

Versification at the 2015 ASEEEES Convention (November 2015, Philadelphia, USA)

Barry P. Scherr*

In 2015, as in 2014, there were two panels on verse theory at the annual convention of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEEES), which was held in Philadelphia. The following remarks are devoted to those two sessions. It should also be noted, however, that during the several days of the conference several hundred panels were held and more than 1000 individual papers were read, dealing with all fields related to the study of Central Europe, Russia, and Eurasia. Among those panels were several individual papers that touched on aspects of verse theory, particularly at a session dealing with the poetics of translation. On the whole, then, there was a greater level of interest paid to poetics in 2015 than at most other ASEEEES conferences over the past decade.

The first of the panels that focused on verse theory, “Russian Poetry: Forms and Functions”, began with a paper by *Michael Wachtel*, of Princeton University, on “The Problem with Hypermetrical Stress.” He noted at the outset that scholars have for the most part not accounted for hypermetrical stress in their statistical analysis of verse, even though they recognize that it can have a significant impact on the rhythm. He then provided several examples of poems in which hypermetrical stress either creates variation in the rhythm or complicates the perception of meter, citing instances in works by Khodasevich, Tsvetaeva (who, as many have observed, makes extensive use of hypermetrical stress) and Gippius. For instance, in the case of Tsvetaeva’s «Читатели газет» hypermetrical stress plays an important role in imparting variety to the poem’s otherwise insistent iambic trimeter rhythm. Special attention was paid to «Что есть грех?» by Gippius. The iambic rhythm that characterizes the poem as a whole does not become clear until the third stanza; indeed, thanks to omission of stress on the second, sixth and eighth syllables along with the presence of hypermetrical stress on the first syllable, the first line (“Грех – маломыслие и малодянье”) is more readily perceived as dactylic tetrameter with omitted stress on the third ictus. Line 5 has exactly the same stressing as line 1, while the remaining six lines in the first two stanzas are stressed only on the

* Author’s address: Barry P. Scherr, Dartmouth College, Russian Department, 6085 Reed Hall, Hanover, New Hampshire 03755-3562. E-mail address: barry.scherr@dartmouth.edu.

fourth and tenth syllables and thus also can be seen as dactylic rather than iambic. Wachtel's more general points were twofold: first, that verse scholars need to pay greater attention to hypermetrical stressing when describing the rhythmical tendencies of Russian verse, and, second, that the broad statistical data, in and of themselves, are not always adequate to describe what occurs in specific poems.

Barry Scherr (Dartmouth College) then gave a paper titled "To Separate or Not to Separate: Stanza Boundaries and Poetic Structure". He examined the ways in which the formal qualities of a poem may vary depending on whether and how frequently a graphic division between rhyme units appears on the page. One aspect of this issue arises when a rhyme pattern is repeated within a stanza: for example, is a stanza rhyming ababcdcd in fact two abab quatrains that have been arbitrarily joined together, or does it exhibit additional formal qualities indicating that, structurally, it is indeed an integral eight-line stanza? A related problem concerns poems in which a rhyme scheme is repeated throughout the poem, but there are no graphic divisions into discrete stanzas. Do a poet's poems written in stanza form differ from those written without breaks between the rhyme units? The presenter noted that his paper offers only a preliminary discussion of these matters and that further research will be required to draw broadly applicable conclusions. However, he found that in the cases he had examined poets tended to use additional formal means to underscore the structural integrity of the stanzas created by the divisions on the page. Additionally, when poets use repeated rhyme units but do not make graphic divisions between stanzas, they appear to create more varied structures and to experiment more radically with verse forms.

The third and final paper at this panel, "A Hypothesis for the Semantic Structure of Verse", was given by *Elena Vladimirovna Uryson* of the Russian Language Institute at the Russian Academy of Sciences. She pointed out that the repetition of lexical components in verse occurs not randomly, but in such a way as to underscore the semantic coherence of the text. Of particular importance in this regard are the strong sets of semantic components, with a "strong set" defined as containing at least one strong component. To be strong, a component must either appear in a semantically strong verse position (such as by occupying the end of a verse line or violating the usual word order in some way) or in a semantically strong syntactic position (such as the end of a sentence). Uryson emphasized that these semantic repetitions involve lexemes rather than words as such. That is, different words that refer to the same notion will register as lexical repetitions. After her introductory remarks she presented a detailed analysis of a brief poem for children by Agniia Barto, «Идет бычок, качается...», pointing out the semantically strong positions in

each of the work's four lines and then listing the repeated components. She concluded by pointing out that a prose presentation of the poem would lead to the perception of only the "objective content". In perceiving verse, on the other hand, the mind grasps the repeating elements, so that a sequence of strong semantic components influences the comprehension of a poem and the entire complex of such sequences creates a poem's "lyrical mood."

