

Editors' preface

1. Verse and semiotics

The semiotic turn in Tartu has its beginning in studies of versification: in 1962 Juri Lotman delivered a special course on structural poetics, on the basis of which, in 1964, he published the monograph *Lectures on Structural Poetics. Introduction. Theory of Verse*, which would become the first volume of *Sign Systems Studies*. Verse was a favoured object of study in the 1960s and early 1970s, and also a classic illustration of the term 'secondary modelling systems'. Verse theory was, at the time, an inseparable part of semiotic studies at Tartu, where scholars of versification such as Piotr Rudnev and Jaak Põldmäe actively participated in seminars on semiotics and published their works in editions covering such subjects. Mikhail Gasparov, a leading Soviet scholar of versification, also took part in conferences and contributed to volumes on semiotics.

Paradoxically, the roads of semiotic research and verse theory started to diverge just as the semantic turn took place in versification studies due to the work of Kiril Taranovsky and Mikhail Gasparov. At that point, next to the problems of the syntactics of verse, the problem of specific mechanisms of meaning in verse came to the fore. The importance of this turn is emphasized by the fact that a special edition on comparative Slavic metrics was devoted to the semantics of verse forms (Pszczolowska 1988: 105–143). Yet strangely, while solving these emerging problems, both Taranovsky and Gasparov discarded the linguosemiotic tradition and started to invent their own semantic apparatuses (Taranovsky turned towards mechanisms related to psychophysiology, Gasparov to those of literary history), while semioticians in their turn did not notice the challenge offered by the semantics of verse. However, Gasparov himself has claimed that he received the impulse to study the semantics of verse namely from the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school (see below). Although Yuri Levin has expressed the opinion that Gasparov's research requires a cultural-semiotic generalization in the vein of Juri Lotman, his text remained an isolated case (Levin 1982).

Regardless of the fact that works important to the semiotics of verse can be found also outside the Russian tradition (the most noteworthy ones among these are the books of the poet and verse theorist John Hollander, first and foremost Hollander 1960, 1985), the most significant results have been obtained within it. The term ‘the Russian tradition’ is used here to designate the direction in the study of versification, the foundation of which was laid in the renowned monograph by Andrey Bely titled *Symbolism* (1910); James Bailey has referred to it as ‘the Russian method’ (Bailey 1979). What is important here is the common origin, not the material discussed (for instance, Marina Tarlinskaja, first of all, describes English verse) or the location (for instance, one of the most outstanding representatives of this school, Kiril Taranovsky, wrote his main work in Yugoslavia, but later resided in the USA).

Research in the semantics of verse¹ started when Kiril Taranovsky, who conducted an analysis of all Russian binary metres, noticed that almost all poems written in trochaic pentameter contain the motif of journey: it can be an actual road or path, but also a metaphoric journey of life, etc. (Taranovsky 1963). In this fashion this came to be commonly understood, although Taranovsky himself is much more precise: we are not speaking of just trochaic pentameter here, but rather of a particular rhythmic type in which the third, fifth and ninth syllables are strong, and after the third or fourth syllables an asymmetrically strong syllabic boundary can be seen. At the same time, these poems show a strong tendency to place a word of motion (usually a verb) in the first line of the poem, preferably in the initial position. Compare the initial verses of just some of the poems:

Выхожу один я на дорогу xxX/xXxxxXx
 [I walk alone onto the road] (Mikhail Lermontov, 1841)

Вот бреду я вдоль большой дороги xxX/xXxXxXx
 [So I walk along the large road] (Fyodor Tyutchev, 1864)

Табор шел. Вверху сверкали звезды XxX/xXxXxXx
 [Gipsy band went. In the sky stars shined] (Aleksander Blok, 1898)

¹ This should not be confused with the descriptions of the content of poems by critics and scholars of the history of literature. There the object of study is a message expressed with verbal means, at best also a metaphoric and rhetoric structure, but the specifics of verse is not considered.

Выхожу я в путь, открытый взорам
[I walk onto the road, open to eyes] (Aleksander Blok, 1905)

xxX/xXxXxXx

Шел господь пытать людей к любви
[Lord went to force people to love] (Sergei Esenin, 1914)

XxX/xXxXxXx

Trochaic decasyllables with a motion verb at the beginning have sometimes been incorporated even into Mayakovsky's accentual verse.

