

AATSEEL KEYNOTE SPEECH

LINGUISTICS AND POETICS AND SOME OTHER SMOLDERING ISSUES OF LITERARY ANALYSIS: *AN AUTO-HEURISTIC STUDY*¹

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1.1. The reason I'm holding forth from this high pulpit is that I was last year's recipient of AATSEEL's prize for Outstanding Contribution to Scholarship. Which is not only flattering, but also handy: I get this exclusive opportunity to speak to all of you, no panel competition—for a spacious 50 minutes—and then have my paper published in SEEJ—promptly, rather than in years,—and, last but not least, without censor... oops, peer review.

Which calls for massive gratitude. This is not an Oscar ceremony, so I will refrain from listing my relatives, wives and other significant others, friends, Romans, countrymen, mentors and co-authors—the many people who had a part in my deserving the award.

Let me just thank:

- Fred White, my former graduate student, who nominated me;
- Irene Delic, the emerita editor of SEEJ, for my recent professional visibility;
- Barry Scherr, who wrote a comprehensive review article of three of my monographs²;
- Igor Pil'shchikov's editorial team and my USC colleagues headed by Tom Seifrid, who made possible a hefty *Festschrift* on the occasion of my eightieth birthday, and all forty of its distinguished contributors;³
- and, of course, Kevin Platt and the entire award Committee.

Thank you all! I am honored and humbled.

1. I am grateful to Stuart Goldberg for painstakingly de-Russifying my English.

2. See Scherr 2015.

3. See Ioffe et al. 2018.

1.2. Having said that, I was surprised—pleasantly, but challenged with figuring out what happened: whether I did something right—or the Committee went wrong somewhere and didn't know what it was doing. Well, it's our professional task to interpret enigmatic texts and that's what I'll undertake—at the risk of intentional fallacy. Hence my subtitle, "An (auto)heuristic study," i. e., in plain Greek, "What kind of *eurekas* do I go for?"

When I first came to these shores—actually, to the other coast—40 years ago, I was that rare bird, a dissident rescued from the Soviet claws, and as a result on friendly terms with one of the principal rescuers, the Dean of Cornell's College of Arts and Sciences, a distinguished Romance scholar Alain Seznec.

And one day, he asked me how I liked teaching at Cornell. I said I loved it but was surprised to discover that I preferred my undergraduate classes to graduate seminars, contrary to what I had expected looking from Russia.

"Small wonder," he said, "just think who your undergraduates are. They are a cross-section of the student body of our Ivy League school—future lawyers, doctors, businessmen, the cream of the nation. And your average grad students? People who have settled in advance for a miserable \$20,000 as their first annual salary. [Remember, we are in 1980!] All they care about is taking notes in class in order to become a pale copy of you."

A rather sobering estimate by a major scholar in the humanities, who must have known what he was talking about. Sobering, and feeding right into what I'd call our profession's inferiority complex, which, I believe, is at the root of its problems.

All my life I have tried to overcome it, and the prize I have received from you certainly helps. There is also the temptation to take seriously the students' alleged mimetic desire—and to share the secrets of my trade. The question is of course what is that "**I**" that the students, AATSEEL and myself are dealing with?

2.1. For various reasons—my natural predisposition, my original linguistic training and the influence of mentors—I'm interested in **what** and **how** texts mean. And how they make the process of meaning/understanding so pleasurable, the proverbial *plaisir de texte*.

Linguistics is relevant to literature in two basic ways. One is that language is literature's medium; the other, that literature is itself a sort of "language," a sign system, and thus linguistics and semiotics provide useful models for thinking about it.

Language and linguistics are the closest—if seemingly poor—relatives of literature, which is not a visual art (see Lessing), nor primarily an ideological one. It is a verbal art. Verbal, and therefore very *linguo-centric*.

2.2. To articulate my other core belief, let me start with an old, Soviet-era joke.

A husband and wife celebrating their golden wedding are asked how they managed to live peacefully together for 50 years. "Oh," says the wife, "from the start, to avoid conflicts, we di-

vided all the issues into minor (*melkie*) and major (*krupnye*), with me deciding minor ones and him, major.”—“And which issues are minor?”—“Oh, whether to have eggs or porridge for breakfast, have the stove repaired or buy a new one, spend the summer at the dacha or in Crimea, send the kids to a special school or a regular one, whether my husband should change jobs or...”—“*A krupnye*?”—“Well, those are the really big ones, say, whether the Dalai Lama is to return to Tibet.”

Well, I tend to identify with the domineering wife, not the intellectual husband. The “minor” issues end up quite big but can well be resolved at the family level, whereas the major ones are so grand they are way beyond the family’s practical reach, noble as they are. I firmly prefer *melkie*.

2.3. Because they are not *melkie* at all. It’s once again our inferiority complex and lack of professional dignity to think they are insignificant, boring and undeserving of attention and that only big philosophical issues, political institutions and fashionable “isms” can lend them worth. (As a colleague liked repeating, “All isms become wasms.”)

I go for minor issues because, in the words of Jean Giraudoux, “I find enough depth in the surface of things.”

2.4. Where does the discreet charm of major issues come from? Fact is, plagued as we are with a professional inferiority complex, we look for some authoritative institution to offer and confer on us cultural and—hopefully—gainful sponsorship. That makes us feel like the masters of the universe, philosopher kings etc., but produces—at best—flashy journalism. To meet that public agency’s expectations, we agree to adapt our scholarship accordingly—to translate it into required media and formats, popularizing, vulgarizing, distorting and finally nullifying it in the process.

I am reminded of the story of the famous Georgian ballet dancer Vakhtang Chabukiani’s (1910–1992) return to his native Tbilisi stage (1941), told to me by an admiring ballet buff.

The theater was always full. The lucky ones sat in the loges, the orchestra stalls, the balcony; the less lucky ones stood in the aisles, the foyer, on the stairs, the porch and in the street, the Rustaveli avenue. And every time Chabukiani performed a masterful leap, the applause rippled from the hall to the foyer to the stairs and into the street—in a process of gradual translation into ever vaguer terms. Which testified to the incredibly high level of the artist’s success. But what were the people in the street actually saying by their applause? Basically, “Wow!”

I prefer the professional’s spot in the front row. Working, like a Hemingwayan torero, close to the bull.

