Versification and Poetics through the Lens of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics ("Juri Lotman 100": A Report from Poetry and Poetics Panels)

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The international congress *Juri Lotman's Semiosphere*, held in Tallinn and Tartu from 25–28 February 2022, was organized to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Juri Lotman (1922–1993).[1] The main goal of the congress was to promote Lotman's scholarly legacy worldwide and bring together an interdisciplinary network of researchers to create a dialogue between experts with different academic backgrounds. Among other topics discussed by Lotman and his fellow members of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, versification, poetics and the history of poetry were addressed.

Several papers focused on signs in poetic texts and poetic text as a sign system.

Natalya Fateeva's "Poetry as a self-reproducing system" elaborated on Juri Lotman's model of autocommunication to study the phenomenon of poetic inspiration as described by the poets themselves in their works. Such self-descriptions often refer to introspection and autocommunication. Fateeva proposed that a poet simultaneously acts in two guises: first, as someone experiencing an extraordinary physical and mental state and, second, as an actual poet-creator who describes this state in rhythmic-phonetic formulas.

Jurgita Katkuvienė's "Strategies of reading visual poetry" highlighted a feature of modern poetry in which the formation of meaning often takes place not on the content plane but on the expression plane (to use Louis Hjelmslev's

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1   For the program, abstracts and other information about the congress visit the event page: https://jurilotman.ee/en/juri-lotman-100/congress-2022/

terms). The most vivid forms of such poetry destroy the boundaries of traditional verbal discourse and expand the very concept of poetry. At the same time, a question arises about the possibilities of reading such poetry. Considering visual poetry sampled from Lithuanian literature and using A. J. Greimas's tools for semiotic analysis of the forms of content and expression in various texts, Katkuvienė addressed the issue of applying Greimas's model of reading to poetic texts in which verbal discourse is minimized or even completely absent.

Oleg Zaslavsky discussed hidden structures concealed in artistic works. His paper "The hidden plot in Pushkin's poetics" was based on studying several of Pushkin's texts. The working hypothesis was that Pushkin, aiming for extreme semantic saturation and conciseness, removed all the intermediate links of the plot that can be unambiguously restored from the narrative. By reconstructing these elements, the study demonstrates that the "hidden plot" is an essential factor in Pushkin's narrative construction.

Ekaterina Dmitrieva's paper "Silence as a semiotic sign in European poetry of the late 19th century and its precedents in gallant poetry of the 18th century" examined the issue of the semiotic nature of silence (emptiness) and the signifiers used to express it. She analyzed the modernist poetics of Mallarmé and Maeterlink, demonstrating different ways of constructing such signs, and then pointed to their precedents in French *poésie légère* of the 18th century.

In the paper "The 'self' and the 'other' in Estonian poetics", *Maria-Kristiina Lotman* and *Rebekka Lotman* addressed one of the basic binary antinomies in Tartu-Moscow semiotics, the question of foreign and 'own' (domestic, native Estonian) in Estonian theories of poetry. They demonstrated how this dichotomy has been expressed in poetical treatises since the earliest period of Estonian literature. They show how Estonian poetic culture has been a constant dialogue between the 'self' and the 'other', while the bases for determining the Estonian 'own' are changing, as are the boundaries of the 'foreign'. On one hand, the 'own' has been idealized, but on the other hand, it sometimes acquires a negative meaning as something worn-out or constrictive.

Irina Melnikova's talk "On the problem of the iconicity of a (poetic) text" proceeded from the concept of poetic text as a sign system involved in the process of communication. The material for the study was the poetry collection "Immersion" (Grimzdimas, 2017) by a contemporary Lithuanian poet, Gytis Norvilas. It is a semiotically heterogeneous text that uses different types of coding, combining symbolism and iconicity in different forms and proportions. Melnikova concluded that Norvilas's poetry is clearly a manifestation of what Lotman associates with the dynamics of literary texts and literary evolution – the oscillation between semiotic homogeneity and semiotic

heterogeneity – and this makes it possible to reveal the collision of various semiotic systems described in Lotman's theory.

Suren Zolyan's "Poetics of modality: Pushkin's 'If only I were Tsar…'" was dedicated to the semantic function of modality in Pushkin's oeuvre. Zolyan showed how Aleksandr Pushkin's biographically important prosaic fragment "If only I were Tsar…" presents some principles of Pushkin's poetics that were later embodied primarily in his prose works. A play with modalities can take various forms, thus making the real and the imaginary mutually permeable. Using intratextual analysis and comparison with other works by Pushkin, Zolyan offered an interpretation according to which "If only I were Tsar…" can be seen as a short story, while its textual ambiguity (some fragments are erased while others are erased and then restored) is an artistic device. The plot dynamics, which are normally created by links between the events, are created here by changes in modal relations – relations of attainability between worlds and transition from one possible world to another. An avant-texte functions as an equivalent of a hypertext.

