

Metrical Ambiguity

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Abstract: In most instances the meter of a Russian poem becomes clear virtually from the start, after a single line or perhaps just a few lines. However, there are also poems for which a simple metrical classification remains problematic even upon consideration of the entire work. In some cases, an abundance of internal rhyme leads to the appearance of a “shadow meter” that creates an alternative way to describe the meter over at least a portion of the poem. In others, it turns out to be possible to interpret an entire poem as belonging to any of two or more meters, often because the work does not precisely match the norms for any one type while bearing reasonably close resemblances to more than one metrical category. In this paper I examine several instances of metrical ambiguity in Russian verse and conclude that for such poems it is best not to employ a single metrical label but to offer a more detailed characterization that does justice to the work’s complexity.

Keywords: Russian verse, shadow meter, rhythmic disruption, paeon

My focus in this article is on instances when a single metrical category seems inadequate for fully describing what is taking place in a Russian poem. For the most part, the determination of meter occurs through an awareness of the poetic tradition and is not especially problematic. Thus, Miroslav Červenka (1984: 35) has stated, “as a rule, the metrical scheme in question already appears in [the] recipient’s mind upon his first contact with the verse text,” assuming that the meter is canonical. Aleksandr Iliushin (1986: 52–54) observes further that assigning verse to a particular meter requires an awareness of the cultural context – that is, the tradition within which a poet is working – as well as of the context provided by the poem. His first point means that if we come across a nineteenth-century Russian poem in which all the lines have eight syllables and stresses appear on every other syllable beginning with the second, we will conclude that it was written in iambic tetrameter – since syllabo-tonic verse was the norm for the era – rather than in syllabic verse, a tradition that by then had receded into Russia’s past. His other point implies that it is often necessary to look at more than a line or two of poetry

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to determine the meter. If the line *Veroj v budushchee ne bojus'* (XxXxxxxX) were to be considered on its own, the strong stressing on the first and third syllables might initially suggest trochaic pentameter, with stress omitted on the third and fourth ictuses (strong positions). Another, and at first perhaps not obvious, possibility, is anapestic trimeter, with an unstressed middle ictus and hypermetrical stressing on the first syllable. In fact, the latter turns out to be the case, as would be obvious to a reader coming across that line within its poem, Pasternak's "Ne volnujsja, ne plach', ne trudi...".

In Pasternak's poem that very first line already implies the meter, and the next several lines soon confirm the correctness of that initial impression. Had the first line been *Veroj v budushchee ne bojus'* a reader may well make the wrong assumption until reading further helps determine the actual meter. But even when it is not possible to gain a clear idea of a poem's meter from the very start, readers typically develop a kind of metrical awareness or metrical understanding regarding a poem after just a few lines. There are, though, also poems for which this process becomes more complicated – and in some cases may not lead to a clear resolution. Works that do not allow for a single metrical definition have long bedeviled verse theorists, who have established a couple of categories to deal with certain instances in which more than one meter appears: polymetrical compositions contain distinct sections composed in different meters, while poems employing transitional metrical forms may have up to 25% of their lines falling outside the main meter.¹ Kirill Korchagin (2015) has commented on several kinds of more problematic occurrences. For instance, verse composed in very short meters provides an obvious conundrum: short of asking the poet, there is often no obvious way to know whether a poem has been composed in anapestic monometer or trochaic dimeter, in iambic or amphibrachic monometer, etc. Then there are poems in which numerous individual lines challenge the reader's ability to determine the meter. Such lines occur because of words that may or may not be regarded as stressed, hypermetrical stressing within the line, or deviations from the metrical norm, as Vadim Semenov (2010) has illustrated in a poem by Tsvetaeva. A slightly different problem, that of nomenclature, arises in the case of the 5 + 5 meter, popularized in literary verse by Aleksei Koltsov. James Bailey (1970: 438) has pointed out that this form could be interpreted as trochaic tetrameter with dactylic caesura and dactylic ending. That would be the modern literary definition, but Bailey prefers the 5 + 5 label to highlight the meter's connection to

¹ Petr Rudnev employed both terms in his studies of Blok's poetry, and they have since been used widely. A useful introduction to polymetrical compositions can be found in Rudnev 1969; see Rudnev 1972: 227 for his definition of transitional metrical forms.

folk verse. Meanwhile some Russian scholars have used the term *pjatislozhnik* or *penton* to suggest that such works were written in five-syllable feet.

The focus here will not be primarily on deciding between labels for a particular metrical type, nor will I be dealing with poems that present such obvious obstacles to defining their meter as some of those by Tsvetaeva. Rather, I am interested in the more subtle phenomenon, where describing a poem as being written in a single meter does not fully account for the interplay of rhythmic and metrical structures within the work. Sometimes a poem is haunted by what I shall call a shadow meter, which emerges either just briefly or even over a significant section of the poem and needs to be accounted for in some way.² In other cases, a poem seems to exhibit a particular meter but also violates one or two norms to such an extent that it turns out to be feasible, and perhaps desirable, to suggest an alternate meter as well. Or a poem may display characteristics of more than one meter (and may not fit perfectly under any), so that choosing among the possibilities presents a conundrum. If all these phenomena were relatively uncommon before the twentieth century, they appear more often in modern works and present a challenge whenever they appear.

Let us begin with Leonid Martynov, who was a master at slowing his readers' perception of a poem's meter. His techniques were varied: he would arrange parts of lines into columns or combine two verse lines into one on the page, and at the same time employ such devices as internal rhyme, enjambement, or hypermetrical stress.³ Usually the initial difficulty would eventually give way to a clearly recognizable meter, but once in a while that identification would then be undercut. Here are the opening lines of his "Namedni" (1974):

А что
Так **медово**
Плывет –
4 Не **звезда ль?**

Нет!
Медное **слово**
Звонит, как **медаль**.
(Martynov 1986: 432)

² I borrow the notion of a shadow element from Vadim Baevskij (1972), where he describes the phenomenon of "shadow rhyme" in modern poetry.

³ For an examination of how Martynov employed these devices in several poems besides "Namedni," see Scherr 2004.