3.1. Minor issues are those we can treat professionally. As Roman Jakobson famously wrote a hundred years ago:

[П]редметом науки о литературе является не литература, а литературность [...] Между тем, до сих пор историки литературы [...] уподоблялись полиции, которая, имея целью

арестовать определенное лицо, захватила бы на всякий случай всех и все, что находилось в квартире, а также случайно проходивших по улице мимо [...] [И]сторикам литературы все шло на потребу—быт, психология, политика, философия. Вместо науки о литературе создавался конгломерат доморощенных дисциплин.⁴

Let me turn to some specific literary-critical cases from my experience.

3.2. Way back, at the dawn of our philological youth, my friend and future, now late, coauthor, Yuri Shcheglov, challenged me to solve an elementary problem in poetics: to state what all quatrains of Alexander Vertinsky's "Маленькая балерина" ("The Little Ballerina"; lyrics coauthored with Natal'ia Grushko) had in common. The song tells playfully the tear-jerking story of a poor ballet dancer's romance with the king, the queen's jealousy, and the dancer's crying at night into her pillow while her sick mother mends her costume.

Я—маленькая балерина, Всегда нема, всегда нема, И скажет больше пантомима, Чем я сама.	И будет штопать, не вздыхая, Мое трико, И будет думать, засыпая, Что мне легко.
И мне сегодня за кулисы Прислал король Влюбленно-бледные нарциссы И лак фиоль...	Я маленькая балерина, Всегда нема, всегда нема, И скажет больше пантомима, Чем я сама.
И, затаив бессилье гнева, Полна угроз, Мне улыбнулась королева Улыбкой слез...	Но знает мокрая подушка В тиши ночей, Что я усталая игрушка Больших детей!
А дома в маленькой каморке Больная мать Мне будет бальные оборки Перешивать.	

I failed—and all the more poignantly learned the lesson. I did of course realize that the above paraphrase of the plot—the surface structure—was not the answer. The answer I didn't find was the hidden—in rather plain view—invariant (that concept had yet to be introduced into our scholarship) of the seven quatrains: 'eloquent muteness.' Not a word is uttered by the characters, the poem only features their gestures, facial expressions and tears, echoing the repeated auto-meta-poetic lines about the heroine's being *всегда нема* and the *пантомима*'s telling it all better. Meta-poetic and meta-linguistic, as it's all about the (non-)use of language, the famous *silentium*!

3.3. Therein lies the secret—the deep structure—of the text, and failure to pinpoint and formulate it can't be compensated by coming up with any

4. See Jakobson 11.

amount of big data about the history of dancing, royal patronage of ballet, economic conditions of dancers etc. Because that would mean failing—as I had failed—at the basic professional task of a literary scholar, i.e. a specialist in tropes, meters, story, discourse, intertextuality, theory of parody, but not philosophy, climatology or quantum mechanics. I am curious about what **is there** in the text and may only appear “minor” if I neglect looking for it or am incapable of noticing it and seeing it for the exciting thing it is, signs all that I might be in the wrong profession.

4.1. Turning to a more prestigious example, here is Pasternak’s and Yuri Zhivago’s “Veter” (Wind):

Я кончился, а ты жива .	A
И ветер, жалуясь и плача ,	B
Раскачивает лес и дачу .	B
Не каждую сосну отдельно ,	C
А полностью все деревья	A
Со всею далью беспредельной,	C
Как парусников кузова	A
На глади бухты корабельной.	C
И это не из удалства	A
Или из ярости бесцельной,	C
А чтоб в тоске найти слова	A
Тебе для песни колыбельной.	C

4.2. In the beginning, it features a puzzling irregularity of rhyming: A (*жива*)—B (*плача*)—B (*дачу*)—... We then again expect A (*-ва*), but get, in line 4, a new rhyme C (*отдельно*). Why such a strange sequence? The answer is that this unmatched, separate, lonely rhyme is supplied by the word *отдельно* (separately), whose meaning thus gets iconized. A minor thing, of course.

But as is usual with minor issues, not all that modest. The separate pine tree reverberates with the famous Heine-Lermontov-Tiutchev northern *sosna* pining away for the distant and equally lonely southern palm tree. That is intertextually, while intratextually, the separateness of the tree—and of the rhyme—is promptly overcome. The wind goes on to rock all the trees without exception (*полностью все деревья*); these *деревя* provide the missing rhyme A; while the initially “separate” rhyme C (in *-ельно*) effectively takes over—and thus transcends its separateness: it appears four more times and concludes the poem. At the same time the wind, which metaphorically represents the deceased speaker (Yurii), finds words of lullaby consolation for the pine-tree—the poem’s addressee (Lara). And all this—in the spirit of ‘the miraculous unity of the world,’ Pasternak’s central invariant.⁵

5. In more detail, see Zholkovsky 1984.

4.3. Incidentally, this *melkii* but crucial trifle eluded six of the seven translators of the poem into English that I studied; the one fortunate exception was by a poet who collaborated with Professor Markov!⁶ Not *melkii*. But of course not as *krupnyi* as disquisitions on really grand topics like whether Pasternak's worldview is closer to Albert Einstein's theory of relativity or Niels Bohr's complementarity principle.

5.1. My next example is Count Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoy's narrative poem «Zmei-Tugarin» (*Tugarin the Serpent*). Its political message is quite transparent: satirizing Russian monarchical despotism as Oriental in nature, indeed, a continuation, under a patriotically Russian guise, of the Tatar-Mongol yoke. But as usual, it's the poem's minor features that make it a gem, in fact, the author's favorite work. The devil is as usual in the details.

5.2. First off, it's the poem's master trope: a hybrid of the genres of political satire, romantic ballad, and folk *bylina*.

Second: casting the traditional antagonist of the *bylina* plot—a Tatar guest at Prince Vladimir's feast, who later turns out to be Tugarin the Serpent—casting him paradoxically as the poem's prophetic speaker who predicts correctly Russia's Tatarized future.

And, finally, the way the corroboration of the prophecy is orchestrated, quite unlike in Pushkin's prototypical "Song of the Wise Oleg." There the Prince dies, as predicted by the Wizard, because of his horse, but here the confirmation does not take place in the course of the plot, which is confined to the feast in Old Kiev. But it is implied—caustically alluded to—by relying on the readers' awareness of the subsequent history of Russia, unknown, of course, to Vladimir and his guests, who blissfully enjoy their victory over the antagonist.

