral elements circularly arranged around the central one. The links are emphasized by the polarity of key words. Thus the first and the fifth sense fragments are linked by the opposition of "dark" and "light", and *B* and *B'* elements have opposing "find" and "cannot find".

The principle of circular arrangement of elements is also applied in *Unfaithfulness*,⁵ which is a twenty-five-line verse with seven sense fragments (1904):

³ K.B. Καβάφη, *Ποήματα*, 1896-1918, Αθήνα, 105.

⁴ The poems are translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard.

⁵ *Ποήματα*, 1896-1918, 109.

ΑΠΙΣΤΙΑ

Σαν πάντρευαν την Θέτιδα με τον Πηλέα
 σηκώθηκε ο Απόλλων στο λαμπρό
 τραπέζι
 του γάμου, και μακάρισε τους
 νεονύμφους
 για τον βλαστό που θα βγαίνε απ' την
 ένωσί των.
 Είπε, ποτέ αυτόν αρρώστια δεν θαγγίξει
 και θάχει μακρυνή ζωή. – Αυτά σαν
 είπε,
 η Θέτις χάρηκε πολύ, γιατί τα λόγια
 του Απόλλωνος που γνώριζε από
 προφητείες
 την φάνηκαν εγγύησις για το παιδί της.
 Κι όταν μεγάλωνε ο Αχιλλεύς, και
 ήταν
 της Θεσσαλίας έπαινος η εμορφιά του,
 η Θέτις του θεού τα λόγια
 ενθυμούταν.
 Αλλά μια μέρα ήλθαν γέροι με
 ειδήσεις,
 κ' είπαν τον σκοτωμό του Αχιλλέως
 στην Τροία.
 Κ' έβγαζεν από πάνω της και
 ξεπετούσε
 στο χώμα τα βραχιόλια και τα
 δαχτυλίδια.
 Και μες στον οδυρμό της τα παλιά
 θυμήθη
 και ρώτησε τι έκαμνε ο σοφός
 Απόλλων,
 που γύριζεν ο ποιητής που στα
 τραπέζια
 έζοχα ομιλεί, που γύριζε ο προφήτης
 όταν τον υιό της σκότωναν στα πρώτα
 νειάτα.
 Κ' οι γέροι την απάντησαν πως ο
 Απόλλων
 αυτός ο ίδιος εκατέβηκε στην Τροία,
 και με τους Τρώας σκότωσε τον
 Αχιλλέα.

UNFAITHFULNESS

A (1-6a) [At the marriage of Thetis and Peleus
 Apollo stood up during the sumptuous
 wedding feast and blessed the bridal
 pair
 for the son who would come from their
 union.
 "Sickness will never visit him" he said,
 "and his life will be a long one."]
B (6b-9) [This pleased Thetis immensely:
 the words of Apollo, expert in prophecies,
 seemed to guarantee the security of her
 child.]
C (10-12) [And when Achilles grew up
 and his beauty was the boast of Thessaly,
 Thetis remembered the god's words.]
D (13-14) [But one day elders arrived
 with the news
 that Achilles had been killed at Troy.]
C' (15-18) [Thetis tore her purple
 robes,
 pulled off her rings, her bracelets,
 and flung them to the ground.
 And in her grief, recalling that wedding
 scene.]
B' (19-21) [she asked what the wise
 Apollo was up to, where was this poet
 who holds forth
 so eloquently at banquets, where was
 this prophet
 when they killed her son in his prime.]
A' (22-25) [And the elders answered
 that Apollo himself had gone down to
 Troy
 and together with the Trojans had killed
 her son.]

The central *D* sense fragment of the poem relates about the death of Achilles in Troy. *C* and *C'* elements, which are linked to the central one, show that Thetis remembered Apollo's words. *B* and *B'* fragments refer to Apollo's sorcery, his gift for prophecy. As for the first *A* element, it pictures Apollo blessing Achilles while the final *A'* sense fragment renders how the god killed the hero. Thus, the poem vividly exposes similarities and differences between circularly arranged elements.