This passage contains some striking plays on sound similarities, but our focus here is on the meter. Note that line 2 rhymes with line 6, as does 4 with 7. Since lines 1–2, 3–4 and 5–6 all combine to form amphibrachic dimeter lines, which is also the meter of line 7, those seven lines on the page would seem to form four verse lines, rhyming AbAb. The alternative would be to suggest that lines 1–4 and 5–7 each comprise a single amphibrachic tetrameter line, creating a pair of lines rhyming aa (звезда ль / медаль).

Lines 8–11 at first seem to present something quite different:

8 Ушли
Дни былые,
Они **далеки**:
И злыдни, и злые на зло **добряки**.

Line 11, ending in *dobrjaki*, is in amphibrachic tetrameter; since the only previous word that rhymes with it is *daleki* at the end of line 10, one's first impulse is to conclude that lines 8–10 must all be portions of a single amphibrachic tetrameter line, so that these four lines are actually two amphibrachic tetrameter verse lines rhyming aa (*daleki / dobrjaki*). A closer look, though, reveals that «былые» at the end of line 9 and «злые» in the middle (!) of line 11 also rhyme. So, line 11 can also be read as combining two verse lines, suggesting that line 9 rhymes with the first part of 11 (*zlye / bylye*) and 10 with the second part of 11, once again creating a sequence in amphibrachic dimeter, rhyming AbAb. A similar case appears in the next set of four lines, where бредни at the end of line 13 rhymes with намедни in the middle of line 15 (and another намедни at the end of line 15 rhymes with ремни at the end of line 14). Lines 16–18, as well, at first seem to consist of two amphibrachic tetrameter lines rhyming aa:

16 Намедни!
Похоже на мед и на **медь**,
Поет это слово, успев **онеметь**

This grouping too may also be seen as comprising four dimeter lines:

Намедни! **Похоже**
на мед и на **медь**,
Поет это **слово**,
успев **онеметь**

So, after dealing with all the internal rhyme and broken lines, a reader might justifiably conclude that the poem is written either in amphibrachic dimeter, rhyming AbAb or in amphibrachic tetrameter, rhyming aa. However, the situation then changes at the poem's conclusion:

И кануть в такую глубокую даль,
 20 Что помнят о нем только Фасмер и Даль,
 И Преображенский –
 Настолько стара
 Суть слова, чей смысл означает:
 24 **Вчера!**

Now we clearly have four amphibrachic tetrameter verse lines (spread over six lines on the page) that form masculine paired rhymes. So how are we to characterize the poem as a whole? On the one hand, to claim that the poem is just written in amphibrachic tetrameter with paired aa rhyming would be essentially correct, since the work as a whole can be analyzed as containing 12 verse lines with six pairs of aa rhyme. However, the internal rhymes in this poem are not merely occasional phenomena; rather, they are sufficiently consistent that the larger part of this poem can lay equal claim to being in amphibrachic dimeter with alternating rhyme. Could “Namedni” be categorized as a kind of polymetrical composition (amphibrachic dimeter, rhyming AbAb over the first 18 lines; and then amphibrachic tetrameter rhyming aa)? Yes, but given that lines 1–18 can also be read as tetrameters, and in some cases appear that way on the page, simply defining the poem as a polymetric composition obscures the complexity of the work's form. Either categorization of the metrical structure in “Namedni,” while not inaccurate, fails to account fully for the ambiguities that Martynov has created. Still another possibility would be to say that a shadow meter – amphibrachic dimeter rhyming AbAb – appears alongside the amphibrachic tetrameter over the first two-thirds of the work. This designation, while a bit cumbersome, at least provides a more complete sense of the intricate structuring that the reader encounters.

In the same year that Martynov wrote “Namedni,” Boris Slutsky published “Odissej”:

Хитрый лис был Улисс.
 Одиссей был мудрей одессита.
 Плавал, черт подери его,
 4 весело, пьяно и сыто.

А его Пенелопа,
его огорчить не желая,
все ждала и ждала его,
8 жалкая и пожилая.

А когда устарел
и физически он и морально
и весь мир осмотрел –
12 вдруг заныло, как старая рана,
то ли чувство семьи,
то ли чувство норы,
то ли злая
16 мысль,
что ждет Пенелопа –
и жалкая и пожилая.

Вдруг заныла зануда.
20 В душе защемила заноза.
На мораль потянуло
с морального, что ли, износа!
Я видал этот остров,
24 настолько облезлый от солнца,
что не выдержит отрок.
Но старец, пожалуй, вернется.

Он вернулся туда,
28 где родился и где воспитался.
Только память – беда!
И не вспомнил он, как ни пытался,
той, что так зажилась,
32 безответной любовью пылая,
и его дождалась,
только жалкая
и пожилая.
(Slutsky 1991: 3.14)

While the issue is similar to that in the Martynov poem, it occurs in the reverse order and ultimately is both more varied and more difficult to describe concisely. The meter seems to become clear after just a few lines, even if the very start of the poem hinders its perception: the internal rhyme in lines one and

two (*lis / Uliss; Odissej / mudrej*) creates a singsong effect, while hypermetrical stress on *Плавал* and *его* in line 3 interrupt the anapestic rhythm. That said, the rhyme words ending lines 2 and 4, as well as 6 and 8, soon indicate that each pair of lines in fact comprises a single verse line, and so we have anapestic pentameter lines rhyming AA. The third stanza suggests a problem with that assumption, since the rhymes at the end of lines 9 and 11 open the possibility for anapestic dimeter and trimeter lines alternating with the scheme aBaB. Lines 13–18 contain two verse lines that return to the form found at the poem’s beginning, but then the final two stanzas again point to an alternative structure. Lines 19–26 can be read as anapestic dimeter alternating with amphibrachic trimeter lines rhyming ABAB / ABAB, and the final stanza, lines 27–34, like lines 9–12, can be interpreted as anapestic dimeter and trimeter lines rhyming aBaB. Once again, it would be possible to say that the entire poem is written throughout in a single meter – anapestic pentameter, rhyming AA – but that would not account for the systematic use of rhyme and line breaks to create two shadow meters: alternating anapestic dimeter and trimeter lines in lines 9–12 and again in 27–34, and anapestic dimeter alternating with amphibrachic trimeter over lines 19–26.