The second versification panel was titled "Slavic Verse: Analysis and Taxonomy". *Petr Plecháč*, from the Institute of Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences, opened that session with a paper titled "19th-Century Czech Verse". His talk was based on a computer analysis of the corpus of Czech verse that explored the features and development of trochaic verse with feminine endings. He first described the metrical features of this verse, where the weak positions are always unstressed and the strong positions arbitrarily stressed, and then outlined developments in this verse from 1710 to 1920. In particular, he singled out trends during the period when Romanticism was predominant, noting that the frequency of irregular line endings became significantly higher at the time. He observed as well that isosyllabic rhymes peaked early in the 19th century, before decreasing. In the latter part of his paper Plecháč illustrated the way in which computer analysis of formal features can be used to examine questions of authorship. There has long been a suspicion that Jan Neruda in fact wrote a book attributed to his contemporary, Josef Barák. In 1960 an examination of the two writers' style, based on sentence length, found significant differences. However, a recent comparison of their work in trochaic verse with feminine endings revealed that the two have a very similar style. While the results do not prove that Neruda was in fact the author, they do point to that possibility and suggest that the 1960 findings were not definitive.

The second paper at the panel, "How to Differentiate Meters in Non-Classical Verse", was given by *Tatyana Vladimirovna Skulacheva*, from the Russian Language Institute at the Russian Academy of Sciences. She began by remarking that while certain words in Russian are never stressed and others have a single fixed stress, the class of words that are "ambiguously" stressed has been the cause of the greatest difficulty in dealing with non-classical verse. In classical verse, these words are considered stressed when they fall a strong position according to the metrical scheme and as unstressed when they fall on a weak position. She then pointed to a couple of ways in which these ambiguously stressed words are to be handled when they appear between stressed words in non-classical verse. If the ambiguously stressed word appears within a long interval of unstressed syllables, then it may be regarded as carrying a stress. Conversely, if there is no interval between such a word and a

stressed syllable, then the ambiguously stressed word should be considered as unstressed. Skulacheva briefly discussed the differences among various kinds of non-classical verse (dolnik, taktovik, tonic verse, accentual verse and free verse), and as an example of how to deal with stress in non-classical verse she provided an analysis of Khlebnikov's «Как стадо овец мирно дремлет...».

Oleg Mikhailovich Anshakov, from the Russian State University for the Humanities, gave the final presentation at this panel. His paper was titled “Can Verse Study Become an Exact Science”? He outlined the conditions for arriving at scientifically rigorous results in a field such as verse studies, and pointed to the value of collaboration, in which verse scholars can bring their expertise to the issues involved while mathematicians can bring their sophistication in dealing with statistics. Working individually is difficult; for instance, verse scholars would either have to obtain a thorough knowledge of the necessary mathematics, or they would need to work with experts in statistics. At the same time, collaboration poses its own challenges, since each field has its own approaches to particular problems. A significant moment occurred in the 1960s, when the prominent mathematician, Andrei Kolmogorov, pursued an interest in verse studies. Within the Department of Probability Theory at Moscow State University he led a seminar that included both philologists and linguists as well as mathematicians, thereby making possible important collaborations and providing philologists and linguists with the background needed to apply statistical approaches in a knowledgeable way. Meanwhile, Kolmogorov himself wrote a series of articles on Russian verse that have now (in 2015) been published in a collection edited by his frequent collaborator, Aleksandr Prokhorov. The use of statistical methods in these articles provided general methods for constructing theoretical models of various meters and was based on the notion that verse rhythm is subject to basic statistical laws, which can be calculated by using probability theory. The chief problem in finally making verse an exact science remains the complexity of both the entities that are being analyzed in verse and of their relationship to each other.