Similar structure underlies another one-verse poem *Body, Remember*⁶... (1918). The poem is composed of eleven lines and seven sense fragments:

ΘΥΜΗΣΟΥ, ΣΩΜΑ...

Σώμα, θυμήσου όχι μόνο το πόσο
αγαπήθηκες,
όχι μονάχα τα κρεβάτια όπου
πλάγιασες,
αλλά κ' εκείνες τες επιθυμίες που για
σένα
γυάλιζαν μες στην φωνή – και
κάποιο
τυχαίο εμπόδιο τες ματαίωσε.
Τώρα που είναι όλα πια μέσα στο
παρελθόν,
μοιάζει σχεδόν και στες επιθυμίες
εκείνες σαν να δόθηκες – πως
γυάλιζαν,
θυμήσου, μες στα μάτια που σε
κύτταζαν,
πως έτρεμαν μες στην φωνή, για σε,
θυμήσου, σώμα.

BODY, REMEMBER....

A (1-2) [Body, remember not only how you were loved, not only the beds you lay on.]

B (3-4a) [but also those desires that glowed openly in eyes that looked at you,

trembled for you in the voices-]

C (4b-5) [only some chance obstacle frustrated them.]

D (6) [Now that it's all finally in the past,]

C' (7-8a) [it seems almost as if you gave yourself to those desires too –]

B' (8b-10a) [how they glowed, remember, in eyes that looked at you, how they trembled for you in those voices.]

A' (10b)[remember, body.]

The central element is "Now that it's all finally in the past" (*D*). Polarity principle links the central fragment to *C* and *C'* elements, the first of which expresses frustration of desires, and the latter – their fulfillment. *C* and *C'* elements are linked to *B* and *B'* sense fragments that by similarity principle depict how "desires ... glowed openly in eyes ..." and "trembled ... in the voices." Key phrases related to the desire are fully repeated. Finally, the poem

⁶ Ποιήματα, 1896-1918, 91.

starts and ends with *A* and *A'* elements which also include recurrent key words "remember, body".

The next poem to consider is *A Young Poet in His Twenty-Forth Year*⁷ (1928). It consists of three verses, 24 lines and seven sense fragments:

**ΕΝΑΣ ΝΕΟΣ, ΤΗΣ ΤΕΧΝΗΣ
ΤΟΥ
ΛΟΓΟΥ – ΣΤΟ 24ΟΝ ΕΤΟΣ ΤΟΥ**

Όπως μπορείς πια δούλεψε, μυαλό.-
Τον φθείρει αυτόν μια απόλαυσις
μισή.
Είναι σε μια κατάσταση
εκνευριστική.
Φιλεί το πρόσωπο το αγαπημένο κάθε
μέρα,
τα χέρια του είναι πάνω στα πιο
εξάισια μέλη.
Ποτέ του δεν αγάπησε με τόσο μέγα
πάθος. Μα λείπει η ωραία
πραγμάτωσις
του έρωτος λείπει η πραγμάτωσις
που πρέπει να'ναι κι απ' τους δύο
μ'έντασιν επιθυμητή.

(Δεν είν'ομοίως δοσμένοι στην
ανάμαλη ηδονή κ'οι δύο.
Μονάχ'αυτόν κυρίεψε απολύτως).

Και φθείρεται, και νεύριασε εντελώς.
Εξ άλλου είναι κι άεργος, κι αυτό
πολύ συντείνει.
Κάτι μικρά χρηματικά ποσά
με δυσκολία δανείζεται (σχεδόν
τα ζητιανεύει κάποτε) και
ψευτοσυντηρείται.
Φιλεί τα λατρεμένα χείλη, πάνω
στο εξαίσιο σώμα – που όμως τώρα
νοιώθει
πως στέργει μόνον- ηδονίζεται.

**A YOUNG POET IN HIS
TWENTY-FOURHT YEAR**

A (1) [Brain, work now well as you can.]
B (2-3) [A one-sided passion is destroying
him.
He's in a maddening situation.]
C (4-7a) [Every day he kisses the face he
worships,
his hands are on those exquisite limbs.
He's never loved before with this degree
of passion.]
D (7b-10) [But the beautiful fulfillment
of love
is lacking, that fulfillment is lacking
which both of them must want with the
same intensity.]