A less conspicuous instance of shadow meter appears in David Samoilov’s “Sred’ shumnogo bala” (1978), which basically employs amphibrachic trimeter. In discussing some twentieth-century poems containing a significant rhythmic disruption – which typically highlights a new or altered theme – Viacheslav Ivanov (1981: 222) singles out three lines from this poem and states that they read as if they had been composed in a “special meter”:

Война была посередине.
И несколько тысячелетий
Невольно нас разъединили.

Examining those three lines on their own immediately suggests a very specific and familiar form: iambic tetrameter.⁴ If they were to appear in an iambic tetrameter poem, we would say that the first and third of these lines simply omit stress on the third ictus (thereby employing the most common of the rhythmic variations for that meter), while the middle line lacks stress on the middle two ictuses and thus employs a much rarer rhythmic variation. Now, if instead these lines are considered within the context of the entire

⁴ For a somewhat more detailed analysis of this passage, including a reference to Samoilov’s own reading of the poem, see Scherr 2020: 182–185.

amphibrachic trimeter poem, the light stresses on “byla” and “nas” become hypermetrical. While most hypermetrical stressing in ternary verse (as in binary) occurs at the beginning of the line (Gasparov 1974: 186–190), internal hypermetrical stressing appears every so often, particularly on relatively weakly-stressed words like “byla” and “nas”. Similarly, the omission of stress on the middle ictus of amphibrachic trimeter lines is not all that unusual in the twentieth century; Pasternak, for instance, who was not averse to employing unstressed ictuses in his ternary poems, did so most often on the middle ictus in his amphibrachic trimeter verse. (Struve 1968: 240–243). What is atypical here is the appearance of not a single line but of three consecutive lines that omit an internal stress; furthermore, with hypermetrical stress occurring on the fourth syllable in two of the three, this set of lines comes to read more like iambic tetrameter verse than amphibrachic trimeter.

The possibility for the rhythmic shift arises due to the underlying similarity between these two meters. Both have strong positions on the second and eighth syllables; therefore, if those five middle syllables in either meter are left unstressed, only the context in which the line occurs will indicate whether the line is in one meter or the other. Iambic tetrameter lines with that rhythmic form, in which the middle two stresses are unstressed, are generally uncommon: Kiril Taranovsky (2010b: 397), in analyzing usage of the iambic tetrameter at the beginning of the twentieth century, found this form in fewer than 2% of the lines he examined. A unique instance of employing this rhythmic form occurs in Andrei Belyi’s 20-line “Noch’ju na kladbishche” (1908), which begins as follows:

Кладбищенский убогий сад
И зеленеющие кочки.
Над памятниками дрожат,
Потрескивает огонечки.

Над зарослями из деревьев,
Проплакавши колоколами,
Храм яснится, оцепенев
В ночь вырезанными крестами.
(Belyi 2006: 1.327)

The first two lines contain familiar rhythmic forms of the iambic tetrameter, with stress omitted on the third ictus and then on the first and third ictuses. Remarkably, Belyi then goes on to use the very uncommon rhythmic form, in which stress is omitted on the middle two ictuses, over the poem’s next

fourteen lines. The fifth and final stanza reverts to three more typical iambic tetrameter lines, followed by a final line employing the same rhythm as lines 3–16. Belyi's poem is (as he stated himself [1910: 294]) a kind of *tour de force*: an iambic tetrameter work in which three-fourths of the lines contain a rare rhythmic form that is difficult to use over a long sequence. Note that if one were to come across any segment of those fourteen lines on its own – for instance, the poem's second stanza, quoted above – it would be impossible to tell whether the passage was in iambic tetrameter or amphibrachic trimeter.⁵

For all the artificial nature of that poem, it does illustrate the possibility of a fuzzy border between iambic tetrameter and amphibrachic trimeter verse. With that in mind, let us return to those three lines in Samoilov's poem, this time examining them in the context of lines 17–30:

И в нем, как на выцветшем фото,
Проявленном в свежем растворе,
Вдруг стало пробрезживать что-то
20 Былое в лице и во взоре.

Вдвоем среди шумного бала
Ушли они в давние даты.
– Беда ,– она тихо сказала,–
24 Но оба мы не виноваты.

Меж нашей разлукой и встречей
Война была посередине.
И несколько тысячелетий
28 Невольно нас разъединили.

Но как же тогда, на вокзале,
Той осенью после победы, –

Lines 17–20, like most of those in the poem, are clearly in amphibrachic trimeter. But in the next stanza, lines 21–24, Samoilov begins to shift the rhythm. Note the light hypermetrical stressing on the fourth syllable in each line of the stanza, so that all four lines begin as though they could be iambic tetrameter. Line 24, at the end of that stanza not only has a lightly stressed pronoun

⁵ Igor Pilshchikov (2019: 67–68) has provided a detailed rhythmic analysis of “Noch’ju na kladbishche.”

occupying the fourth syllable but also lacks stress on the middle ictus: as a result, this line, anticipating what occurs in the next stanza, reads more like iambic tetrameter than amphibrachic trimeter. After momentarily returning to a clear amphibrachic rhythm in line 25, Samoilov again presents an essentially iambic tetrameter rhythm in lines 26 and 28. While 27 is ambiguous, its immediate surroundings create the aura of an iambic tetrameter passage, an aura that is strengthened by the rhythms appearing in the preceding stanza. Only beginning in lines 29–30 does Samoilov return to employing clearly amphibrachic lines. Thus, over a period of eight lines he prepares the way for and then moves into an iambic tetrameter rhythm before reverting back to the poem's main meter. Although there is little doubt that Samoilov was employing amphibrachic trimeter for the poem as a whole, what takes place between lines 21 and 28 creates an unconventional rhythmical interlude, during which the shadowy presence of iambic tetrameter briefly emerges.

