

Vadim Baevskij (1929–2013)

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On November 12, 2013, Vadim Solomonovich Baevskij, the outstanding Russian scholar of poetry and versification passed away. Vadim Baevskij, a veteran in the studies of Russian versification, started his research in the 1960s, when any formal approach to the study of literature was strongly disfavoured for ideological reasons. It has to be recognised that Baevskij, as a consummate academic, did not automatically join that mainstream of Russian versification studies, but instead sought his own way.

Russian versification studies focus, first of all, on the analysis of rhythmicity. Ever since Andrey Belyj (1910), poetic rhythm has been studied on two levels: metrical and rhythmical. Although the notions of the relationship between metre and rhythm have varied (be it a norm and a deviation from it, an ideal scheme and its realisation, language and speech in Saussurean sense, or deep structure and surface structure in the spirit of generativism), the consensus is that it is necessary to distinguish between these phenomena¹. Starting from Belyj, rhythm has been regarded as a very narrow phenomenon. The classical works by Andrey Belyj (1910), Viktor Zhirmunskij (1925), Boris Tomashevskij (1929) and others proceeded from the understanding that in Russian language and verse all syllables are either stressed or unstressed, while there cannot be any intermediate degrees (the corresponding attempts by Georgij Shengeli in 1921 and 1923 found unanimous disapproval, see especially Taranovsky 1953). These are only lexical stresses and they occur only in metrically strong positions. Although such an approach is still prevailing, the first critical notes appeared soon after Belyj's monograph was published. Thus, Valerij Brjusov, another guru of Russian symbolism, brought forth the need to calculate both phrasal stresses and extrametrical (that is, placed on metrically weak positions) stresses (Brjusov 1910), but his standpoints had no practical consequences, and the studies still focused on the distribution of lexical stresses in strong positions.

Such an approach, however, was in clear contradiction with linguistic data. Andrey Kolmogorov and his school developed a detailed and complicated system for the notation of verse, which did not find wider application. Baevskij, on the other hand, proceeded from the so-called Potebnia effect (named by an

¹ Perhaps the most remarkable attempt to overcome this dichotomy was made by Boris Buchstab (Buchstab 1969), which unfortunately failed. See Lotman 1972: 49.

eminent linguist Oleksandr Potebnia). Accordingly, a Russian word has three accentual degrees: it is the strongest in the stressed syllable, intermediate in the pre-accentual syllable and the weakest in all the others. The formula for Russian 4-syllabic paroxytone, according to Potebnia, is 1231 (Potebnia 1973: 63). Baevskij modified this scheme, expanding it to all Russian words. He proceeded from the fact that the initial syllable of the word, as well as the post-accentual syllable, is also to a certain extent distinguished, although weaker than the first pre-accentual. All in all, he discerned five accentual degrees (Baevskij 1969). It is interesting to note that in one of his last publications on the theory of verse he returned to this problem and made considerable modifications (Baevskij 2013).

The scope of Baevskij's research was vast. He was one of the first who attempted to create a universal typology of stanzas, which was further developed as a classification system offered by Boris Tomashevsky (1958). He also studied the phonic structure of verse, being the first who tried to identify and study anagrams by means of statistical methods (Baevskij 1976; Baevskij, Koshelev 1975 and 1979). In his research Baevskij made wide use of mathematical methods, and he was the first to use a number of different models for the study of verse. For example, he used correlation and cluster analyses to study metrics and rhythmicity. He was also the first Russian versologist to make extensive use of computer technologies, including both data processing and data gathering. Together with his younger colleagues he created several data banks of Russian poetry, the most substantial of which comprises different aspects of Boris Pasternak's poetry, from rhythmicity to semantic structure.

Baevskij worked not only on poetics, but also on the history of literature, where he used statistical methods and mathematical modelling. The end product of these studies is his book "Linguistic, mathematical, semiotic and computational models in the history and theory of literature" (Baevskij 2001). He created a unique compendium of the history of Russian poetry, which has great application as a study tool as well (Baevskij 1994).

Baevskij dedicated several publications to the translation of poetry, including both case studies and more general principles. With his already mentioned study of anagrams he should be considered the founder of the field.

Although Baevskij's studies of poetry made extensive use of formal methods, poetry interested him in a wider context too. He was an expert on Boris Pasternak's works, and devoted several publications to Alexander Pushkin, David Samoilov and Nikolaj Rylenkov (Baevskij 1986, 1990, 1993, 2002). His thorough textological work with Pasternak and Rylenkov's poetry made it possible to publish the collections of poems by these authors as well. While working on the "great" poets, Baevskij did not forget the local ones. He coined

the term “poetry school of Smolensk”, which includes Mikhail Isakovsky, Alexander Tvardovsky and Nikolaj Rylenkov; moreover, he studied their works himself and encouraged countless students to also do so.

Baevskij’s commitment as a teacher and academic is worth separate mention. Baevskij’s scholarly and pedagogic career is inseparably connected with Smolensk and its institute, later university. He was a popular teacher and one of the few Soviet researchers of versification who managed to establish his own school. Most of his papers were written in collaboration with his students. And at the same time he was able to form a group of researchers which, in addition to philologists, included like-minded mathematicians and programmers.

Baevskij lived a long life, and, up to his final days, remained academically relevant. Although his health held him back from travelling, many colleagues and students gathered around him. In the study of literature where the term “Smolensk philological school” has been used, Baevskij has been named as its founder. During his final years, Baevskij himself was regarded as Smolensk’s Socrates. One might add to it that his ideas have not only influenced his immediate students, his publications have inspired scholars of versification studying in Russia and elsewhere. And, as for the students he immediately affected, they have already long been living, and working, carrying on and expanding his tradition, in places and universities all around the world.

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