E (11-12) (They aren't equally given to
the abnormal form of sensual pleasure;
only he is completely possessed by it.)

D' (13-17) [And so he's wearing himself
out, all on edge.
Then – to make things worse –he's out of
work.
he manages somehow to borrow
a little here and there (sometimes
almost begging for it) and he just gets
by.]
C' (18-20) [He kisses those adored lips,
excites himself on that exquisite body –
thought he now feels it only acquiesces.]
B' (21-23) [And then he drinks and
smokes, drinks and smokes;

⁷ Ποιήματα, 1918-1933, 63.

Κ'έπειτα πίνει και καπνίζει, πίνει και
καπνίζει,
και σέρνεται στα καφενεύια ολομερίς,
σέρνει με ανία της ομορφιάς του το
μαράζι.-
Όπως μπορείς πια δούλεψε, μυαλό.

and he drags himself to the cafes all day
long,
drags the weariness consuming his beau-
ty.]
A' (24)[Brain, work now well as you
can.]

The first *A* and the last *A'* elements are absolutely identical and represent an address to the brain. The whole sense fragment is repeated: "Brain, work now well as you can". By circularity principle they are linked to *B* and *B'* elements which express a sorrowful state of the poet in love. *C* and *C'* fragments picture his passionate caresses. These elements, on their part, are linked to *D* and *D'* fragments by means of the principle of circular composition. *D* refers to the lack of "fulfillment of love", and *D'* once more pictures the poet's sorrowful state. And finally, the central element is outlined in *E* element that renders the dominant theme of "one-sided passion".

The principle of circular arrangement of elements is also applied in *Prayer*⁸ (1898), which consists of four verses, eight lines and five sense fragments.

ΔΕΗΣΕΙΣ

η θάλασσα στα βάθη της πήρ' έναν
ναύτη.-
Η μάνα του, ανήξερη, πιαίνει κι
ανάφτει

στην Παναγία μπροστά ένα υψηλό
κερί
για να επιστρέψει γρήγορα και
van'καλοί καιροί-

και όλο προς τον άνεμο στήνει τ'αυτί.
Αλλά ενώ προσεύχεται και δέεται
αυτή,

η εικόν ακούει, σοβαρή και λυπημένη,
ξεύροντας πως δεν θάλθει πια ο υιος
που περιμένει.

PRAYER

A (1) [The sea engulfed a sailor in its
depths.]
B (2-4) [Unaware, his mother goes
and lights
a tall candle before the icon of our
Lady,
praying for him to come back quick-
ly, for the weather to be good-]
C (5) [her ear cocked always to the
wind.]
B' (6-8a) [While she prays and sup-
plicates,
the icon listens, solemn, sad, know-
ing]
A' (8b) [the son she waits for never
will come back.]

⁸ Ποιήματα, 1918-1933, 99.

The poem starts and ends with *A* and *A'* elements which imply that the sailor has died. *B* and *B'* elements link to *A* and *A'*. *B* renders how the sailor's mother, unaware of his death "lights a tall candle before the icon of our Lady" and *B'* pictures "solemn, sad" icon of the Mother of God. *C* element, which shows the sailor's mother impatiently observing the weather, proves central.

Circular composition is applied in *Interruption*⁹ as well (1901), which is a one-verse poem with eight lines. To our mind, the poem includes three sense fragments:

ΔΙΑΚΟΠΗ

Το έργο των θεών διακόπτομεν εμείς,
τα βιαστικά και άπειρα όντα της
στιγμής.
Στης Ελευσίνος και στης Φθίας τα
παλάτια
η Δήμητρα και η Θέτις αρχίνουν έργα
καλά
μες σε μεγάλες φλόγες και βαθόν
καπνόν. Αλλά
πάντοτε ορμά η Μετάνειρα από τα
δωμάτια
του βασιλέως, ξέπλεγη και
τρομαγμένη,
και πάντοτε ο Πηλεύς φοβάται
κ'επεμβαίνει.
1901

INTERRUPTION

A (1-2) [Hasty and awkward creatures of the moment,
it is we who interrupt the action of the gods.]
B (3-5a) [In the palaces of Eleusis and Phthia
Demeter and Thesis initiate rituals over high flames and heavy smoke.]
A' (5b-8) [But Metaneira always bursts in
from the royal quarters, hair loose, terrified,
and Peleus, scared, always intervenes.]