How can these results be interpreted? Taranovsky himself offers two versions, the first of which pertains to cultural history. As opposed to other leading binary meters, the tradition of trochaic pentameter begins considerably later, with its beginning well fixed. The tradition was created by two poems published in 1841 – one of these proved to be extremely popular and formed a number of rhythmic-syntactic formulas, which served as a source for the subsequent authors. This became one of the main directions in interpreting Taranovsky's paper, carried out, among others, by Mikhail Gasparov: the semantics of verse forms is related to formulas which have been crystallized in the usage of the given metre. All this seems logical and convincing. Nevertheless, Taranovsky's own approach is far more problematic. To be more precise, he draws attention to the fact that, already before the publishing of Lermontov's poem, there were other texts with the same rhythmic-semantic structure (for instance, "Колодник" [Convict in the stocks] by Afanasy Fet from 1840); that is, this cannot be reduced to the influence of literary tradition. Following from the reconstruction of Proto-Slavic verse by Roman Jakobson, according to which it was a decasyllabic trochee which was later substantially transformed and changed into three-stress verse with varied syllabics, he notes that there is only one *bylina* in which the initial syllabism and trochaic impulse are well-preserved, namely one devoted to a journey ("Путешествие Вавилы со скоморохами" [Vavila's journey with the skomorokhs²]). Some of the verses demonstrate the "Lermontovian" pattern:

Мы пошли веть тут да скоморошить:
[We went to act like skomorokhs]

xxX/xXxxxxXx

Мы пошли на иниишнёе царьство
[We went to an alien kingdom]

xxX/xXxxxxXx

² That is, wandering minstrel-cum-clowns.

In other *bylinas* as well, the trochaic decasyllable has been better preserved in verses speaking of motion and journey. All this caused Taranovsky to assume that there is a synesthetic relationship between the trochaic decasyllable and the thematics of journey; the rhythmical-semantic movement of verse is associated with the rhythm of footsteps. Taranovsky continued in this direction with his research of semantics of verse and his analysis of Andrey Bely's iambic tetrameter and instrumentation (1966, 2000). The first direction came to be called 'conventional' and the other 'organic'. The semiotic difference here is that, while according to the conventional theory, verse metre is a symbolic sign (in Charles Sanders Peirce's terms), the organic approach treats metre as an icon. Nearly all further developments were connected with the conventional direction, with the most influential authors being Mikhail Gasparov (1973, 1976, 1979, 1982, 1983) and Marina Tarlinskaja (1985, 1986, 1993).

Nevertheless, there are also syntheses of both theories: according to these approaches, verse form is related to different semantic mechanisms. A synthetic theory is offered, for instance, by John Hollander (1960, 1985), who claims that metre and rhythm have an opposite expressive role. Poetic rhythm emphasizes peculiarity, individuality and nonstandardness, which characterize a given place in the given phenomenon. Metre, however, emphasizes typicality and standardness, which characterize one or another tradition. Before Hollander, similar observations were made by Roman Jakobson (1979) who noted in his study of the 19th century Czech poet Mácha that there are rhythmic variations which are associated with certain thematics. Mihhail Lotman (1988, 1989) has shown how both verse metre and rhythm are related to different semiotic mechanisms. Verse metre as a sign is generally conventional, that is, in Peirce's terms, metre is symbol. However, it often plays an indexical part as well (referring to a certain genre, tradition, etc.) and is also sometimes related to iconicity (for instance, long and short metres can be synaesthetically associated with size, etc; see Lotman, Lotman, Lotman 2010). At the same time rhythm can be iconic (for instance, a spondaic hexameter in ancient poetry could emphasize slowness, while dactylic verse could represent fastness and playfulness), indexical (referring to a tradition, for instance, a Russian iambic tetrameter at the beginning of the 20th century) or a conventional sign.

2. Mikhail Gasparov

The special volume on the semiotic of verse is devoted to the memory of Mikhail Leonovich Gasparov (1935–2005), an outstanding scholar of versification and a contributor to semiotic publications in Tartu. In his self-ironic memoirs Gasparov writes how he became a semiotician:

“When in 1963 the first conference on semiotics was being prepared, I got an invitation to participate in it. It confused me. I had heard this word frequently, but understood it poorly. By chance I ran into Paducheva³ in the library, a while ago we had been classmates. I asked: “What is semiotics?” She answered with conviction: “Nobody knows.” I asked: “What about the rhythmic of three-stress *dol’nik* – is it semiotics?” She answered with the same conviction: “Of course!” It impressed me. I submitted my abstract and it was published.

