

Review

Barry P. Scherr, James Bailey, Evgeny V. Kazartsev (eds.). *Formal Methods in Poetics: A Collection of Scholarly Works Dedicated to the Memory of Professor M.A. Krasnoperova*. RAM-Verlag, Lüdenscheid (Germany), 2011. 315 pp.

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The present collection of essays contains a range of approaches, all of which seek to apply strict methods of analysis (often statistical) to verse. Given the lengthy and distinguished history of such approaches in Russia, it is not surprising that most of the essays are devoted to Slavic poetry, with the exceptions usually authored by Slavs. The fact that the entire volume is written in English suggests that the editors (two of whom are American) wish to reach an audience beyond Eastern Europe. Certainly someone has put significant effort into English style; on the whole, the essays read exceedingly smoothly, and typos are few. However, the frequent use of probability theory and the esoteric national traditions involved (at least from the perspective of the Anglophone reader) may make the volume inaccessible to a broad readership. This would be a pity, because the quality of scholarship is often on a high level.

Empirical approaches to verse are sometimes taken to task for losing sight of aesthetic questions. Yet as many of the contributors to the volume show, there is no reason why the two cannot be combined in meaningful ways. And while the “scientific” tone may strike the uninitiated as dry, the advantage of formal approaches is that the authors lay out with unusual clarity the problem, the methodology, and the conclusions. As a result, even the reader who lacks the mathematical background to understand the details (for example, this reviewer) can usually follow the aims and accomplishments of the work.

Among the numerous “formal methods,” some authors concentrate their analysis on a single text, filtered through a broad range of quantitative data. Several use comparative metrics to study translation. Still others cover the entire metrical repertoire of a given poet, or a significant subset of a poet’s work. The collection is divided into two parts, the first devoted to Russian verse, the second to “European” verse. There would have been better ways to organize this material, e.g., the Klenin and Plungian contributions should have been adjacent rather than in different sections. However, rather than reorganize the volume now, my comments below treat the essays in the order they appear with the minor exception that I discuss two essays by the same author in the same paragraph.

Evgeny Kazartsev begins the volume by investigating the relationship of Lomonosov’s iambs to those of Johann Christian Günther, a German poet whose works have long been recognized as having influenced Lomonosov. Based on a rigorous analysis of rhythmical patterns, Kazartsev concludes that Lomonosov used his German counterpart as a model not only in the earliest poems, but even later, where he seems to have followed Günther’s lead in terms of the relationship of rhythm and genre. One question that Kazartsev does not address, however, is how to deal with German secondary stress. In his view, the lines: “Наследник имени и дел” and “Wer lehrt dich, tumme Tyraney?” are rhythmically identical. However, a German would surely read the lines differently, putting two stresses on “Tyraney” and thus making it a line without pyrrhics. Now, it may well be that Lomonosov spoke German without secondary stress (as Nabokov apparently spoke English), but this is an issue that at the very least needs to be considered.

In the next essay, Andrew Davis applies statistical analysis of punctuation to study the syntax of the Onegin stanza. His approach draws on work begun by Tomashevsky and Vinokur and continued most recently by Barry Scherr. While the importance of the fourth line as a syntactic border has long been recognized, Davis shows among other things how the rest

of the stanza's syntax is dependent on that fourth line. When the fourth line breaks neatly, there is a strong tendency for the eighth line to do so as well. However, when the fourth line lacks a syntactic break, the eighth becomes even less likely to close a segment. This explains why scholars who wish to see the Onegin stanza as a type of sonnet can easily find material to substantiate their claim, but it likewise shows why this claim is essentially false. Davis also discusses the syntax of later Onegin stanzas, showing, for example, that Lermontov's work in this form is stricter than Pushkin's, while Vikram Seth's novel *The Golden Gate* is still freer.

Sergei Andreev's essay draws on the methodology of M.A. Krasnoperova, memorialized in the volume's subtitle. This means that the approach is marked by higher mathematics, a challenge to the average student of poetics. Still, Andreev explains his approach for those who may not be able to follow the details. The basic idea is to investigate Tiutchev's lyric poems (in this case, those in iambic tetrameter quatrains) in terms of many formal features (rhythm, syntax, rhyme) and see how they correlate with each other. For example, even without statistical analysis one might assume that a stressed anacrusis tends to correlate with an unstressed first ictus, but it is hardly obvious how this might affect later ictuses or how it might vary from line to line. Andreev takes this data and divides it by periods, supporting a contention (made in his earlier work) that Tiutchev's later poetry differs from that of his early period. The essay offers a significant amount of information, though its significance will only become fully apparent in the context of a much larger data set (e.g., similar studies of other nineteenth-century Russian poets).