The first one expresses an idea that men "interrupt the action of the gods". It is followed by the second element the so-called paradigmatic part which renders how Thesis and Demeter "initiate rituals" "in the palaces of Eleusis and Phthia". This central element is followed by the third sense fragment, which is linked to the first one and illustrates the idea stated in it: Peleus and Metaneira interfere with Thesis' and Demeter's deeds and prevent them from accomplishing their intention.

In our opinion, *Thermopylae*,¹⁰ a two-verse poem with 10 lines, is also structured to the principle of circular arrangement of elements (1903):

⁹ Ποιήματα, 1918-1933, 102.

¹⁰ Ποιήματα, 1918-1933, 103.

ΘΕΡΜΟΠΥΛΑΕΣ

Τιμή σ'εκείνους όπου στην ζωή των
 ώρισαν και φυλάγουν Θερμοπύλας.
 Ποτέ από το χρέος μη κινούντες.
 δίκαιοι και ίσιοι σ'όλες των τες
 πράξεις,
 αλλά με λύπη κιάλας κ' ευσπλαχνία.
 γενναίοι οσάκις είναι πλούσιοι, κι
 όταν
 είναι πτωχοί, παλ'εις μικρόν γενναίοι,
 πάλι συντρέχοντες όσο μπορούνε.
 πάντοτε την αλήθεια ομιλούντες,
 πλην χωρίς μίσος για τους
 ψευδεμένους.

Και περισσότερη τιμή τους πρέπει
 όταν προβλέπουν (και πολλοί
 προβλέπουν)
 πως ο Εφιάλτης θα φανεί στο τέλος,
 και οι μήδοι επί τέλους θα διαβούνε.
 1903

THERMOPYLAE

A (1-2) [Honor to those who in the life
 they lead
 define and guard a Thermopylae.]
B (3-10)[Never betraying what is right,
 consistent and just in all they do
 but showing pity also, and compassion;
 generous when they are rich, and when
 they are poor, still generous in small
 ways,
 still helping as much as they can;
 always speaking the truth,
 yet without hating those who lie.]

A' (11-14)[And even more honor is due
 to them
 when they foresee (as many do foresee)
 that in the end Ephialtis will make his
 appearance,
 that the Medes will break through after
 all.]

We distinguish three extended sense fragments in the poem. However, in this case, the circular composition is constituted not by one element merely reflecting another but by gradation. The central *B* sense fragment characterizes heroes who have sacrificed their lives to Thermopylae. The preceding *A* fragment glorifies the heroes, while the final *A'* element, following the central one, states that "even more honor is due to" the deeds that are committed despite one's awareness of inevitable defeat.

Another poem with circular composition is *He Swears*¹¹ (1915). It is a six-line verse with three sense fragments:

¹¹ Ποιήματα, 1918-1933, 58.

OMNYEI

Ομνύει κάθε τόσο ν' αρχίσει πιο καλή
ζωή.
Αλλ' όταν έλθη νύχτα με τες δικές
της συμβουλές,
με τους συμβιβασμούς της, και με τες
υποσχέσεις της,
αλλ' όταν έλθη νύχτα με την δική της
δύναμι
του σώματος που θέλει και ζητεί,
στην ίδια
μοιραία χαρά, χαμένος, ξαναπαίρνει.

The central *B* element pictures the nightfall. The first and the final fragments link to it by means of circularity principle. The first *A* element expresses a strong desire to start a better life, while the final *A'* shows return to the old lifestyle. We believe the poem vividly exposes logical opposition between the elements.

The circular arrangement of elements is applied in *Priest at the Serapeion*¹² (1926). The poem consists of two verses of different size, thirteen lines and three sense fragments:

ΙΕΡΕΥΣ ΤΟΥ ΣΕΡΑΠΙΟΥ

τον γέροντα καλόν πατέρα μου,
τον αγαπόντα με το ίδιο πάντα.
τον γέροντα καλόν πατέρα μου θρηνώ
που πέθανε προχθές, ολίγο πριν
χαράξει.