This manner of prophecy corroboration is in fact a venerable literary motif going all the way back to Virgil's *Aeneid*, where contemporary readers (Emperor Augustus included) relished recognizing recent Roman history being predicted to Aeneas in the underworld.⁷

5.3. These are some of the minor issues. As for *krupnye*, one is free to speculate whether the Tatar-Mongol—or for that matter Chinese—yoke is to return to Tibet,—sorry, Russia. And to decide in the process who is more of an Orientalist: Genghis Khan, Alexei Tolstoy, Vladimir Putin or Xi Jin-Ping...

6.1. One more case for the importance of being minor.

I have long been intrigued by a line in Mandelshtam's 1931 poem «Еще далеко мне до патриарха...» ("I'm Still Far from Becoming a Patriarch"): *И*

6. See Markov and Sparks 604–605.

7. For detailed analysis, see in Zholkovsky 2017.

гривенник серебряный в кармане (“And a silver ten-kopeck coin in my pocket”). After some research, it turned out that the phrase about a coin in the pocket, owned but not spent, small but potentially powerful, had an intertextual source. It went back to the title of a French adventure novel, «Les cinq sous de Lavarède» (1894, by Henri Chabrillat and Paul d’Ivoi), translated into Russian in 1908 as «Вокруг света с гривенником в кармане» (*Around the World With a Grivennik in the Pocket*).

It also turned out the *grivennik* was a recurrent motif in Russian literature, sometimes making it into titles, as a ready-made symbolic, small but important, amount of money—the price of a visit to a bathhouse or a movie theater, of a streetcar ride, the typical alms given to beggars—and so on.

Plus, shortly before the poem was written, the ratio of silver to copper in Soviet *grivenniks* was reduced, making the newly minted ones look less silvery than the older ones, which were still there—in some pockets—and thus nostalgically real, “classical.”

The affinity of these *melkie* connotations of the silver dime to Mandelstam’s poetic invariants are obvious.⁸

6.2. And what about *krupnye voprosy*? In Mandelstam studies, there are two ways to go big. One is the “super-clever” (*вумная*) fallacy of blowing up his image into that of Poet-philosopher, another Viacheslav Ivanov, while ignoring his very warm, vulnerable and engaging poetic sensibility and thus focusing again on grand ideas (often imaginary) at the expense of poetry proper. Another version of *vumnost’* calls for imposing on an unsuspecting Mandelstam various trendy agendas of today.

An intellectually much less ambitious “major” fallacy exploits the poet’s martyrdom by focusing on the erection of Mandelstam statues, busts and bas-reliefs. Once again, the underlying assumption is that poetry proper is something minor, not worthy of attention, which brings to mind Dmitrii Prigov 1970s’ poem:

Внимательно коль приглядеться сегодня
 Увидишь, что Пушкин, который певец
 Пожалуй, скорее что бог плодородья
 И стад охранитель, и народа отец

Во всех деревнях, уголках бы ничтожных
Я бюсты везде бы поставил его
А вот бы стихи я его уничтожил –
Ведь образ они принижают его

Busts—*si*, poems—*no*, for they only diminish the image of the National Hero.

8. See Zholkovsky 2011, “Grivennik...”.

7.1. Leo Tolstoy's «После бала» (“After the Ball,” 1903) and Nikolai Leskov's «Человек на часах» (“The Sentry,” 1887) share the “major” theme of “cruel and socially unfair corporal punishment” in the Russian army. But they are fascinatingly different in the “minor” ways they implement it.

7.2. In Tolstoy's story, the master conceit is juxtaposing the romantic ballroom scene and the shocking one of gauntlet running. The two are consummately rhymed, exhibiting multiple similarities, some of them quite subtle, “minor,” and therefore calling for detection.

For instance, there are the semes of “majesty and deadliness” in the early characterization of the heroine, the love interest of the “moral” protagonist and the daughter of his “evil imperial” antagonist.

Она [...] была прелестна: высокая, стройная, грациозная и **величественная, именно величественная**. Держалась она всегда необыкновенно **прямо** [...] и это давало ей [...] несмотря на ее худобу, даже **костлявость**, какой-то **царственный** вид, который **отпугивал бы** от нее, если бы не ласковая, всегда веселая **улыбка**...

The charming Varen'ka is majestic, regal and scary—all characteristics of her father and the Emperor he represents and looks like. As for her redeeming smile, the colonel also wears one—at the ball but not at the flogging. In addition, she is “bony”—like Death the *Kostliavaia* and Baba-Iaga *Kostianaia* Noga of Russian folklore!

Another structural detail is the way Varen'ka's beautifully dressed and un-touchable body—clad in metaphorical bronze garments—is compositionally projected onto the gory naked body of the flogged soldier in an impressive fusion of the two central themes: dropping out of military service and out of a *comme il faut* marriage.⁹

7.3. Leskov's narrative is drastically—and innovatively—different.

First, the plot unfolds by following step by step the hierarchical order of the army (the butt of the satire)—climbing the rungs of command, from the private to a Captain, to a colonel, to a general... all the way up to the Emperor and even God!

Second, what travels up that bureaucratic ladder is not a character, but his story, case, dossier, symbolic reflection, while he himself is immobilized as a prisoner and then a casualty of flogging.

The two correlated motifs were later used in Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat* and Voinovich's *Ivan Chonkin*,—see Shcheglov's pioneering study of what he termed the “administrative novel.”¹⁰

7.4. These are of course my favorite minor literary-theoretical issues, while questions like whether corporal punishment will return to the Russian

9. See Zholkovsky, “Text Counter Text” 59–87.

10. See Zholkovsky 2012, Shcheglov 2009.

army are too *krupnye* for me. As is, say, the problem of Tolstoy making the only woman in the story a negative character. Or should he be excused for showing her complicity in the crimes of the ruling class she belongs to? Provided of course that class beats gender. As for Leskov's story, how come there are no women in it at all, so that, to use a fashionable expression, it doesn't look like Russia?

8.1. Among minor effects readily ignored by partisans of major issues are, of course, verbal subtleties of literary texts, whether poetic (like Pasternak's "Veter") or prosaic. A way to identify these is by looking at translations.