While the great majority of instances involving metrical ambiguity appear in modern poetry, it is possible to find occasional examples much earlier. Poets of the eighteenth century were more adventurous than is sometimes realized, and this is especially true of Gavrila Derzhavin, many of whose practices were ahead of their time.⁶ Some of his poems, while seemingly written within the syllabo-tonic tradition, have a sufficient number of deviations from the norms that they could simultaneously be considered as belonging to one of the so-called “non-classical” meters. Others seem to fall out of the syllabo-tonic tradition entirely. Here are the first four lines of the early “*Idilliia, perelozhen-naia v stikhi s grecheskogo perevoda*” (by 1776); the ‘|’ indicates the placement of the caesura:

Гневлив Ерот и дерзок, но любят его музы,	xXxXxXx xXxXxXx
С ним в хорах они водят согласия союзы.	xXxXxXx xXxXxXx
С ним вместе, чтобы пети, за ним они стремятся,	xXxXxXx xXxXxXx
И дикого Ерота ни мало не боятся.	xXxXxXx xXxXxXx

(Derzhavin 2002: 524)

The work as a whole contains 26-plus lines in paired feminine rhyme (the 27th and final line consists of a single word, which rhymes with the endings of lines 25–26). Kirill Vishnevsky (1972: 215) classifies this work as employing a logaedic meter (that is, a form in which the intervals between stresses may be

⁶ Some of Derzhavin's formal experiments – in his use of rhyme and stanzaic forms, as well as meter – foreshadow practices that were to gain wide usage only with the onset of Modernism. For an overview, see Scherr (2021).

either one or two syllables, with the same sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables repeated in each line). Interestingly, Derzhavin treats the middle of the line in such a way that each full line could be read as two iambic trimeter lines; if we divide the poem's 22nd line in that way we get:

И стройныя тут струны	х́XxXx́Xx
Не стройны становятся.	х́XxXx́Xx

If iambic trimeter were to be regarded as the poem's meter, the odd lines would be unrhymed (leading to an XAXA rhyme scheme). Since Derzhavin frequently resorted to partially rhymed poetry, the possibility cannot be entirely dismissed.⁷ However, given that Derzhavin placed his line divisions only after every 14th syllable, he almost certainly did not consider this poem to be written in iambic trimeter. A more plausible option is to see these lines as iambic hexameter with an expanded strong caesura (a strong caesura is one in which the preceding ictus is constantly stressed). This form, which allows for adding or truncating a syllable or two at the caesura, had been used already by Sumarokov but remained rare until the latter part of the nineteenth century and came into wide use only around the turn of the twentieth (Bailey 1971: 131–132). Derzhavin had Sumarokov's verse as a model and wrote other poems – albeit mostly in ternary verse – in which he either subtracts or adds a syllable at the caesura. So, is this a logaoedic poem or a work employing iambic hexameter with a strong caesura? In this case the poem fits neatly within the parameters of both meters, and it would seem arbitrary to give preference to a single label.

If “Idilliia, perelozhennaia v stikhi s grecheskogo perevoda” seems open to placement in more than one metrical category, Derzhavin also has poems that resist any ready classification. Below are the first four stanzas of “Osen” (1804):

На скирдах молодых сидючи Осень,	A	xx́Xxx́X ́Xxx́Xx
И в полях зря вокруг год плодоносен,	A	xx́Xxx́X ́Xxx́Xx
С улыбкой свои всем дары дает,	b	x́Xxx́Xx ́Xxx́X
Пестротой по лесам живо цветет,	b	xx́Xxx́X ́Xxx́X
Взор мой дивит!	c	́Xxx́X

⁷ While “Idilliia, perelozhennaia v stikhi s grecheskogo perevoda” is non-stanzaic, Derzhavin's stanzaic poetry, which employed partial rhyme nearly 20% of the time (Smith 1977: 263), shows that he was quite willing to mix rhymed and unrhymed lines in the same work.

Разных птиц голоса вьющихся тучи,	D	xxXxxX' XxxXx
Шум снопов, бег телег, оси скрыпучи,	D	xxXxxX' XxxXx
Стук цепов по токам, в рощах лай псов,	e	xxXxxX' XxxX'
Жниц с знаменем идущих гул голосов	e	x'XxxXx X'xxX'
Слух мой пленит.	c	X'xxX'
Как мил сей природы радостный образ!	A	x'XxxXx X'xxXx
Как тварей довольных сладостен возглас!	A	x'XxxXx X'xxXx
Где Осень обилье рукою ведет,	b	xX'xxXx x'xxxX'
Царям и червям всем пищу дает	b	xX'xxXx X'xxX'
Общий отец.	c	X'xxX'
Но что же вдруг, Я<рцов>! черные бури,	D	x'XxxXx X'xxXx
Грохоча так, кроют неба лазури?	D	xX'xxXx X'xxXx
Здесь тихий ток с ревом роет волна,	e	xX'xxXx X'xxX'
Там в бледных туманах ржет нам война:	e	xX'xxXx X'xxX'
Благ ли Творец?	c	X'xxX'
(Derzhavin 2002: 346)		

The entire poem consists of eight stanzas, with the last lines of each pair of stanzas rhyming. These linked stanzas are a modern feature, more reminiscent of Russian poetry at the turn of the twentieth century, as is the decidedly approximate rhyme (*obraz / vozglas*) at the beginning of stanza three. However, the meter may be the poem's most unusual (and in its way, modern) feature. The one constant is the abbreviated fifth line in each stanza, which is in dactylic dimeter. The first four lines of each stanza are more varied, with an abundance of hypermetrical stressing occasionally making it difficult to perceive the metrical underpinning of lines and at the same time imparting a 'heavy' rhythm that is typical of Derzhavin. The caesura, which occurs after the sixth syllable in those lines, is again prominent in this poem, for it is the point where the line's rhythm often (but not always) undergoes an abrupt shift, with the omission of one or two syllables needed to make the lines regular ternaries. In the first two stanzas a two-syllable anacrusis predominates, but, beginning with the third stanza (and for the remainder of the poem), the anacrusis is generally one syllable, so that the rhythm in the first hemistich switches from mostly anapestic to essentially amphibrachic. Of the lines quoted here only one, the third line in the third stanza, is in the form of a regular ternary meter, in this case amphibrachic tetrameter. In contrast, nine of the sixteen lines in the second half of the poem are clearly ternary. Of the 32 long lines in the entire poem, eight are in amphibrachic tetrameter and two are dactylic tetrameter.

