



Sergei Kormilov (a photo by Vera Polilova)

Sergei Kormilov (06.06.1951–20.06.2020)

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Sergei Ivanovich Kormilov was born in Moscow and spent the entirety of his academic career at Moscow State University. He obtained a degree in Russian literature there in 1974, completed his candidate (Ph.D.) dissertation in 1978, and then started teaching in the Department of Soviet Literature. The topic of his dissertation was *The Principle of Historicism in Fiction and Russian Historical Fiction of the 1860s*, but his research interests ranged widely, from the role of social and historical realia in prose fiction to the study of prosody. He completed his habilitation in 1993 and was appointed professor the next year. His unpublished habilitation thesis, *The Marginal Systems of Russian Versification*, appeared in an abridged version as a monograph (Kormilov 1995). Other portions of the second thesis were published as separate articles. The full list of his publications, comprising more than 600 items, includes papers on almost all major 19th- and 20th-century Russian poets, playwrights and novelists, among them Derzhavin, Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Fet, Ostrovsky, Turgenev, Lev Tolstoy, Chekhov, Briusov, Tsvetaeva, and Akhmatova.

His outwardly successful university career, however, did not satisfy him. According to Kormilov himself, it was flawed from the start, when, after he had studied at the Department of Literary Theory for many years and completed his dissertation there, he was denied a permanent position in the department. He spent the rest of his life and career at the Department of Soviet Literature (later renamed the Department of Newest Russian Literature and Contemporary Literary Process), where he read several courses on post-Revolutionary literary criticism. “I am the only professor [...] of [the Philological] Faculty, who teaches something other than what he was born to teach. [...]

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I feel I have not fulfilled even half of what I could have done”, he said in an interview (Kormilov 2011: 342).

Kormilov’s first contribution to the field of verse studies, “Stanza as an Element of Verse Form” (Kormilov 1974) appeared in a collection of student papers but is often cited by poetry scholars even today. His next paper on prosody, “On the History of Russian Free Verse”, coauthored with Vadim Baevsky, Leonard Ibraev and Vyacheslav Sapogov (1975) became, together with Aleksandr Zhovtis’s works, a touchstone for many further studies of Russian *vers libre*. It should be noted here that, in the Russian tradition, *vers libre* remained an atypical poetic form for a very long time, and its critical discussion, known as “the Soviet debate on free verse” (of which the aforementioned article was a part), started as late as the 1970s (Trunin 2012). Simultaneously, Kormilov began to study other unusual literary forms, such as metrical prose, monostichs and “lapidary verse” (i.e. epigraphic texts with an undetermined metrical status) – the forms that he would later refer to as “marginal systems of versification”.

Kormilov distinguished between “mainstream and self-sufficient” versification systems and “marginal” versification systems. The marginal systems are situated “at the intersection of very different [literary] forms” or even between “different spheres of literature and culture” (Kormilov 1995: 4). According to Kormilov, such forms emerge at the intersection of 1) various mainstream systems of versification, 2) verse form and authorial intention, 3) the prosodic and extra-prosodic features of a given text, 4) verse and prose, 5) poetry and non-poetry, 6) the metro-rhythmic pattern of the text and the means of its phonetic and visual realization. Therefore, the type of a versification system, be it mainstream or marginal, is determined by its relationship with various forms of verse and prose in a given historical period (Ibid.).

For Kormilov a system’s “marginal” character was depended on the context, not any immanent quality of the national poetic tradition: in certain contexts, a text structure is perceived as poetic, but in others it is not. In a famous example, Kormilov argued that Karamzin’s epitaph “Pokójsia, mílyj prákh, do rádošnogo útra!” [‘Rest peacefully, dear ashes, until the joyous morning!’] is considered an iambic monostich because it is presented as an epigraphic poem, whereas the Communist slogan “Idéi Lénina zhivút i pobezhdájut!” [‘Lenin’s ideas live and triumph!’] is not, despite its iambic qualities, because the production of the Agitation and Propaganda Division of the Communist Party’s Central Committee was not contextually poetical.