I remember gathering translations of Russian classics for my *Text counter Text*¹¹ and discovering that the precious little gems I wanted to illustrate were consistently absent from the English texts. Which meant that the Anglo-American reader is actually dealing not with Lermontov, Gogol and Chekhov but rather Marlinsky, Vladimir Odoevsky and Potapenko. The New Historicists probably wouldn't mind, but I, as a literature buff, certainly do.

8.2. As case in point let us look at a verbal detail, in fact an entire linguistic motif, pivotal for the narrative structure of Chekhov's "Dushechka" ("The Darling") but untranslatable into English. Here are several fragments of the story (in the Constance Garnett translation¹²):

"Yesterday we gave 'Faust Inside Out,' and almost all the boxes were empty; but if **Vanitchka and I** had been producing some vulgar thing [...] the theatre would have been packed. Tomorrow **Vanitchka and I** are doing 'Orpheus in Hell.' Do come."

And what Kukin said about the theatre [...] she repeated The actors were fond of her and used to call her "**Vanitchka and I,**" and "the darling."

The theatrical entrepreneur Ivan Kukin soon dies, and Olga promptly marries the timber merchant Vassily Pustovalov. She abandons the esthetic views of the deceased husband and starts echoing those of the current one but sticks to the same verbal formula:

"**Vassitchka and I** have no time to go to theatres [...] What's the use of these theatres?" [...] "I wish everyone were as well off as **Vassitchka and I.**"

The fivesome of "Va—itchka and I" phrases is impressive in its consistent recurrence and does make its thematic point—but only awkwardly so, since the best part of Chekhov's conceit is, like all poetry, lost in translation. In the Russian original, the phrase carries no first-person singular pronoun—no "I"—as, of course, befits a heroine totally lacking identity. Chekhov has

«мы с Ваничкой поставили» [...] «мы с Ваничкой ставим» [...] «называли "мы с Ваничкой"» [...] «нам с Васичкой некогда» [...] «жить, как мы с Васичкой».

11. That is, Zholkovsky 1994.

12. See Matlaw 211–221; other English versions (Hingley 172–182, Proffer 358–370) have the same problems as Garnett's.

Alas, there is no such collective pronominal phrase in English (as budding Russian speakers of English sooner or later find out the hard way), which leaves Chekhov's idiomatic find well-nigh untranslatable.¹³

The development of the “we vs. I” motif does not stop there. As Pustovalov dies in turn, Olga starts living with a veterinarian, whose first name, to be sure, also begins with a V: Vladimir Smirnin. So Olga can and does call him “Volodichka,” but, remarkably, the phrase “V-ichka and I” does not make an appearance in the text. What does happen, is that the collective pronoun “my” (we) as it were changes hands (or rather, mouths):

Когда [...] приходили [...] его сослуживцы [...] она [...] начинала говорить о чуме на рогатом скоте [...] о городских бойнях, а он страшно конфузился и, когда уходили гости [...] шипел сердито:

– Я ведь просил **тебя** не говорить о том, чего **ты** не понимаешь! Когда **мы, ветеринары**, говорим **между собой**, то, пожалуйста, не вмешивайся [...]

– **Володичка**, о чем же **мне** говорить?!

This is easily matched in English translations but, alas, not as the dramatic climax of the “my”-sequence, present in the original but missing in the translation.

8.3. Once again, a *melkii* verbal effect proves quite significant: indeed, proper command of pronouns helps save the man's life. Unlike the two previous partners of the vampiric “darling,” the veterinarian is not married to her and leaves town unscathed—thanks to being legally, intellectually and, last but not least, linguistically separate from her. This is “major” enough for me, and I feel no urge to speculate on Chekhov's role in pondering the ecological fates of Russian forests and existential ones of the Russian intelligentsia, the domain of such thinkers as Vasisualy Lokhankin.

9.1. So far, I have been documenting my attempts to emulate the greats I so admire for their “minor” findings:

– Mikhail Gershenzon, who noticed the Prodigal Son pictures in the setting of Pushkin's “The Station Master” and showed their narrative significance;

– Lev Vygotsky, who analyzed the counterpoint of story and discourse in Bunin's “Light Breathing”; and

– Boris Eikhenbaum, who showed how “The Overcoat” was made by playing several stylistic registers against one another—rather than championing the Little Man.

My programmatic point—behind the auto-heuristic one—is to insist that until the literary text has been understood properly, with all the minor things adding up to a whole, we, strictly speaking, know nothing about it, and any

13. This kind of pronominal phrase exists in Estonian, Swahili, Turkish, Zulu and some other “Oriental” languages.

major statements about it are premature—void. Until Gershenson detected and interpreted the handwriting on the wall of the station, we were in Belshazzar's shoes: no adequate reading. And such readings—apparently trifling but actually ambitious—*are some of my favorite things*.

9.2. The question that inevitably comes to mind is on what grounds do I claim my readings—or for that matter, Gershenson's and Eikhenbaum's—to be the adequate ones, while respected theories tell us there are no such things. On no grounds at all. Inspired solely by a gut conviction, common sense, the prize you awarded me—and the vainglorious hypothesis that someone might actually *wanna be like me, wanna walk like me, and talk like me*. Plus a realization that the famous line about *the infinite play of signifiers* is itself just fascinating wordplay, while in professional practice, plausible alternative readings are not all that many: one, two, at best three...

9.3. Some sixty years ago, Shcheglov and I, camping on the banks of a lake in the environs of Moscow, had to listen throughout the day to the then new hit, “Podmoskovnye vechera” (“Moscow Nights”), carried over the waters on radio waves. Brash young linguists, we tried to parse the poetic ambiguities of the text, in particular of the line *Трудно высказать и не высказать Все, что на сердце у меня*. We came up with three alternative readings:

- it is hard to express it and hard not to express it;
- it is hard to express it and yet not to express it;
- it is hard and well-nigh impossible to express it at all.

Remarkably, the aura of triple ambiguity reified the explicit meaning of the line: the age-old poetic theme of “ineffability,” championed by Zhukovsky, Tyutchev, Mandelstam—and Vertinsky's ballerina.