Ιησού Χριστέ, Τα παραγγέλματα
της ιερότατης εκκλησίας σου να τηρώ
εις κάθε πράξιν μου, εις κάθε λόγον,
εις κάθε σκέψι είν' η προσπάθεια μου
η καθημερινή. Κι όσους σε αρνούνται
τους αποστρέφομαι.- Αλλά τώρα
θρηνώ
οδύρομαι, Χριστέ, για τον πατέρα μου
μ' όλο που ήτανε- φρικτόν είπειν-
στο επικατάρατον Σεράπιον ιερεύς.

HE SWEARS

A (1) [He swears every now and then to begin a batter life.]

B (2-4) [But when night comes with its own counsel, its own compromises and prospects-when night comes with its own power]

A' (5-6) [of a body that needs and demands, he goes back, lost, to the same fatal pleasure.]

PRIEST AT THE SARAPEION

A (1-4) [My kind old father
Whose love for me has always stayed the same-
I mourn my kind old father
who died two days ago, just before dawn.]

B (5-10a) [Christ Jesus, I try each day in my every thought, word, and deed to keep the commandments of your most holy Church; and I abhor all who deny you.]

A' (10b-13) [But now I mourn: I grieve, O Christ, for my father even though he was – terrible as it to say it – priest at that cursed Serapeion.]

¹² Ποήματα, 1918-1933, 51.

B element, which renders faithfulness of a believer in Christ, proves central. *A* and *A'* fragments, expressing the believer's mourning over his deceased father, link to it by means of circularity principle.

Circular composition structures Cavafis' *Endless Poems* edited by Renata Lavagnini. Poem *Colors*¹³ is an eight-line verse with three sense fragments.

ΧΡΩΜΑΤΑ

Τα κόκκινα, τα κίτρινα, και τα μαβιά
των λουλουδιών είν' όμορφα, το
παραδέχομαι.
Αλλά το χρώμα σαν φαντάζομαι,
το σταθερό κι αμόλυντο το χρώμα,
δεν πάει ο νους μου στα λουλούδια, αλλά
στο κόκκινο το ρουμπίνι ή το κοραλλί,
στο κίτρινο του τραπεζιού και στο
μάλαμα,
και στών σαφφείρον και των περουζέδων
τα μαβιά.

Colors

A (1-2) [Red, yellow and violet
flowers are beautiful, I admit.]

B (3-5a) [But as I imagine colors,
steady and pure it is not flowers that
I remember]

A' (5b-8) [but the red of ruby and
coral,
the yellow of topaz and gold and
the violet of sapphire and tur-
quoise.]

The first element *A* names colors of flowers, which is opposed by naming identical colors of precious stones in the third fragment *A'*. The central *B* element states that the notion of colors does not remind the author of flowers. The first and the third elements include recurrent words denoting colors: "red", "yellow" and "violet".

The above-stated leads us to the conclusion that Cavafis quite often and consistently applies circular composition as a kind of compositional organization. Equally remarkable is the fact that almost in all cases the poet resorts to the classical type of the device. To our mind, Cavafis' use of the principle is by no means spontaneous. We believe this type of compositional structure is organically linked to the development of the logic of a certain idea, and the poet uses it in poems with a definite logical structure. Since his other works are organized to a different compositional pattern, it becomes evident that Cavafis applies circular composition only to constitute a definite type of poems those based on circularity principle. It is also noteworthy that the principle runs throughout all periods of the poet's literary activity including his earliest as well as later works.

We should also admit that the principle of circularity is not confined to the recurrence of restricted number of elements at the beginning and the end of poems we mean *ABCBA'* structure. Some of the poems have four interrelated elements. All these point to intensive and subtle usage of the principle of circular arrangement of elements in Cavafis' poetry.

¹³ Κ. Π. Καβάφης, Ατελή ποιήματα, Renata Lavagnini, 1918-1932, Ίκαρος, 308.