Six lines, all from the first two stanzas, have an anapestic beginning and sixteen start with amphibrachs, but then the ternary rhythm is broken at the anacrusis in these 22 lines. Is there a single label that can describe all the rhythmic varieties found in this poem? In modern terms it would be simplest to say that the first four lines of each stanza are composed in four-stress taktovik, with the intervals between ictuses ranging from zero to two syllables. However, that designation implies a somewhat looser structure than seems to be the case and would not account for the essentially ternary rhythm that predominates in the poem. Given Derzhavin's tendency to add or subtract syllables at the caesura, a more descriptive label would be mixed ternary tetrameter with a strong caesura. All the lines with an anapestic beginning truncate two syllables at the caesura, and many of those with an anapestic beginning truncate one syllable. Granted, this would be a highly irregular form of ternary verse even in modern times. As with the previous poem, either of two possible ways to interpret the meter would seem correct. That said, the definition of the verse as mixed ternary appears more descriptive of what is taking place within the poem.

Let us return to the twentieth century and examine two poems that have already been the subject of astute studies by other scholars. The first of these is Georgy Ivanov's 12-line poem "Uzh rybaki vernulis' s lovli":

Уж рыбаки вернулись с ловли	xXxXxXxXx
И потускнели валуны,	xXxXxXxX
Лег на соломенные кровли	xXxXxXxXx
Розово-серый блеск луны.	xXxXxXxX
Насторожившееся ухо	xXxXxXxXx
Слушает медленный прибой:	xXxXxXxX
Плещется море мерно, глухо,	xXxXxXxXx
Словно часов старинных бой.	xXxXxXxX
И над тревожными волнами	xXxXxXxXx
В воздухе гаснущем, бледна,	xXxXxXxX
За беспокойными ветвями –	xXxXxXxXx
Приподнимается луна.	xXxXxXxX
(G. Ivanov 1994: 159)	

Reviewing Ivanov's 1916 collection, *Veresk*, Nikolai Gumilev (2006: 195) referred to this poem's "magnificent and rare combination of iambs and choriamb." Gumilev does not say specifically, but he apparently regarded the poem

as written in iambic tetrameter verse, and in keeping with that assumption the schema next to each line quoted here shows ictuses on the even syllables. He is correct in citing the frequency of choriamb, where two unstressed syllables appear between two that are stressed: no fewer than six of the twelve lines in the poem begin with this form. What Gumilev did not state, and perhaps did not notice, is that five of those six choriamb violate what is a rather strict rule in Russian verse: hypermetrical stressing in binary meters is normally confined to monosyllabic words.⁸ Only the first instance of a choriamb, in line 3, where the hypermetrical stress is on the monosyllabic “leg,” turns out to be in keeping with the norms for Russian verse. “Slovno” in line 8 has two syllables, while four of the words with hypermetrical stress – at the beginning of lines 4, 6, 7, and 10 – are trisyllabic.⁹ One violation of this norm would be highly irregular; five in a 12-line poem suggests that something very unusual is going on.

Maksim Shapir (2005: 50–51) has made a strong argument for continuing to regard the poem as iambic tetrameter. As he notes, each line, from the first syllable through the last strong position, contains the requisite eight syllables and anywhere from two to four stresses; the hypermetrical stresses all appear on the first syllable of the line, where they are far less disruptive to the iambic rhythm than they would be within the line; and the fourth syllable – like the eighth – is constantly stressed, in keeping with a tendency found among many nineteenth century poets to make that already strong position in iambic tetrameter verse a near constant. In other words, most rhythmic features of this poem do not deviate from the expectations for syllabo-tonic and specifically iambic tetrameter poetry. Two other points he makes are even more critical. First, the opening lines of the poem, as well as the last two, are perfectly regular iambic tetrameter lines. Those initial lines in particular are especially important: as Červenka (1984) noted, readers typically attempt to establish their metrical understanding of a poem right at the start; if a poem begins with several consecutive lines in a recognizable meter, they will, unless they eventually come across strong evidence to the contrary, intuitively sense that the rest of the poem is in that meter as well. These first two lines, like all those

⁸ The most detailed treatment of this phenomenon remains that of Roman Jakobson (1973).

⁹ Note that English verse, unlike Russian, regularly allows for hypermetrical stress on two-syllable words: for instance, “Failing the osprey’s pillowed wing” (xXxXxXx) or “Issues rebellious from the leaves” (xXxXxXxX) in Richard Wilbur’s “From the Looking Rock” (Wilbur 1988: 327). However, three-syllable words with the stress falling on a weak syllable are very uncommon even among poets writing in English. A few examples occur in Wilbur’s verse (e.g., “Hastily sips the listless waves” from the same poem) but having four such instances in a twelve-line iambic poem would be extraordinarily unusual in the English tradition as well.

in the poem, omit stress either on just the first ictus or on the first and third ictuses; in both cases, the lines are employing a less common but hardly rare rhythmic variation for the iambic tetrameter. Once readers have assumed the poem has been composed in iambic tetrameter, the appearance of multisyllabic words whose stress coincides with the first syllable of a line may not be enough to change that impression. Second, even the hard and fast rules for Russian meters turn out to be not so hard and fast.¹⁰ Especially since the turn of the twentieth century it is possible to find at least the occasional exception to any of those rules, including that of limiting hypermetrical stress in binary meters to monosyllabic words.