Recently, I revisited the lyrics. A minor *eureka* (prompted by Igor Pil'shchikov): they are written in a rare, predominantly folkloric, meter: penton, or *piatislozhnik*, consisting of five-syllable feet; and the original way it is treated by the authors may have contributed to the song's wild success. (My piece was published in *Novyi Mir*, usually a venue for *krupnye voprosy*).¹⁴

10.1. All this smacks of conservatism—the refreshing kind. Let me turn to some of the new things that I have been doing lately. Conveniently, they involve matters linguistic—verbal, discursive, communicational—in accord with the “linguistics and poetics” part of my title.

This new interest was prompted by discovering how prominent such motifs were in the prose of Fazil Iskander. His characters like performing elaborate scenes in front of one another. Often they keep completely silent, striking telling postures and assuming various facial expressions. And when

14. See Zholkovsky, “Podmoskovnye piatislozhniki.”

they do speak, they do so obliquely—in order to suggest the intended meaning to the audience—or to mislead it. This tasks interlocutors with decoding the play-acted pantomimes and parsing the oblique monologues. The text abounds in “theatrical” phrases, such as: *желая показать, делая вид, как бы, казалось*, as well the vocabulary of “comprehension”: *следил, замечал, догадка...* Reading Iskander, one is immersed in the world of intense semi-otic interactions, as the characters join the writer in coauthoring his narrative through their own stories and acts inside the overall plot.¹⁵

10.2. Iskander pushed this technique to the limit, but did not invent it. His immediate model was probably Tolstoy, but the motif is a widespread one—a paramount manifestation of literature’s doubling back on itself.

Let us consider an example from Shakespeare. What made Desdemona fall in love with Othello? Every literate Russian remembers his words: *Она меня за муки полюбила, А я ее за состраданье к ним*. But let me argue *that it ain’t necessarily so*.

In *Othello*, Act I, Scene 3, Othello is put on trial to establish how he managed to bewitch Desdemona, a senator’s daughter. The secret witchcraft turns out to be none other than the magic of the word: the art of storytelling, reciprocated by Desdemona—the narratee’s gift for listening.

As an experienced speaker, Othello starts from the opposite: a figure of utter rhetorical modesty:

[...] **Rude am I in my speech,**
And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace
 [...] **And little** of this great world **can I speak,**
More than pertains to feats of broils and battle,
 And therefore **little shall I grace my cause**
In speaking for myself. Yet [...] **I will a round unvarnished tale deliver...**

Having refuted in advance any accusation of pretense, i. e. “acting,” he addresses the issue of *the mighty magic with which he won Desdemona*. At first from afar:

Her father loved me, oft invited me,
 Still **questioned me the story of my life**
 From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes
 [...] **I ran it through** [...] **To th’ very moment that he bade me tell it,**
 Wherein **I spoke** of most disastrous chances
 [...] **It was my hint to speak—such was my process—**
 And of the Cannibals that each others eat...

15. See Zholkovsky, “Fazil Iskander’s Pantomimic Narratives.”

From afar—in the sense that the narrative was summoned almost against his will by the senator himself—Desdemona is not even mentioned at first. But then she joins in the listening, preferring that to her other duties:

[...] These things **to hear**
Would Desdemona seriously incline.
 But still the house affairs would draw her hence,
 Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,
 She'd come again, and **with a greedy ear**
Devour up my discourse...

Noticing her interest, Othello skillfully arranges for tete-a-tete sessions with her and relishes her strong esthetic reaction and identification with him as the speaker-protagonist:

... **Devour up my discourse, which I, observing,**
Took once a pliant hour and found good means
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart
That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,
Whereof by parcels she had something heard
But not intentively. I did consent,
 And often did **beguile her of her tears**
When I did speak of some distressful stroke
 That my youth suffered. **My story being done**
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs
 [...]
 She wished she had not heard it, yet **she wished**
That heaven had made her such a man...

In the next round, Desdemona actually takes over the creative—narratorial and histrionic—role. In a thinly disguised way she declares her love for Othello, saying she would fall in love with anybody who would be so good at telling stories, that is, laying bare her preference for a good narrator over an actual hero:

... She [...] bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story
And that would woo her...

Othello then declares his love and sums up the argument about the kind of voodoo he had used:

... **Upon this hint I spake.**
 She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
 And I loved her that she did pity them.
This only is the witchcraft I have used.
 Here comes the lady. Let her witness it.

And the Duke himself acknowledges:

I think **this tale would win my daughter** too.

Note that we are exposed not to the actual scenes of Othello's bewitching Desdemona with his narratives, but his skillful narrative about those skillful narratives. Meta-literariness squared—if not cubed! And Othello, although the play's title character, isn't even its main "theatrical agency." That's Iago, who masterminds and stages the entire plot, directing Othello and others as his involuntary actors!

10.3. For Shakespeare, of course, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances."¹⁶ But the same holds true for narrative prose, where all the world is a narrative, and the men and women in it are authors, readers, directors, actors, viewers, critics, translators, editors, recreating inside the text the institution of literature. Examples abound, beginning with the obvious case of the internal narrator who tells the framed story and offers a panoply of variations.

Erast in "Poor Liza" is a reader and imitator—impersonator—of idyllic fiction.

Tatiana and Onegin exchange letters and mutual reader-responses/criticisms.

Silvio designs, stages and enacts a scenario of psychological revenge, using the Count and his wife as involuntary actors and impressed viewers.

In "Taman'," Pechorin and the *undina* cast each other in the competing scripts of their own, his being the colonial-Romantic seduction of a local beauty, hers a crime-and-detection plot, and each plays along with the other's script, until it all unravels.¹⁷

In "Revizor," Khlestakov has at first no intention to play the role of Inspector General, in which the misled city officials choose to cast him; he gradually accepts and starts performing it to the best of his abilities.

Dostoevsky's pawnbroker stages his entire marriage with *krotkaia* (the gentle spirit) as a morality play intended to educate her, the captive viewer and participant, into admiring him.¹⁸

Babel's narrator-protagonist in "Guy de Maupassant" corrects a flawed translation from the French made by a woman-publisher, an admirer of Maupassant, and in the process they together "translate" the plot of the story into a sexual tryst—in a scenario that activates the roles of publisher, reader, translator, editor, script-writer, director and actor.

10.4. An interesting case of "internal author/reader" interactions is Bunin's "Vizitnye kartochki" ("Visiting Cards"). At first blush, the story is about

the seduction of a not so young and rather pathetic provincial housewife by a famous writer whose work she has admired from afar and for whom she now willingly—daringly—falls in a one-night stand on a Volga boat trip.