<...> First time I went to “Semiotics” in Tartu with a paper from Jarcho and about Jarcho⁴. I remember how J. M. Lotman called me and proposed an appointment in RGALI⁵. He said: “You will recognize me by the moustache.” <...> Why was I accepted to “Semiotics”? I was working on versification with the help of calculations – a tradition which through Andrey Bely stemmed from classical philology and medieval studies more than a hundred years ago, when the amount of deviations in verse was used to establish the relative chronology of Euripides’s tragedies. These positivist exercises could hardly be interesting for the scholars of the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school. These had nothing to do with the theory of signs. Only striving to precision and verifiable scholarly quality could be valued in these. The same attracted me to Tartu studies: “precision and explicitness” in any given subject, as it was expressed by Y. I. Levin; “moving from non-science to science”, as it was expressed by J. M. Lotman.

I would like to think that I learned something too, when I was reading and listening to my comrades, – especially when I started to work on the semantics of verse meters.

Later I turned out to be even in the editorial board of *Semiotics*, but it was not related to the scholarly work, but the conditions of its surroundings. B. M. Gasparov⁶ belonged to the editorial board and his name was printed on the reverse side of title

³ Elena Viktorovna Paducheva is an outstanding Russian linguist and semiotician, a constant participant in semiotic conferences in Tartu, as well as a contributor to semiotic volumes.

⁴ Boris Isaakovich Jarcho (1889–1942) was an eminent Russian scholar, a member of the Formalist movement, who used statistical methods to study medieval and modern literature.

⁵ Russian State Archive of Literature and Art.

⁶ Boris Mikhailovich Gasparov – a namesake of Mikhail Leonovich – is a Professor of Slavic Languages at Columbia University (NY, NY); before emigrating (1980) he was an Associate Professor at the Department of Russian Language in the University of Tartu.

page even after he had emigrated abroad. Censor noticed it only after several issues had been published. But J. M. Lotman said to him: “Come on! It is just a simple typo!” and changed the initials.”

Versification was only one of the many academic spheres where Mikhail Gasparov was well established. His first speciality, and one he was engaged in throughout his academic life, was classical philology. At the same time he was involved with the theory and practice of translation (ancient and medieval authors both in prose and in verse, Western European poetry; his translations have not been collected, but they would constitute several sizeable volumes), Russian literature, especially Russian literature of the 20th century, particularly poetry, especially Mandel’shtam. He is still considered the foremost expert of Mandel’shtam’s poetry. We can add his textological studies and several activities in spheres usually considered to lie on the margins of philology. Nevertheless, versification was his favourite field of study, and the one with which he was permanently engaged from the 1960s until the end of his life.

The first period of his study on the theory of verse (1960s–1970s) was focused on the description of the so-called Russian “non-classical” metres. Gasparov divided what had been previously known vaguely as “accentual verse” into three metres which differed, first of all, by quantity:

(1) *dol’nik* (verse metre where the number of unstressed syllables between stressed positions varies from 1 to 2);

(2) *taktovik* (in two variants): a) the number of unstressed syllables between stressed positions varies from 0 to 2; b) the number of unstressed syllables between stressed positions varies from 1 to 3;

(3) accentual verse where the interval between stressed positions is unlimited.

Mikhail Gasparov developed a detailed typology of rhythmic modulations of these forms and described them statistically in the whole body of Russian poetry. The results were so important that they led to a revision of the way in which the so-called classical metres are treated. In his fundamental monograph (1974) Gasparov gave a synthetic overview of Russian verse, first and foremost regarding its rhythmical aspect.

During the second period of his verse studies Gasparov focused on three main topics. In the first of them, the theory and history of Russian rhyme, he first had to develop a method of analysis, in order to describe statistically the largest body of Russian rhyme collected until now. The second topic was the history of Russian verse. These topics were reflected in Gasparov’s next

monograph (1984). The third topic was the semantics of verse forms. It is an especially problematic sphere, demanding a great deal of responsibility. Gasparov understood well that his results rather constitute source material which requires theoretical interpretation (Gasparov 1999).

Next, Gasparov took up the capacious work of systematizing the European verse metres in their historical development (1989), and at the end of his life, together with Tatyana Skulacheva, he started working on a completely new subject which he called the linguistics of verse (Gasparov, Skulacheva 2005).

If we attempt to formulate very briefly Gasparov's guiding principles, there will be two premises – enlightenment and reductionism. For him these two were in a natural relationship. If you simplify things, they become clearer and you can explain them to others. For Gasparov, the expression 'things are not so simple' is a feature of obscurantism – things are simple. This also characterizes the most complicated phenomena of culture and art, including the art of versification: they can always be quantified. Gasparov's profound democratism is the result. Literary history is usually made up of an élite: it treats the best, but not the worst, writers. Gasparov has been accused of studying poor writers as attentively as acknowledged classics. For Gasparov, a scholar who observed the scenery of literature with the eye of a statistician, there would indeed be no difference. Only the statistical regularities matter, to which a genius is subjected similarly with a scribbler.

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