I would agree with Shapir (and for that matter with Gumilev) that the poem can most readily be described as iambic tetrameter, albeit one with an unusual number of choriamb. However, I would also argue that to do so without qualification fails to take into full consideration the particular nature of “Uzh rybaki vernulis’ s lovli.” First of all, the stressing on the strong positions is quite distinctive. Although the poem is too short for statistical data to allow for clear-cut conclusions, certain features stand out:

Table 1: Stressing on Ictuses in Iambic Tetrameter¹¹

	I	II	III	IV	Average
Ivanov, “Uzh rybaki...”	0%	100%	33.3%	100%	58.3%
Younger poets of Pushkin’s era	82.1	96.8	34.6	100	78.4
Early 20th c.	83.5	87.4	49.1	100	80.0

Most striking, of course, is the complete absence of stress on the first strong position. As Shapir noted, the stressing over the next three strong positions closely resembles that of some nineteenth-century poets, but it is not easy to find even short iambic tetrameter poems in which the first ictus is not stressed even once. As a consequence, the average stressing on the strong positions for the poem as a whole is extremely low: just 58.3%, or an average of 2.3 stresses per line. Second, the type of hypermetrical stressing is almost as distinctive, in part as a natural result of having the stressed syllables of so many multisyllabic words appearing in the first syllable of lines. Hypermetrical stressing on monosyllabic words in that position is hardly unusual; in an extensive study of

¹⁰ This point also appears in Iliushin (1986: 49–50).

¹¹ The figures in the second line second line in this table are from Table III, appended to Taranovsky 2010a, and that in the third line from Taranovsky 2010b: 396.

this feature in iambic tetrameter poetry Mikhail Gasparov (1997: 207) found that about 20% of lines in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries featured such a stress. However, the majority – roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ – of those stresses were what he called “light”, falling on such words as monosyllabic pronouns, rather than the heavy stresses that occur on verbs, nouns or adjectives. Thus, in a poem of this length one would see on average perhaps two or three hypermetrical stresses, of which no more than one would be heavy. Gasparov’s breakdown of these figures for individual poets shows that some of them did employ more hypermetrical stress than others (1997: 212), but “Uzh rybaki vernulis’ s lovlj” – where hypermetrical stressing appears at the beginning of half the lines and at least five of these six stresses (the exception would be the conjunction *slovnno*) are “heavy” – goes well beyond ordinary usage. Furthermore, if we go back and look at the average number of stresses on the line as a whole (rather than just the stresses that appear on the ictuses), we end up with an average of 2.83 – still low, but no longer such an extreme. All this creates an argument for seeing stress on that first syllable as part of a metrical expectation, rather than as a rhythmical variant. Finally, it is worth noting that in his other iambic tetrameter poems Ivanov does not break the rule of having only monosyllables occupy the first syllable of choriamb with such impunity. At the very least, in this poem he was doing something very unusual within his own practice.

These observations allow for two other interpretations of the poem’s meter. One was hinted at by Shapir, when he called the poem’s constant stress on the second ictus analogous to the “paeonization” of the iambic tetrameter’s alternating rhythm in the nineteenth century (2005: 50). That is, iambic tetrameter verse was tending toward a constant stress not just on the eighth syllable of the line, but also on the fourth, which allows for seeing the poem as employing a four-syllable foot, or paeon. Since the matter of unusually long feet will also arise in discussing the next example, it will be worth devoting some attention to the nature of the paeon, which at times has been a controversial notion among Russian scholars. Tomashevsky (1959: 403–404), for instance, felt that if the number of syllables in a foot was not a prime, it would break down into its constituent parts – in the case of paeons, either trochees (if the ictus falls on the first or third syllable of the foot) or iambs (if it is on the second or fourth), thereby rendering the very term unnecessary. Some, though, have felt there is a benefit in singling out verse where every fourth syllable is stressed – a fairly common occurrence in, for instance, trochaic tetrameter poems, if less so for those employing iambic tetrameter. In any case, interest in paeons became significant during the Modernist period. Valery Briusov gave examples in his *Opyty po metrike i ritmike*. Here is the last of four stanzas from his “Burja s berega,” subtitled “Peon tretij” and written in 1914, just two years before Ivanov’s poem:

Чем обманываете вы? не стремительностями ли xXxXxxXxxxXxxxxx
 Изгибаний, извиваний длинно-вытянутых тел? xxXxxxXxxxXxxxX
 И заласкиваете вы не медлительностями ли xxXxxxXxxxXxxxxx
 Ласк пьянящих, уводящих в неизведанный предел? xXxxxXxxxXxxxX
 (Briusov 1974: 482)

The poem, like many of those in *Opyty*, is something of a tour de force. It consists of trimeter lines alternating with tetrameter. The trimeter lines are notable both for the omission of stress on the middle ictus – an extremely rare occurrence for this metrical form, since it requires a sequence of seven unstressed syllables – and for their hyperdactylic rhymes that have no fewer than five unstressed syllables following the rhyme vowel. As a result, the trimeter lines turn out to be one syllable longer than the tetrameter. (Alternatively, one could say that all the lines are tetrameters, with unstressed final ictuses in lines one and three – an equally unusual phenomenon). By employing features common to other foot lengths (omitted stress on some ictuses, hypermetrical stress) Briusov attempts to show that this form has the potential to behave as one of the more standard foot lengths.¹² At the same time, the placements of hypermetrical stress signal the trochaic rhythm that seems to underlie poems in the “third paeon,” providing evidence that Tomashevsky’s objection to the term has merit.

However, “Uzh rybaki vernulis’ s lovli” comprises an instance where the paeon does not readily reduce to the rhythm of a binary meter (in this case, iambic verse), given the complete absence of stress on the second syllable and the unusually strong stressing on the first. So, it would not be unreasonable to refer to this poem as “fourth paeon dimeter”: xxxXxxxX(x), in which the hypermetric stressing occurs on either the first syllable of the first foot or the second syllable of the second foot. A further argument for this interpretation is the appearance of no fewer than five lines, nearly half those in the poem, with

¹² Mihhail Lotman (2019: 76–85) points to instances where poets in the early twentieth century used the term paeon to refer to a rhythmic structure within the line rather than to the type of foot that describes the poem as a whole; thus Khodasevich employs the title “Peon i tezura. Trilistnik smyslov” (1916) for a poem in which each line begins with a second paeon (xXxx) and is followed by two iambic feet. Lotman (78) also quotes a brief poem that Nabokov sent to Edmund Wilson (both in English and in Nabokov’s Russian translation), claiming that it consisted exclusively of fourth paeons (see Karlinsky 2001: 92). That is true of the Russian translation, but in the English (The complicated variation / of Lepidoptera affords / a fascinating occupation / for proletarians and lords.) both “complicated” and “fascinating” are normally stressed on the first syllable, so that the first half of the lines in which those words appear are in the second paeon, not the fourth.

stresses on only the fourth and eighth syllables: these would then be “pure” paeons, without any hypermetrical stress.