Several presentations demonstrated how computational methods can be applied to the study of thematics and the semantic halos of metrical structures.

Oleg Sobchuk and *Artjoms Šeļa*'s paper "Towards computational thematics" proposed a new direction in the digital humanities: the study of automated detection of thematic similarities between texts by comparing various algorithms for text analysis and measuring their performance for unsupervised detection of thematic similarities between literary texts. To perform such an analysis, a corpus of 200 novels in four genres (detective, science fiction, fantasy, and romance) was assembled, and after removing the genre labels, algorithms were applied to divide the texts into groups as similar as possible to the original genres. The aim of this method is to provide better tools for detecting literary influences (borrowing plots, settings, etc.) for the study of literary traditions on a large scale and, eventually, for detecting patterns of cultural evolution in literature.

In their paper "The semantic halo of meter in European syllabic-accentual poetry: Quantitative evidence and formal modelling", *Artjoms Šeļa* and *Petr Plecháč* attempted to research the semantics of verse on a quantitative basis and build a formalized model of the semantic halo for several European syllabic-accentual traditions such as English, Danish, German, Russian and Czech. The aim was to achieve a sufficiently abstract representation of the semantic structure of different verse meters.

Another group of papers was dedicated to various issues of sound in poetry.

Gennady Obatnin's presentation "On the history of the description of rhyme and rhyming in Russian poetry" examined different *topoi* of describing rhyme

in Russian poetry, criticism and normative versification, such as 'rhyme-rattle' or 'rhyme bell'; 'rhyme-arrow'; 'rhyme-breath'; 'marriage of rhymes' and others. The study also addressed the internal connections and sources of these descriptions.

Boris Maslov and *Tatiana Nikitina*'s "Comparative approaches to rhyme and rhythm" presented some recent results on the interaction between different levels of organization of verse that support the basic insights of Lotman's structuralist poetics. The research material was drawn from Russian and English syllabic-accentual poetry (complex stanzas used by Shakespeare, Pushkin and Byron).

Michael Wachtel presented a paper on "Hiatus in Russian poetry". Hiatus is a relatively rare feature in the Russian poetic tradition and often suggests foreign influence. Using examples from Golden and Silver Age poetry, Wachtel demonstrated several ways in which this phonetic device has been used for semantic effect.

The congress also featured papers devoted to the poetics of ideology and the poetics of politics.

Konstantin Polivanov's presentation "Boris Pasternak's strategies of literature and life in the perception of his contemporaries" discussed the political subtexts of Pasternak's works, the argumentation of critics of his political position, and the reactions of the authorities to his behaviour and speeches in the 1930s.

Lea Pild's paper "Alexander Blok in the poetry by Mikhail Kuzmin in the late 1910s and early 1920s" analyzed changes in Kuzmin's attitude towards Alexander Blok. Amidst the horrible events after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, which the poet regarded as the destruction of culture, Kuzmin's former critical attitude towards the Symbolists became less sharp and even indulgent.

Andrei Fedotov and *Pavel Uspensky*'s paper "Nikolai Nekrasov's love poems and Avdotya Panaeva's prose: The poetics of mansplaining and emancipation" presented Nekrasov's so-called Panaeva cycle in light of gender theory. One of this cycle's distinctive features is instructiveness, which manifests itself in persistent appeals to the poet's beloved with requests, commands and instructions. The instructions were given with the intention to develop her self-awareness and self-sufficiency, but they can be viewed as typical mansplaining. The prose of Avdotya Panaeva gives a unique opportunity to understand how an emancipated woman of the nineteenth century reacted to mansplaining. The paper examined in detail the strategies of Panaeva's female representation and her ways of deconstructing masculine ideas and practices.

One panel focused on the history of poetic theories and shifts in theoretical frameworks and concepts.

Mihhail Lotman's talk "Verse Theory: Formalism – Structuralism – Generativism" was devoted to the development of theoretical approaches that had a significant impact on the development of ideas in twentieth-century poetics. The speaker pointed out that the formalists did not create a unified theory of verse. Boris Tomashevsky's technological approach differs significantly from the functionalism of Boris Eichenbaum and, especially, Yuri Tynianov. There is a significant continuity between formalism and structuralism, and Roman Jakobson's theories form a link between these schools. Thus, the poetic function of language in Jakobson can be considered a development of Tomashevsky's ideas. The theory of meter in Jakobson and Trubetskoy, which is based on the mechanism of privative oppositions, is fundamentally different from all previous theories of verse. Morris Halle, the founder of generativism in verse theory, can be considered a link between structuralism and generativism. Halle and Keyser continued the structuralist tradition, giving up the concept of verse feet. What was new in their approach was a specific set of criteria for metricality and the calculation of the complexity of a metrical structure. Mihhail Lotman concluded that the main difference between generativism and previous approaches is its consideration of the phenomena of verse at the level of deep and superficial structures.