Emily Klenin's article concerns Fet's translation of Goethe's *Faust*. As a native speaker of German, Fet was especially sensitive to the rhythmic and metrical nuances of the original. He was the first Russian translator to retain the more unusual formal features, for example, the *Knittelvers* of Faust's opening monologue. (In Goethe's usage — which only vaguely recalled the medieval verse that goes by this name — *Knittelvers* was a somewhat irregular four-stress meter.) Given that Fet preserved this form in that famous opening soliloquy, the question arises as to why he did not do so in Faust's "Osterspaziergang" speech. The answer that Klenin suggests is that Fet — like some recent German metricians — did not read the "Osterspaziergang" passage as the same *Knittelvers* as the opening. Hence his rendering, which mixes binary and ternary meters, while not slavishly following the rhythm line by line, nonetheless creates an equivalent rhythmical texture.

Venera Kayumova's essay is devoted to a very important and rarely studied formal feature: hypermetrical stress. Using an enormous set of data (36,000) lines, she graphs the frequency of hypermetrical stresses in the iambic tetrameter of Russian poets over 140 years (1880–1920). Most incidences occur on the very first syllable of the line, and, statistically speaking, hypermetrical stressing decreases from the beginning to the end of the line. The most common type of hypermetrical stressing is in the form of a spondee (rather than that of a choriamb). Since the incidence of hypermetrical stress is far greater than theoretical predictions would lead us to expect, it can be safely assumed that hypermetrical stress is more a conscious decision on the part of the poet than an inevitable feature of Russian phonology.

In a staggeringly thorough analysis of Maksimilian Voloshin's poetry, Igor Karlovsky addresses the issue of free verse. Voloshin is often mentioned in this context, but Karlovsky shows that there are no finished poems by Voloshin that unambiguously meet the criteria for free verse. He suggests (logically enough) that Voloshin's lengthy stay in France influenced his untraditional — and relatively free — experiments with verse form. However, given Voloshin's famously poor knowledge of French language, it is probably no coincidence that he only began these experiments after he returned to Russia and was privy to Vyacheslav Ivanov's theories (and lectures) on poetics. Karlovsky not only surveys the variety of Voloshin's unusual forms (unrhymed variable meters, use of trochaic lines in iambic verse, etc.), but also connects them to genre, offering valuable lines of inquiry to future scholars.

Georgii Vasiutochkin has supplied two essays, both of which apply formal methods of poetic analysis to the interpretation of an individual text. The first, on Khodasevich's "Ne iambom li chetyrekhstopnym," begins with the well-established (by Andrei Belyi, then by Kirill Taranovsky) distinction between the iambic tetrameter of eighteenth-century poets and that of nineteenth-century poets. Placing Khodasevich's poem in this broad context, Vasiutochkin shows its rhythmic profile to be distant from Khodasevich's own earlier poetry and from that of the age of Pushkin, yet strikingly reminiscent of eighteenth-century practice. The closest fit is not Lomonosov's "Khotin Ode" (invoked in Khodasevich's poem), but Derzhavin. Some of Vasiutochkin's claims can be disputed; it is not clear why "Videnie murzy" should be singled out as the source rather than Derzhavin's verse more generally. Moreover, Vasiutochkin is apparently not aware that Khodasevich's poem is unfinished, a consideration that inevitably complicates a minute empirical analysis. Finally, one can argue that the sampling of a single poem is too small to be statistically significant. (And Vasiutochkin's rhythmical assumptions are sometimes debatable. To his credit, though, he shows precisely how he scans the poem.) Nonetheless, the statistics are so overwhelmingly revealing that even questioning a few stresses here and there would not change the overall picture. Vasiutochkin's other essay is similar in methodology; he seeks a Russian model for the trochaic hexameter of Joseph Brodsky's "Letters to a Roman Friend." His (unexpected) conclusion is that there was no specific model. Rather, he argues that Brodsky developed an odd rhythmic profile in an attempt to echo (albeit loosely) the metrics of antiquity, in particular Martial's Phalacian verse.