Dmitry Kuzmin has described Kormilov’s theory as “a theory of contextually determined poeticality” (Kuzmin 2016: 383, cf. 19). Another scholar, Maksim Shapir, praised the innovativeness of the concept of marginal systems,

but criticized Kormilov's proposed typology and the vagueness of its principles. The phenomena Kormilov collected, he argued, are too diverse to be captured under one umbrella term that embraces everything from various types of rhythmically organized prose (i.e. non-verse) to widespread (i.e. non-marginal) poetic forms, such as *vers libre* (Shapir 2000: 80–81).

Nevertheless, the significance of Kormilov's introduction of rich, varied and provocative material into academic parlance is uncontested and has been widely acclaimed. Mikhail Gasparov's review of Kormilov's book was appropriately titled "Expanding the Field" (Gasparov 1996). "The novelty of the material is refreshingly good", the reviewer concluded (Ibid.: 145). Kormilov discovered what is now accepted to be the first Russian original (untranslated) poem written in heterometric unrhymed verse (Feodor Glinka's "K sinemu nebu" ["To the Blue Sky", 1830]; see Baevsky, Ibraev, Kormilov and Sapogov 1975: 90; Kormilov 1995: 124; 2011: 349), as well as many other early specimens of translated and original *vers libre*.

Kormilov promoted the study of the monostich as a verse form, assembling and analyzing a collection of 200 Russian monostichs by 36 authors. Not only did he dramatically enlarge the empirical basis of the research (Kuzmin 2016: 5–6), but showed that monostichs are poetic phenomena in their own right, rather than just a collection of curious oddities, as Vladimir Markov's pioneering study might suggest (Markov 1963).

Furthermore, Kormilov published on Lermontov's deviations from accentual-syllabic prosody (Kormilov 1982), Fet's non-classical verse forms (Kormilov 2004), the versification experiments of Silver Age Russian poets (Kormilov 1994, 2018), the history of the Russian sonnet (Kormilov 1993a, 1997, 1999, 2015a), and the poetics of individual authors and works. He also gathered a huge collection of 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century metrical prose, including forms oriented towards binary, ternary and dolnik verse (Kormilov 1990; 1992, 1995: 86–117; 2009).

In his research, Kormilov vied to include the works of all authors from the most to the least known – and the least known first of all. He disapproved of what he called the habit for "aristocratism in literary studies" (Kormilov 1995: 5, 142), a view that brought Kormilov into proximity with his older colleague Mikhail Gasparov. In his review of Kormilov's 1995 monograph, Gasparov called the study the result of "Egyptian labor", marvelling that one scholar had collected so much material; it was as if "he worked as ten people" (Gasparov 1996: 141, 144). Kormilov's interest in borderline poetic phenomena and liminal manifestations of verse also connected him with his younger colleague Maksim Shapir. Kormilov devoted special articles to these scholars,

both of whom he survived, and compared their research methodologies (see Kormilov 2012a and 2012b).

Over the last decade, Kormilov published a cycle of articles on the formal features of Russian translations of Chinese and Korean poetry (Kormilov, Amanova 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015, 2017), continued his studies of rhyme and stanza (Kormilov 2015a, 2015b), and laboriously reviewed new literature on prosody and poetics.

Sergei Ivanovich was known to his colleagues not only as a versologist and literary scholar but also as a passionate local historian of Moscow, the Moscow Region, and other Russian cities and towns. In this role, he organized and guided many tours for participants in academic conferences, including Russia's largest conference on versification, *Slavic Verse*. Kormilov's in-depth and minute knowledge of everyday history (biographies, genealogies, evolution of civil and military ranks, decorations, uniforms, architectural details, houses and streets, etc.) made him a tour guide like no other. This talent expressed itself not only in numerous articles that offer a vast social-historical commentary to Russian classical literature, but also in his metrical studies. To cite a particularly colorful topic, one of his essays is titled "Publications of the Russian Necropoleis of the late 19th- and early 20th Century and Their Importance as Sources for the History of Verse" (Kormilov 1993b).

Kormilov's erudition was nothing short of incredible. His indefatigable and profound interest in the most peculiar facts of cultural history was the most flamboyant feature of his personality and allowed him to enrich the study of Russian literature and Russian verse. He was a bright and original scholar, and we remember his lectures and conversations with gratitude.

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