There is yet another way of looking at the poem. Shapir (2005: 50) states that the poem is not logaoedic. However, given the frequency of strong stressing on the first syllable, it is not unreasonable to call that syllable one of the poem’s strong positions, in which case the metrical structure can be schematized as $Xxx\acute{X}xXx\acute{X}(x)$. The ictuses fall on the first, fourth, sixth and eighth syllables, with the second and fourth ictuses constantly stressed and the first and third optionally stressed. Throughout the poem, the intervals between ictuses contain two, one and one syllables, respectively. If analyzed in this way, “Uzh rybaki vernulis’ s lovli” fits the criteria for logaoedic verse exactly. In short, there are arguments to be made for all three ways of defining the verse, and we cannot be sure as to just what Ivanov had in mind. Ultimately, Shapir’s assertion that Ivanov employed the iambic tetrameter verse while regularly flouting one of the more rigidly observed rules of this meter may well be correct, especially since the poem’s opening two lines lead toward that conclusion. Yet by standing back and examining the distribution of stresses in the poem, it is not difficult to make reasonable cases for claiming that it was composed in paeons or in logaoedic verse.

The final work to be analyzed in this study provides a particularly complex example of metrical ambiguity: Zinaida Gippius’s poem from 1902, “Chto est’ grekh?”:

Грех – маломыслие и малодянье,	XxxXxx xxxXxx
Самонелюбие – самовлюбленность,	xxxXxx xxxXx
И равнодушное саморассеянье,	xxxXxx xxxXxx
4 И успокоенная упоенность.	xxxXxxx xxXx
Грех – легкочувствие и легкодумие,	XxxXxx xxxXxx
Полупроказливость – полуволнение.	xxxXxx xxxXx
Благоразумное полубезумие,	xxxXxx xxxXxx
8 Полувнимание – полубавенье.	xxxXxx xxxXx
Грех – жить без дерзости и без мечтания,	XXxXxx xxxXxx
Не признаваемым – и не гонимым.	xxxXxx xxxXx
Не знать ни ужаса, ни упования	xXxXxx xxxXxx
12 И быть приемлемым, но не любимым.	xxxXxx xxxXx

К стыду и гордости – равнопрезрение...	xXxXxx xxxXxx
Всему покорственный привет без битвы...	xXxXxx xXxXx
Тяжеле всех грехов – Богоубьение,	xXxXxx xxxXxx
16 Жизнь без проклятия – и без молитвы.	XxxXxx xxxXx

(Gippius 1999: 124–125)

For reasons that will soon become clear, in this instance X and x are not used to represent metrically strong and weak positions, but only stressed and unstressed syllables, with the one occurrence of *x́* indicating a weakly stressed word. Lawrence Feinberg (2016) has published an excellent article about this poem, in which he explains its background and provides a convincing reading of the work as a whole. In the course of his analysis he not only examines the way in which Gippius uses grammatical gender to underscore her main theme, but he also devotes a special section to the poem's metrical structure. As he notes, the first two stanzas in particular can be assigned to any of three possible metrical categories. Dactylic tetrameter lines would have ictuses on the first, fourth, seventh and tenth syllables. In these first two stanzas, the fourth and tenth syllables are consistently stressed, the first carries a stress in just two of the lines, while the seventh lacks definite stress.¹³ Omission of stress on the first syllable of dactylic lines was not rare even in the nineteenth century (and corresponds to Taranovsky's law of the beginning of the line, which states that the first ictus after the first weak syllable will be strong – implying that an ictus on the very first syllable will be relatively weakly stressed). The lack of strong stressing on the seventh syllable is more unusual, but ternary meters in the twentieth century began to omit line internal stress more frequently, so there is nothing in these eight lines that precludes reading them as dactylic tetrameter. If, instead, these lines are regarded as iambic pentameter, with ictuses on the even syllables, then the second and fifth ictuses are constants, and the others lack any strong stresses. (Since hypermetrical stressing involving monosyllabic words on the first syllable of iambic lines is not unusual, the stresses on *grekh* do not hinder this interpretation.) The problem in this case

¹³ Feinberg considers the possibility of secondary stress on the poem's neologistic compounds. Thus, in his dactylic reading of these stanzas he places a secondary stress on the first syllable of both *samoneľjubie* and *samovľjublěmmost'* in line 2, suggesting that the first and seventh syllables are in fact at least partially stressed. However, as he points out, the secondary stress can instead fall on the connecting vowel, if that is the syllable falling on an ictus. Consequently, in his iambic reading of these lines the secondary stress shifts to the second syllable of these words. Granted, accounting for secondary stress can strengthen the dactylic (or iambic) rhythm of the lines, but, since that stress can fall on either the first or second syllable of these words, that does not help in determining whether the intended meter is iambic or dactylic.

would be the unusual pattern of stressing: in the iambic pentameter the third ictus is typically strong, and here it is not stressed at all over the first eight lines.

Feinberg points out that the second half of the poem presents a somewhat different picture. While four of the lines do not contradict the possibility of dactylic tetrameter, for the other four, those beginning with an unstressed first syllable and a stressed second syllable, an iambic reading works much better. He then notes a third plausible way of labeling the meter for the entire poem: iambic tetrameter with an expanded strong caesura. The constant stress on the fourth syllable creates the strong caesura, and the two added syllables at that point mean that the number of syllables from the start of the line through the last ictus goes from the eight of the usual iambic tetrameter line to ten. This designation seems to account for much of the peculiar structure of these lines, but there is one major problem. As James Bailey (1971: 117–118) observed in his study of the strong caesura, when that phenomenon leads to an expansion of the line by two syllables, the result is almost always a sequence of three consecutive weak syllables between the fourth and eighth syllables in the line: Xxx|xX (albeit the sixth syllable in the line may occasionally carry a stress, as in line 15 of this poem). As a result, the eighth syllable (which would be the line's third ictus) is very likely to carry a stress: Bailey's examination of this meter in works by various twentieth-century poets found the eighth syllable to be stressed 85.5% of the time.¹⁴ Here, over the entire sixteen lines, there are possibly some weak stresses on the eighth syllable (see note 13 above), but only a single definite stress, in line 14. Indeed, the stressing for the poem as a whole is remarkably light, particularly in the first two stanzas. Bailey found that stress appeared on 92.5% of the ictuses in the iambic tetrameter with a two-syllable expanded caesura. If we regard the eight lines of the first two stanzas as written in that form, then only eight – that is, 50% – of the ictuses are stressed. For the complete poem the figure is just 61%; as with Ivanov's "Uzh rybaki vernulis' s lovli," we would have light stressing for any work in iambic tetrameter – and extraordinarily light stressing for one with a two-syllable expanded caesura.