Barry Scherr's contribution concerns the sonnets of Arsenii Tarkovskii, a form that the poet turned to throughout his life and in this sense a microcosm of his poetry and poetics. Scherr shows how a supposedly "traditional" poet varies the sonnet form in terms of rhythm and even meter (with one anapestic sonnet), with the changes becoming more apparent as he grew older. He also shows the "border phenomena," poems that may be sonnets but cannot clearly be classified as such. Though the body of work is relatively small and some of the statistical evidence therefore insufficient, the essay is helpful both in understanding Tarkovskii's place in twentieth-century Russian verse as well as in understanding the sonnet more broadly.

Saule Abisheva's essay on the "classical" (i.e., syllabotonic) verse of David Samoilov is likewise an attempt to show how a traditional poet expresses his individuality. By studying all 9,000 lines of relevant verse, Abisheva can be more precise than previous analyses (of such authorities as Pavel Rudnev and M.L. Gasparov), since these were based on sampling. In many respects, however, the results still show that this verse is typical in its rhythmical features or, in the author's words, "an inconspicuous striving for heterogeneity" (p. 158). Still, there are some oddities (e.g. unstressed ictuses in ternary verse) that stand out and deserve attention.

Svetlana Efimova's work on the metrical and stanzaic forms of Konstantin Vasiliev (1955–2001) is similar in approach to Abisheva's essay. Vasiliev was obscure during his lifetime, but has apparently become quite celebrated since his death. Her brief discussion, which suggests a periodisation of his work as well as a delineation of the distinctive (as well as typical) features of his poetry, is followed by a series of charts and graphs twice its length. The main problem of the work of Efimova (and Abisheva) is that ultimately a computer could produce it (see comments below on Ibrahim and Plecháč). On the one hand, there is something reassuring about an essay in which every statement can be empirically verified. On the other hand, there is something troubling about this very phenomenon. M.L. Gasparov edited a compendium of the metrical repertoire of nineteenth-century poets, and the volume can be useful. However, it does not pretend to be poetic analysis, but merely to serve as raw material for future studies. The work of Abisheva and Efimova presumably also belong to this

genre, yet many other poets would require this same detailed analysis before the results can be appreciated.

These essays conclude the first part of the book (“Russian Verse”). The second part (“European Verse”) contains a number of exceptionally fine contributions. In the opening article, Vladimir A. Plungian discusses a single brief poem by Robert Louis Stevenson and its “classic” Russian translation by Andrei Sergeev. Plungian explains that the translator’s equimetrical solution masks a profound problem. By translating an English poem in “dol’nik” into a Russian poem in the same form, the translator cannot but create an anachronism, since “dol’nik” first came into widespread use in Russia in the early twentieth century. Thus Stevenson’s simple poem sounds to a Russian ear like the work of Gippius or Blok. Plungian also looks at small semantic differences and shows how these subtly change the tone of the poem and align it with the same literary-historical problems as the meter. The essay combines synchronic and diachronic analysis in a convincing and accessible way.

Reuven Tsur devotes his article to the question of performance, to the way actual readers realize the written text. Tsur makes a number of superlative points on the interplay of syntax and prosody, with concise and insightful discussion of formal devices (e.g., caesura, enjambment). These observations are then applied to specific readings of Milton’s sonnet “On his Blindness.” Because Milton’s complicated syntax is often at odds with the formal boundaries of the sonnet, the poem serves as a particularly good example of the difficulties facing a reader. Tsur uses audio processors to study readings that can be found on the internet. His point is not to argue for a single correct reading (though he does find fault with some aspects of each reader), but rather to show how each reader makes use of the tension between syntax and versification. Such an approach does not particularly help in interpretation (those hoping to understand what Milton is actually saying will not find much guidance here), but it does nonetheless contribute a great deal to an understanding of how poetry communicates in the broadest sense.

Alfred Behrmann’s essay is one of the most accessible in the volume and also one of the finest. Using a few well-chosen passages from Shakespeare, he investigates the role of paradox, in this case the use of prose versus poetry, a subject far less obvious than is often assumed. In a wonderful discussion of the famous scene after Julius Caesar’s death, Behrmann shows how the “poetic” Brutus uses prose, while the prosaic Mark Antony speaks in verse, all the while insisting that he lacks the skill to do so. (It might be added, however, that Brutus’ prose has strongly poetic elements, e.g. the repeated “If any, speak, for him I have offended,” which scans as an impeccable iambic pentameter line.) Likewise, in “Love’s Labour’s Lost,” a veritable treasure trove of poetic forms, the lowliest characters display no less poetic resourcefulness than the learned ones.