But there is more to this enigmatic little gem. The entire narrative is arranged so as to gradually lead up to a climactic erotic position. The male protagonist is from the start intrigued by the readiness of the woman—modest, provincial and innocent as she seems—to experience something reck-

16. On Shakespeare's poetics of "plays-inside-plays", see Abel, Pinskii 555–98.

17. See Zholkovsky, "Semiotika 'Tamani.'"

18. Zholkovsky, "Time, Money, and Authorship."

lessly adventurous by following his script and staging directions. Excited by her attitude, he develops a desire to use that readiness to some unexpected strong effect. Both protagonists are ready for an experiment, along with the third-person narrator presenting their amorous *pas de deux* through the eyes of the male partner, a writer and thus the author's narratorial alter ego. Thus, the plot unfolds unbeknownst to the woman, the man, and the narrator—being experimentally improvised/discovered by all three as they go.

Moreover, the implied author stages his own meta-experiment by playing with two literary prototypes. One is, of course, the Chekhovian “Chaika” cum “Dama s sobachkoi,” the other, Guy de Maupassant's short story “Une aventure parisienne”:

A married provincial woman goes to Paris to experience risqué excitements of the debauched metropolitan life. She meets a famous writer, gets him to spend with her one typical day of his life: Bois de Boulogne—café—restaurant—theater—.... They end up in bed, where the man's bizarre sexual habits put her off, and she leaves town disappointed.

In Bunin's story, the shamelessly theatrical *zhiznetvorcheskii* experiment, on the contrary, succeeds. What shape exactly does the *besstydstvo*, filling the heroine with *vostorg razvratnosti*, take? The text is not unambiguous but quite suggestive, especially given several foreshadowings:

- the protagonist hugging her from behind,
- her *kosoi* upward glance at the cabin's window slates,
- and the retrospective mention of his placing her on the bed *after* the fact.

A naive reader might come away with the generic sense that the love affair was consummated. But a parser attuned to Bunin's “experimentality” is prodded to infer the particular contours of the boldly transgressive but mutually sought-out erotic experiment: most likely, having sex standing up, the man cupping the woman's breasts and entering her from behind.¹⁹

10.5. One could go on and on with cases of characters' authorial/theatrical/meta-literary behavior inside authored literary texts.

Incidentally, the widely popular genre of crime detection, from Sherlock Holmes to Lieutenant Columbo, is an offshoot of literature's (and other arts') preoccupation with meta-narrativity:

The criminal tries to author/commit a perfect crime—stage a masterpiece show. Pedestrian detectives (Watson, Lestrade and others) fail to offer an adequate reading of it. The super-sleuth (Holmes, Columbo) finally delivers one, sometimes staging his own mini-plays along the way that entrap the criminal (= the flawed author/reader).

All such “literary” characters help the real authors with creating plots and guiding the readers' reception as they endow the literary text with a self-reflexive meta-literary dimension: writing about writing.

19. See Zholkovskiy, “Mesto ‘Vizitnykh kartochek’ v eroticheskoi kartoteke Bunina.”

11.1. Literature also cherishes its historically **magical** role. Accordingly, it likes featuring not just “internal authors,” but “internal prophets,” and makes sure the prophecies are seen to come true.

I have mentioned two different cases of prophecy fulfilment: Aleksei Tolstoy’s “Zmei-Tugarin” and Pushkin’s “Song of the Wise Oleg.” Each has its complications.

The former appeals subtly to the readers’ background knowledge (of Russian history).

In the latter, the correspondence between the foretold and actual deaths relies on the linguistic ambiguity of the prediction: “receiving death from [om] one’s horse.” All along this is assumed to mean some deadly action *by* the horse, but eventually winds up a deadly snake’s coming *out of* [uz] the dead horse’s skull. This is of course typical of oracular formulas, beginning with the Greeks and including, for instance, the elaborate puns circumscribing Macbeth’s death: his nemesis Macduff literally not *born of woman* but *from his mother’s womb untimely ripp’d* (in a Caesarian) and the Birnam Wood metaphorically coming to Dunsinane in the form of soldiers disguised with tree branches.

11.2. One way of emplotting the fulfillment of a prediction is when the prophet himself ensures it.

In Edmond de Rostand’s “Cyrano de Bergerac,” the title character—poet, repeatedly promises in verse to punish his opponent by skewering him at the end of the *envoi* of the *ballade* he is composing as he duels him,—which he indeed accomplishes.

A milder version is the protagonist enacting a pre-existent prophecy.

In Aleksandr Grin’s *Alye Parusa* (*Scarlet Sails*) Captain Grey finds out that the charming girl, the local outcast, has been foretold to marry a prince who would come for her on a ship with scarlet sails. Grey has his sails dyed red, sails into the bay and takes the girl away to live with her happily ever after.

11.3. Sometimes enactment takes the form of a performative—an ideal linguistic tool for self-fulfilling prophecies.

In the Hollywood film *Midnight Run* (1988), the bounty hunter (Robert De Niro) helps the FBI to entrap and arrest his sworn enemy, a powerful Mafioso, who way back had him thrown out of his job as a policeman. As the handcuffing proceeds, De Niro says to the gangster:

- And one more thing I have long wanted to tell you...
- What?..
- You are under arrest.

The situation hinges on a speech-act *double entendre*. The phrase “You are under arrest” is ambiguous. As a constative, it states that a suspect is in police custody. But as a performative uttered by a policeman, it enacts the arrest. It’s this latter “thing” that the De Niro character had long wanted to

say and thus do to the gangster. But since he has not been reinstated as a policeman, he is not legally and linguistically empowered to issue performatives—and has to settle for the constative—and true!—meaning of the words. A small consolation, but still some.

11.4. Back to Russian lit., a similar bitter-sweet effect crowns Mandelstam's 1931 poem «Я пью за военные астры...» (“I Drink to the Military Asters”):

The poet lists various traditional, pointedly un-Soviet commodities and values to which he is drinking, but then it turns out that he has no wine. Throughout the poem, he keeps claiming that he does drink—or is about to—once he chooses between two desirable European brands, both beyond his reach (*Я пью, но еще не придумал—из двух выбираю одно: Веселое асти-суманте иль папского замка вино*).