Igor Pilshchikov's paper "*System* vs. *structure* in the formalist and structuralist parlance" traced the use of the terms and concepts of 'system' and 'structure' in Russian-language literary and cultural studies from the 1920s to the 1970s. In his classic *Metapoetics* of Russian Formalism, Peter Steiner defined 'system' as one of the basic tropological models in Formalist discourse. The use of 'system' is characteristic of Petrograd formalism (Yuri Tynianov), whereas 'structure' was preferred by Moscow (para)formalists (Gustav Shpet, and his followers, among them Grigory Vinokur). In 1928, Roman Jakobson collaborated with Tynianov and disputed with Vinokur. Jakobson added the term *structure* to the term *system* in the formula he elaborated together with Tynianov: "Synchronic studies replaced the notion of a mechanical agglomeration of phenomena with the notion of a system, structure". For Jakobson, 'structure' was the basic concept of new, post-romantic and post-positivist sciences, and he excluded 'system' from all post-1929 versions of this formula. Juri Lotman initiated two important conceptual shifts. Using the post-Saussurean dichotomy of *langue*/code/grammar and *parole*/message/text, he ascribed 'system' to *la langue* and 'structure' to *la parole*. Hence, he derived his concepts of "art as a secondary modelling system" vs. "the structure of artistic (poetic) text" (1970). Furthermore, Lotman developed the dialectics of system and structure: in art, a structure (text) generated by a system (language) becomes

itself a system (language) that generates other structures (texts). This led to his concept of "the text as a dynamic system" (1981).

A few papers discussed and interpreted poetry through the lens of Lotman's ideas.

Silvi Salupere's paper "Structural-semiotic modelling of reading" focused on the structural-semiotic method of reading a literary text developed by Juri Lotman. It demonstrated how, since the 1960s, Lotman actively developed a new metalanguage in which the concepts of model, system, and structure were at the nucleus of the structuralist approach, while the concepts of sign and communication were associated with semiotics. Structural-semiotic methods are useful for the analysis of a poetic text, which is defined as "a semiotic structure organized in a special way" and, as such, a meaning-making device that is interconnected with its environment and modified under its influence. A literary text as a mental object (along with the consciousness of an individual and culture as collective intelligence) is therefore a cognitive-communicative model, since all these objects have been developed from an expanded understanding of natural language. According to Lotman, in addition to natural language, a person has at least two more powerful modelling systems that actively shape their consciousness: a system of 'common sense' and their spatial-visual view of the world. The role of art is to introduce freedom into the automatism of these worlds, destroying the unambiguity of the connections prevailing in them and thereby expanding the boundaries of perception.

Tatiana Stepanishcheva's paper "Russian poetry anthologised by Juri Lotman, *Early 19th-Century Poets* and *Poets of the 1790–1810s*" focused on the poetry collections edited and commented on by Lotman and examined these corpora as reflections of concepts that Lotman presented in the introductions of the volumes. The presenter demonstrated how Lotman's interest in turning points of cultural history manifested in his selection and interpretation of poetic texts included in these anthologies.

A group of presentations was devoted to the sources of and influences in poetry and poetic language.

Dina Magomedova's paper "Biblical quotations and their sources in the work of Alexander Blok" examined notes on pages of the Bible from Blok's home library. Magomedova observed that these marginalia are most numerous in the Pentateuch, Ecclesiastes, the Book of Wisdom of Solomon, the Gospel of John, the 1st Epistle of John and the Revelation of John the Theologian and analyzed a number of quotations found in Blok's poems, dramas and articles.

Natalia Yakovleva's paper "Natalia Benard and Vera Ilyina: The formation of poetic language" examined the formative impact of the early work of Boris

Pasternak on the poetic language of two undeservingly forgotten poets of the 1920s, Natalia Benard and Vera Ilyina, in the context of their biographies.

Igor Nemirovsky's "Ignat Lebyadkin in the circle of contemporary poets" was devoted to the poetry of Ignat Lebyadkin – a character in Dostoevsky's novel *Demons*, whose verses have acquired the status of an independent and self-sufficient historical and literary phenomenon (defined as 'the poetry of a literary character' by Vladimir F. Markov). The paper discussed the poetic context and environment relevant to Lebyadkin, which until now have not received the attention they deserve.

Natalia Mazur's "Boris Pasternak as a secret Petersburger" focused on the meaning of Saint Petersburg and the "Petersburg text" in Pasternak's collection of poems, *Twin in the Clouds* (1914). The presenter demonstrated that two urban poems in this book depict Saint Petersburg, while the lyrical hero feels a special spiritual closeness to this city.

The congress ended with a public statement on the war in Ukraine. The participants from 37 different countries including Ukraine and Russia demanded an immediate cessation of Russia's aggression.[2]