In the tradition of the Abisheva and Efimova essays, Vadim Andreev’s article consists largely of a catalogue of the work of a single poet. In this case, however, the poet is American (Edgar Allen Poe), the verse is limited to iambs, and the purpose is not simply descriptive, but diachronic. In other words, the author is interested in delineating changes that occur in the poet’s work over time. Especially impressive is the number of verse features that Andreev has charted; 34 in all, among them not just rhythm, but also morphology and syntax. Since Andreev includes very few methodological examples (i.e., how these characteristics are defined), a lot has to be taken on faith. Potential problems are legion; for example, though the English iamb tolerates stress reversal and is thus much freer than the Russian, Andreev’s rhythmic analysis seems to have been taken wholesale from that traditionally used to study Russian verse. In any case, without seeing the evidence, it is difficult to evaluate Andreev’s conclusions. On the basis of stylistic markers, he claims to have delineated a system so refined that it would allow him to give approximate dates to works by Poe that have heretofore lacked reliable dates of composition.

The work of Viktor Levitskii and Olga Naidesh is devoted to the “phonosemantic” qualities of verse. This term implies something that poets have argued about for centuries, but which verse theorists have been hesitant to accept: namely, that specific sounds have specific semantic associations consistent from poet to poet. The study is based on German-language poetry, but the authors suggest that the same results would be found in other languages as well. The first study traces the appearance of the “r” sound versus the “l” sound. According to the authors, the former appears with much greater frequency (by a factor of ten) in poems in a “minor” key, while the latter appears with much greater frequency in poems of a “major” key. (The major and minor distinctions are “based on the expert opinion of literary scholars” [p. 249].) The authors then build on their initial discovery by investigating consonant clusters that include either the “l” or the “r” phoneme. Even if one accepts their results as correct, the approach suffers from oversimplification. Poetic semantics is reduced to questions of happy versus sad, and even the relative prominence of the phonemes in question is not taken into account. Surely those in stressed syllables and rhyme position should count more heavily than others.

The essay of Mikhail Lotman and Maria-Kristiina Lotman, devoted to the Estonian trochaic tetrameter, would seem on first glance to be of only local interest. However, the essay is outstanding, with potential application to syllabo-tonic verse of numerous national traditions. According to the authors, Estonian verse is remarkable for the tenacity with which it clings to the metrical scheme. Since rhythmic variation is so rare, the authors seek out factors that might allow some discrimination between historical periods and even individual authors. They propose a two-pronged approach. First, they consider the stressing not on the ictuses (as these are virtually always stressed), but on the weak syllables. Second, they introduce the notion of various degrees of stress, ranging from none whatsoever to phrasal stress (the most important syllable in an entire phrase). Admittedly, such an approach introduces an element of judgment and thus departs from the strictly empirical data sought by many formal theorists. However, it has the enormous advantage of reflecting the verse as it is actually recited (an issue that scholars of Russian verse tend to ignore). Most important: when the authors compare their results to that from randomly occurring trochaic passages in Estonian prose, they discover significant differences. And poets of different periods display different proclivities. Hence the authors conclude that Estonian poets indeed are using the rhythmic qualities of their language for aesthetic purposes.

The article by Robert Ibrahim and Petr Plecháč is rather technical, but the main point is clear and significant. Computer studies of verse have up until now been based on organizing information that is painstakingly gathered by hand. For example, the magnificent “natsional’nyi korpus russkogo iazyka” (<http://www.ruscorpora.ru>) includes basic metrical information on thousands of poems, but the computer has not compiled this data. It is simply a convenient storehouse, a means for allowing a researcher quick access to other scholars’ grunt work. Ibrahim and Plecháč are attempting something quite different; they are hoping to have a computer gather the data, not simply organize it. In other words, they are teaching the computer to scan Czech verse. If Czech poetry (or any national poetic tradition) were entirely accessible in this form, it would allow a far more detailed picture than is presently available.

The final contribution to the volume, by Ján Mačutek, exceeds the competence of this reviewer. The essay concerns the rhythmic patterns in five Slovak poems, and the results are apparently language-specific, i.e., they cannot necessarily be transferred to other national traditions. The author, a mathematician, makes demands that few humanists will be able to follow, e.g., his discussion of the “1-shifted right truncated negative binomial distribution.” I must leave it to others to determine how successfully this methodology explains the complexities of poetic rhythm.

Taken as a whole, the volume shows that verse theory continues to thrive, even after the deaths of such luminaries as M.L. Gasparov and M.A. Krasnoperova (whose complete bibliography is included [pp. v–xi] after a brief opening appreciation of her work [pp. iii–iv]). It is encouraging to see the variety of approaches in this volume, many of which point in directions well worth further exploration.