The absence of wine renders the speaker's act all but unfeasible: in practical terms, the toast fails to happen. But as a speech act—and all the more so, as a symbolic and even poetic statement—a “toast” needs only to be uttered to become a fact. To be sure, it's a weaker speech act than De Niro's. But a speech-act—a perlocutionary one—it is: transforming the speaker into someone who has solemnly staked out his position in the face of whatever.

11.5. One last note about speech acts. How long have we known about their existence? For almost 60 years—since J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*—and it took us decades to start using them in our work. Why such a delay? My guess is because all these linguistic subtleties—indicatives, interrogatives, performatives are *melkie* issues, unlike such *krupnye* ones as: *To Be Or Not To Be, Who Is To Blame, What Is To Be Done, To Have And Have Not...*

12.1. The above four familiar lines bring us slyly to our next *minor* issue, also very linguistic: my anthology of Russian infinitive poetry. It was cited in AATSEEL's award decision as a work still in progress; now it has finally come out from the Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie Publishers.²⁰

Why did it take so long? And I mean not only the 20 years it took me, but why haven't we known all along about the centuries-old existence of infinitive poetry? Why? To get the answer, just add infinitives to the above list of despicable linguistic *-ives*. In the announcement of the Anthology's recent presentation in Moscow: <https://www.facebook.com/events/294051621521822/> :

**Вечер инфинитивной поэзии
Презентация книги А.К.Жолковского**

28 декабря с 19:00 у нас в Дежурной Рюмочной
(Новый Арбат, 7 стр. 1) будет нерядовое дежурство.

20. Zholkovsky, *Russkaia infinitivnaia poezia*.

Александр Жолковский расскажет о своей
«Антологии русской инфинитивной поэзии XVIII-XX веков»,
которая только что вышла в НЛО.

В дежурстве примут участие издатель Ирина Прохорова,
поэты Михаил Айзенберг, Максим Амелин, Игорь Волгин,
Сергей Гандлевский, Михаил Гронас, Юлий Гуголев
и другие поэты и не-поэты —
любители инфинитивной и не-инфинитивной поэзии.

Ведущий — Дмитрий Быков.

Для способных отличить инфинитив от императива вход бесплатный.

I included a brief note: “Entrance free for those who can tell an infinitive from an imperative.” Remarkably, even a noted poet, who recited his poems there, was not always sure which ones were infinitive ones. [Can we imagine people not being able to tell beef from chicken, Cabernet from Riesling, velvet from corduroy?]

My interest in infinitive poetry was first aroused by Sergei Gandlevsky’s 1985 poem “Ustroit’sia na avtobazu...” (“To Get a Job at a Motor Depot”). I immediately found out that some Russian scholars had already supplied its strong subtexts: Blok’s “Greshit’ besстыdno, neprobudno...” (“To Sin Shamelessly, Sleeplessly”) and Brodsky’s “Rodit’sia by sto let nazad...” (“To Be Born a Hundred Years Ago”). The grammatical common denominator—the infinitives—obviously underlay the connection, yet the point was not made. Why not?

My hunch once again is because infinitives—as a linguistic category—are considered minor, while subtexts and great names, such as Blok and Brodsky—major. Or, perhaps because the concept of “infinitive poetry” is an **invariant**, i. e. something dubious, abstract, schematic, structuralist...

I remember being invited to give a talk about my recent work at a leading Slavic department and offering to speak about infinitive poetry. “Oh, no,” said the illustrious colleague, “not that, *tol’ko ne eto*, that’s so *skuchno*...” Looks like boring is one more way of saying “minor.”

12.2. Infinitive poetry finds itself—and was found—at the intersection of Roman Jakobson’s “poetry of grammar,” Kirill Taranovsky and Mikhail Gasparov’s “semantic haloes” of verse meters and, yes, the idea of poetic invariants, pioneered by Jakobson and actively developed by Shcheglov and myself.

How widely spread is infinitive writing? Let me just say that it is all over *Eugene Onegin*, beginning with the memorable first stanza (1+1+1+5 infinitives):

«Мой дядя самых честных правил,
Когда не в шутку занемог ,
Он **уважать** себя заставил
И лучше **выдумать** не мог.
Его пример другим наука;
Но, боже мой, какая скука

С больным **сидеть** и день и ночь,
 Не отходя ни шагу прочь!
 Какое низкое коварство
 Полу-живого **забавлять**,
 Ему подушки **поправлять**,
 Печально **подносить** лекарство,
Вздыхать и **думать** про себя:
 Когда же черт возьмет тебя?»

and including many stanzas of Chapters I, IV, VI and Onegin's letter to Tatiana.

12.3. I won't go into a detailed technical definition of infinitive writing. Suffice it to say here that a poem is considered infinitive if it is grammatically governed, fully or to a great extent, by infinitive(s), one or several, absolute or dependent.

It can be a short poem, governed by several absolute (= independent) infinitives. Here is a mini-cycle of two such poems, with sequences of respectively 3 and 4 infinitives:

Саша Черный, «Два желания» (1909)

1.

Жить на вершине голой,
Писать простые сонеты...
И брать от людей из дола
 Хлеб, вино и котлеты.

2.

Сжечь корабли и впереди, и сзади,
Лечь на кровать, не глядя ни на что,
Уснуть без снов и, любопытства ради,
Проснуться лет через сто.

Or the concatenation of *odnorodnye* infinitives can be quite long, e.g. in Blok's "Greshit'..." (1914), which features 12 infinitive phrases pervading all 6 quatrains:

Грешить бесстыдно, непробудно,
 Счет **потерять** ночам и дням,
 И, с головой от хмеля трудной,
Пройти сторонкой в Божий храм.

Три раза **преклониться** долу,
 Семь — **осенить** себя крестом,
 Тайком к заплеванному полу
 Горячим **прикоснуться** лбом.

Клада в тарелку грошик медный,
 Три, да еще семь раз подряд
Поцеловать столетний, бедный
 И зацелованный оклад.

А, воротясь домой, **обмерить**
 На тот же грош кого-нибудь,
 И пса голодного от двери,
 Икнув, ногою **отпихнуть**.

И под лампадой у иконы
Пить чай, отщелкивая счет,
 Потом **переслюнить** купоны,
 Пузатый отворив комод,

И на перины пуховые
 В тяжелом **завалиться** сне... —
 Да, и такой, моя Россия,
 Ты всех краев дороже мне.

