

Igor Terent'ev, Introductory Article to 17 Nonsensical Instruments

When there are no mistakes, there is nothing.

Children often stumble; they dance exquisitely. Antioch

The mind forces the senses to defer to one another and in this way reach the solutions of all questions for the majority of voices; but when because of this it rises up to vomit,--out comes arbitrariness of the ear (in poetry), the eyes (in painting) and art begins, where all possible *contradictions* have a place of honor:

syr blednyi pokoinik
na zeleni s'edoben I pakhuch!
[cheese is a pale dead man
on greens that are edible and odiferous]

Who could doubt that absurdity, nonsense, naked miracles are the consequences of creation!

But it's not so easy to deceive yourself and accelerate instances of error: only mechanical (and not ideological) methods are in the artist's power and here **mastery, i.e. the ability to make mistakes**, means for a poet to think with his ear and not his head. Isn't this so!

Contradictions between sound and thought don't exist in poetry: the word means what it says.

Faust tried to replace "word" in the Gospel with "reason"; here, other than insolence, is typical human ignorance, people who look upon language as if it were a shovel.

However, practical language is really the most ungainly shovel, while its rules are reversed in poetry. Here they are once and for all:

The rules of practical language

1. Words that sound the same can have different meanings
2. Different sounds—same meaning
3. Any word can have any meaning you want
4. Any word can have no meaning whatsoever

Examples: 1. Bismark (name of a dog.) 2. Noon and 12 o'clock in the daytime. 3. Osel (donkey) or mama (in Georgian it means papa).
4. Any word that the speaker or listener doesn't know the definition of.

THE RULES OF POETIC SPEECH

Words that sound similar in poetry have similar meanings.

Examples: gorod—gordii [city—proud], gorshok—gershuni [chamber pot--Gershuni¹], tvorchestvo—tvorog [creation—cottage cheese].

Pushkin's Tatyana starts by speaking of her love like this:

Mne toshno milaya moya
Ya plakat', ya rydat' gotova,
[It's torturous for me, my dear,
I'm ready to cry, to moan,]

And at the end of the novel, speaking on the same subject, she repeats the same acoustic essence of someone in love:

Vsyu etu vetosh' maskarada.
[All these rags of a masquerade].

(A friend of mine asserts that when he's in love it makes him nauseous).

If you listen closely to the words: genii [genius], sneg [snow], nega [satisfaction], strannost' [oddity], postoyanstvo [constancy], privol'ye [freedom], len' [laziness], vdokhnovenie [inspiration] . . . words that people exclaim when wishing to characterize the "nastroenie [mood]" of "Evgeny's," it becomes indubitable that they are called forth from a sonic hypnosis: Evgeny Onegin, Tatyana, Olga, Lenskii!

Russian folk riddles are built upon this premise:

Vsekh odevayu, samaya golaya (igolka).
[I dress everyone, but I'm naked myself (needle)]
Chernyi kon' prigaet v ogon' (kocherga)
[A black steed jumps into the fire (poker).]

Apprehending the meaning of sound in poetry, many amateurs worked on the creation of a dictionary of Pushkin's, Tyutchev's and others' rhymes. They didn't know that there could be created a dictionary not only of Pushkin's rhymes but of all words in general that one meets in the poet's work:

(Evgeny Onegin, Chap. 1, stanza XIX)
"vse te zhe-l' vy, inye devy,
smeniv, ne zamenili vas" . . .
[are you all the same, have other goddesses
having changed, replaced you]

¹ Grigorii Gershuni (1870-1908) was a Russian terrorist.

And further on the poet, whose acoustic imagination was poisoned by the word “l’vy” [lions] howls and growls: “uzriuli russkoi Terpsikhory²” . . . “ustremiv razocharovannyi lornet” [having directed a disappointed lorgnette] . . . “bezmolvno budu ya zevat” [silently I shall yawn].

While at the same time that this “lion of society” is presented, all XX stanzas portray a menagerie, where the ballerina Istomina, after the words “**parter . . . kipit**” [orchestra . . . boils], is inescapably transformed into **panter** (panther):

“I vdrug pryzhok, i vdrug letit . . .
I bystroï nozhkoi nozhku b’yot” . . .
[And suddenly a jump, and suddenly she flies
And she beats her feet against each other]

Moreover, individual letters—not just words—speak of the poet more forthrightly than any biography. The letter “B” in Pushkin:

“Ya byl ot balov bez uma!”
[I was out of my mind from balls.]

The first chapter is overflowing with the word “blitat’” [shine]: obozhatel’ [admirer], bogini [goddesses], balet [ballet], bokalov [goblets], bobrovyi [beaver], bolivar [a type of hat], khlebnik [baker], v bumazhnom kolpake [in a paper hat]—all the “boom” of banal Petersburg.

Gde, mozhet byt’, rodilis’ vy
Ili blitali moi chitalel’ . . .
[Where perhaps you were born
or shone, my reader] . . .

I won’t insist that “uzriuli” means “ “nozdril’va” [a lion’s nostrils]—maybe it’s “glazitsa” [eye socket] . . . but the articulate pathos of this word, the same with almost all reciters, demonstrates the fundamental accuracy of the conjecture: the solemn beast watches, blowing up his nostrils . . .

A poetic dictionary (the external appearance of which could be the same as a practical dictionary published by the Academy of Sciences) is a creative work, i.e. unconvincing for the deaf . . .

This is not a key to understanding poetry: it’s a **skeleton key**, because every form of beauty is **beauty with a fracture** . . . In this book,

² Terent’ev has fused the first two words of the line, “uzriu li” [do I see] into “uzriuli,” a zaum word.

speaking about “17 Nonsensical Instruments” I will give a brief description of this set of creative hooks.