In other words, as Feinberg emphasizes, all three ways of defining the meter of "Chto est' grekh?" raise serious issues. Since Gippius occasionally employed a strong caesura in other poems, this third interpretation may well point to the most likely, if not unproblematic, metrical design for the poem as a whole. Yet, those first eight lines – by which point most readers would have made

¹⁴ Bailey (1971: 118) used this fact to distinguish iambic tetrameter poems with a two-syllable expanded caesura from the iambic pentameter, which it otherwise might resemble. In iambic pentameter verse the eighth syllable would be the fourth ictus and is typically very lightly stressed.

a determination of the meter – remain enigmatic, resisting any clear determination. They can perhaps be read as dactylic tetrameter with quite a few unstressed ictuses, possibly as iambic pentameter (though with a highly atypical rhythm), or perhaps a little more easily as iambic tetrameter with strong caesura (again, displaying a most unusual rhythm). Only the second and third of these interpretations would be more or less satisfactory for the whole poem.

However, I would like to propose still another possibility. Those first eight lines contain an unusual set of word lengths. One word, in line 4, has four syllables. Six of the words consist of a single syllable (the use of “i” four times and *grekh* at the beginning of each stanza). No fewer than eight words contain five syllables and seven have six syllables. Thus, Gippius manages to fill 92 syllables over those first eight lines with just 22 words, a remarkable feat that required the use of words invented for the occasion. Indeed, half of these eight lines have just two words. What is more, six of the seven words containing six syllables have their stress on the fourth syllable (xxxXxx). The exception again occurs in line 4, where the six-syllable word is stressed on the third syllable but preceded by “i,” so that for the two-word unit the stress once more occurs on the fourth syllable. Five of the five-syllable words are stressed on the middle syllable (xxXxx) and preceded by a one-syllable word, again creating two-word units where the fourth syllable is stressed (x xxXxx). The other three five-syllable words appear at the end of even lines (2, 6 and 8), and have stress on the penultimate syllable (xxxXx). Since stress in Russian words most often falls in the middle or, if there is an even number of syllables, at the beginning of the second half of the word, the stressing here closely follows the norms for Russian.¹⁵ For seven of the eight lines (once more, the fourth line is an exception) those with dactylic endings contain six syllables in each hemistich, and those with feminine endings have six syllables in the first hemistich and five in the second. Given all this, we have a set of lines where each hemistich contains just one word (or word unit) with a stress precisely on the fourth syllable. I am suggesting, therefore, that Gippius, in addition to creating some new words, was creating a new foot: the six-syllable foot, which I will call the “hexon,” a term that no doubt has limited applicability. So, these eight lines can be interpreted as “fourth hexon dimeter” (xxxXxx xxxXx[x]), with required stress on the fourth syllable of the foot and the possibility of hypermetrical stress, here

¹⁵ In his examination of 50,000 words within prose excerpts, Shengeli (1923: 20–21) found a strong tendency for stress to appear in the middle of a word and a weaker tendency for it to favor the second half of a word over the first half. Thus in four-syllable words, for instance, the overwhelming majority of times stress will be on one of the two middle syllables, while the third syllable is stressed more often than the second and the fourth more than the first.

appearing on the first syllable of lines 1 and 5. Line four as well fits the meter rhythmically, though the division between the feet would come within a word. In fact, the last eight lines also could be classified as fourth hexons, albeit with a relatively high amount of hypermetrical stressing due to the decline in usage of long neologisms and other words with a large number of syllables.

My sense is that the abundance of lengthy words, particularly over the first half of the poem, suggests that Gippius was striving for precisely a metrical structure that consisted of unusually long feet, even if she herself was probably not concerned with how metrists would describe the poem. As Kirill Korchagin (2014: 98–101) has observed, some years later Daniil Andreev also experimented with extra-long feet; however, in passages of more than a very few lines he was less successful than Gippius in adhering to regular intervals between stresses. I do not want to insist on the notion of a hexon as necessarily ruling out the other possible metrical interpretations for “Chto est’ grekh?,” but only wish to suggest that, given the oddities of word length and the rhythmic choices Gippius made, the possibility that she was, consciously or not, employing six-syllable feet deserves strong consideration. In any case, this poem provides an instance when a multitude of possible metrical types make it difficult to insist that any one interpretation is the sole possibility.

Metrical ambiguity of the sorts described in this article occurs in relatively few poems. Nonetheless, it has long been a feature of Russian verse, and since the Modernist period it can be found in enough works that it is important to be aware of its possible appearance. My intention in this paper has been, first, to show that metrical ambiguity can add a level of complexity and intrigue to a poem. The structure does not fully reveal itself upon a superficial reading but requires attentive consideration and, in some cases, a willingness to look beyond conventional categories. Second, I have tried to suggest that in all these instances it is best not to try to fit the poems within a single metrical type. Granted, at times one designation may seem more appropriate than other possibilities; however, focusing on a single category ultimately fails to bring out the full intricacy that the work presents to its readers. While there is an obvious attractiveness to straightforward and concise labels, in the case of metrical ambiguity a more detailed and even more tentative characterization is likely to offer a truer picture of what the poet has actually done during the process of creation.¹⁶

¹⁶ I am grateful to Michael Wachtel for suggestions regarding this article.

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