The record holder is Maksimilian Voloshin's "Spekuliant" (1919): 29 infinitives in 39 lines.

The opposite type are long poems featuring just a few infinitives that govern sprawling subordinate phrases forming one period, as in Mikhail Zenkevich's 1926 "V sumerkakh" ("In the Dusk"):

Не окончив завязавшегося разговора,
 Притушив недокуренную папиросу,
 Оставив недопитым стакан чаю
 И блюдечко с вареньем, где купаются осы,
 Ни с кем не попрощавшись, незамеченным
Встать и уйти со стеклянной веранды,
 Шуруша первыми опавшими листьями,
 Мимо цветников, где кружат бражники,
 В поле, опыленное лиловой грозой,
 Иступленно зовущее воплем сверчков,
 С перебоями перепелиных высвистов,
 Спокойных, как колотушка ночного сторожа,
 Туда, где узкой золотой полоской
 Отмечено слиянье земли и неба,
 И **раствориться** в сумерках, не услышав
 Кем-то без сожаленья вскользь
 Оброненное: «Его уже больше нет»...

Three infinitives governing a 17-line-long sentence.

12.4. As far as meaning is concerned, the semantic halo of infinitive writing can be defined as "meditation on an alternative/virtual mode of being." The more specific sub-types of this include such themes as "a character type's daily routine," "woman's fate as a typical different mode of existence," "the poet's unique mode of being." The latter underlies Afanasii Fet's «Одним толчком согнать ладью живую...» ("With One Push To Chase the Live Boat," 1888), incidentally, a free translation of an 1839 poem by Alfred de Musset:

Одним толчком **согнать** ладью живую
 С наглаженных отливами песков,
 Одной волной **подняться** в жизнь иную,
Учуть ветер с цветущих берегов,
 Тоскливый сон **прервать** единым звуком,
Упится вдруг неведомым, родным,
Дать жизни вздох, **дать** сладость тайным мукам,
 [Var.: **Дать** сердцу жизнь, **дать** сладость тайным мукам]
 Чужое вмиг **почувствовать** своим;
Шепнуть о том, пред чем язык немеет,
Усилить бой бестрепетных сердец,—
 Вот чем певец лишь избранный владеет!
 Вот в чем его и признак, и венец!

Ten parallel—*odnorodnye*—infinitives in three quatrains (3+4+2).

12.5. The Anthology contains 369 infinitive poems by 149 poets, beginning with Vasilii Trediakovskii's (born 1703) two poems translated from the French of Paul Tallemand and ending with Vol'f Erlikh's (born 1902), thus spanning two hundred years of infinitive writing—and avoiding copyright problems with those born later. In addition to full poems, annotations to each poet's production include numerous infinitive fragments—by the same author or other Russian or foreign poets. The commentaries use a specially devised notation, defined in the comprehensive introductory overview of the topic.

This, I hope, is the beginning of a new field of study based on a healthy fusion of literary-critical and linguistic expertise.

* * *

Turns out 50 minutes isn't that long, after all. On to some brief conclusions.

Philology is not maidservant to philosophy, politics, various *-isms*, causes and fads. Just think of the graveyard of Soviet humanities.

Less is more. The devil is in the details. Minor issues are big. Discoveries await us in the black earth, *chernozemnyi*, stratum of fertile soil, not in the geological depths or Earth's core.

Linguistics is our closest and most reliable relative.

Structures, invariants, semantic haloes, performatives are not to be pooh-poohed.

Demythologizing literary cults and other pieties, a.k.a. *nesolidarnoe chtenie*, is a productive approach.

Peer review, like Carthage, needs to be... well, reformed.

Charity begins at home. Before pretending to free others—races, genders, classes—let's free ourselves. That is, stop trying to please FBI, КГБ, PBS, ПИИ, PLO, ACLS, ACLU...

Amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas. Plato, Christ, Buddha, Martin Luther, Martin Heidegger, Martin Luther King, Vladimir Lenin, John Lennon, Edward Said, President Trump, Speaker Pelosi and the Dalai Lama may be friends to some of us but our most cherished mutual friend should be The Truth—our professional integrity and independence.

I haven't exhausted my favorite agenda, nor given away all my secrets, but, to conclude, here is Leo Tolstoy in 1908, i.e. a tad younger than I am these days, talking to kids in Iasnaia Poliana:

Спасибо [...] А то, что я вам говорю, нужно для вас будет. Вы вспомните, когда уж меня не будет, что старик говорил [...] добро. Ну, будет.

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Тезисы

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Лингвистика и поэтика и проблемы литературоведческого анализа (Автоэвристические заметки)

«Основной доклад» на Конференции Американской Ассоциации Преподавателей Славянских и Восточно-Европейских Языков в Сан-Диего (февраль 2020 г.) лауреата прошлогодней (2019) премии за выдающийся вклад в науку посвящен принципам его лингво-поэтического подхода к литературе.

Серия представительных примеров из собственных исследований приводится автором в качестве аргументов в пользу целостного анализа текста, начинающегося с, казалось бы, «мелких», часто языковых, деталей и доходящего до высших смысловых уровней, но ни в коем случае не соблазняющегося подменной этой специфически литературоведческой работы необоснованными рассуждениями на «крупные» — философские, общественно-политические и иные высокопарно-идеологические — темы. Эта позиция, на первый взгляд, консервативная, развивается в статье с опорой на классиков формального метода и позднейшего структурализма и с иронией по адресу любителей широковещательных деклараций, рассчитанных на внимание посторонних науке спонсорских инстанций. Филологии предлагается избавиться от комплекса профессиональной неполноценности — не ронять своего профессионального достоинства.

Отстаиваемый подход иллюстрируется анализом оригинальных приемов работы с языковыми, нарративными и интертекстуальными «мелочами» в произведениях Шекспира, Пушкина, Лермонтова, Гоголя, Льва Толстого, А.К. Толстого, Достоевского, Лескова, Чехова, Бунина, Пастернака, Мандельштама, Бабеля, Искандера и ряда других авторов. Особый раздел посвящен явлению инфинитивной поэзии, открытому докладчиком, и краткому обзору составленной и аннотированной им антологии русской инфинитивной поэзии XVIII–XX веков с примерами из Пушкина, Фета, Блока, Зенкевича и Саши Черного.