Knowing the law of poetic language, no one can doubt that all poets are “zaum” poets.

Using ordinary words, Pushkin changes “vetosh” [rags] into “toshnotu” [nausea], “parter” [orchestra] into “pantera” [panther], he creates “zaum” words such as “uzriuli,” “mokuzhon” (Evg. Oneg. Chapter One, stanza XII, line one: “kak rano mog uzh on trevozhit” [how early indeed could he trouble] . . . And if he hadn’t done this, then not just for the Futurists but in general he wouldn’t exist!

My poems, as well as the poetry of Kruchenykh and Ilya Zdanevich convey a strange impression: they are incomprehensible to the extreme!

No problem: we’ll get by!

Zaum transforms into order and order transforms into zaum, everything under the sun changes, and that which we repeat each minute in a simple conversation is constructed more poorly than the most rotten Mayakovsky-webs³: “ne mogu otorvat’ glaz” [I can’t take my eyes away], “potriasiat’ dushu” [to touch one’s soul], “soiti s uma” [to go mad] or “p’ian kak ziuzia” [drunk as a sluggish person], “tarabarshchina,” [gibberish], “tryn trava” [a mythical plant] . . . Who knows what “ziuzia” is . . .

All of this was done in its own time by some sort of Kamensky and came into such broad use because bad examples are infectious.

The circle of zaum poetry’s influence grows slowly and that’s best for all!

Our poetry differentiates itself by:

1. Study of the voice.
2. Material for linguixperiments.⁴
3. The possibility of accidental, mechanical, mistaken (i.e. creative) acquisition of new words.
4. A rest of the weary wise man, zaum poetry is emotion, like all things mute.
5. A method for disassociation from the vulgarians of the past.
6. A condensed deduction of all the newest theoticians.

³ A neologism from “Mayakovsky” and “pautina,” [spider web].

⁴ A neologism from “iazyk” [language] and “opyt” [experiment]

7. Fertilizer of language (zaum is hygiene of sound—the best condition for the growth of thought).

For an artist, a new school is simply anesthesia that hasn't been tried yet. But there's no reason to fear such a word: the most "natural" affairs: fertilizing the land, clearing—it's the same anesthesia (by the way, the words are similar . . .)

Cultural cultivation of poetry demands the fertilizer of theory.

Every person must study to the point of total ignorance: discoveries occur where foolery begins! Rhythm! Rhythm! Rhythm!

Chopped up stretchers, an old carriage, a chariot—a bullock cart or the still-hexametric mare Pegasus, having galloped as far as an ia-mb . . . bears absolutely no resemblance to a tram!

The means of locomotion very much influences the rhythmic nature of a verse.

And it's not just a matter of speed: absolute velocity remains undiscovered. The essence of the matter is in the minute-by-minute stops (a tram), impetuous decelerations (airplanes) . . . The essence of the matter is in the number of seconds!

Only in prose was there possible such a head-spinning multiplicity of rhythms, that gives us khotiaba⁵ . . . Ilya Zdanevich!

An identical or symmetrical distribution of syllables line by line is the psychology of a pedestrian.

Of course, Pushkin's iamb "vpripryzhku"⁶ is better than the "free" verse that barely drags along written by our cymbalists, but the celebrated "acceleration" and "deceleration" of the iamb (Andrei Bely) is now as childish as the even more celebrated "chopped" iamb.

S. Bobrov's thoughts, extracted from Bozhidar's splendid book, carry an infectious spirit into new poetry, which doesn't search at all for "metric evidence" . . . all these "three-dole" pauses⁷ are sucking on a marble fly. This business doesn't belong to Briusov.

How does prose differ from poetry!

Harmony? "Ia vyshla zamuzh, vy dolzny? [I got married, you must]

For six years already poetry has departed from classical droning to a diverse structure of letters in contrast to sound.

⁵ A zaum word created by the fusion of the phrase "khotia by," [even if].

⁶ A misquote from *Evgenii Onegin*, Chapter 5, stanza 62. The original is pripryzhki [jumps].

⁷ A reference to an experimental meter used by the Symbolist poets.

All Mayakovskys, for example, yearn for the words “borshch” and “svoloch” [bastard]. There’s harmony for you!

Inharmonious?

Tropes? I.e. simply naming things not by their own names? Old as a kitten! Whitman made verses from a single enumeration of objects and this was poetry without a single epithet, without metaphor, without a desire to symbolize in front of a mirrored shelf!

Enough! Go to the devil!

Take as your unit of measure not the syllable, but the entire word, i.e. a series of syllables, written cohesively, and then all confusion disappears:

Here’s a most simple example:

1	1	1	1
Pridu	Vchetyre	Skazala	Maria
[I’ll come	At four	said	Maria]

	1	
1	Vosem’.	2
	[Eight]	

	1
1	Deviat’.
	[Nine]

	1
1	Desiat’
	3.
	[Ten]

(It’s possible to read this poem differently).

There are four one-second stresses in each line and one on each word (this isn’t always the case). In the first line there are no pauses; in the second there has to be one stress on the beginning pause and two on the final one; in the third line—0—1, in the fourth—0—3, because the pause at the end of the preceding line is naturally heard as a pause before the following one and through this device the speed accelerates.

This is how words unite in a line, which in verse is where the beat is placed.

Lines can be identical in the number of stresses (in Mayakovsky they’re almost always identical): then the relation of numbers becomes more complex, but all the same the law of identical numbers of seconds remains in force.

