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**RUSSIAN HEXAMETER IN
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RUSSIAN HEXAMETER IN CONTEMPORARY TRANSLATIONS FROM GREEK AND LATIN²

The article deals with Russian translations of ancient epic texts that were made in the last few decades. The type of accentual verse that is frequently (but not universally) considered equirhythmic to Greek and Latin hexameter is called Russian hexameter. The first part of the article gives a brief outline of the metrical history of this verse. The second part classifies the trends in contemporary hexametric translations based on the statistics of dactylization. Some experimental forms of Russian hexameter, which have recently been the point of debate, are discussed in the final part of the present work.

JEL Classification: Z.

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Introduction

The recent three decades have been considerably rich in new Russian translations of Greek and Latin texts, including those pieces of ancient literature which had never been rendered into Russian. Poetry of antiquity was originally created in quantitative verse that cannot be directly reproduced in Russian, and the system of metrical equivalents had evolved throughout the 19th century and was canonized in Soviet times. It is unanimously taken for granted that the «good» translation of Greek and Latin poetry should follow this system and is supposed to be as literal as possible³. This opinion may not be so strong for Catullus or Horatius, who had recently received some «experimental» translations by famous poets⁴, but I do not know of any cases when the translators who work in the field of large texts in dactylic hexameter rejected those equivalents⁵. This situation should be viewed in the context of rather scarce infiltration of verse libre and other less formal types of verse in contemporary Russian poetry. Although the need for a change in this situation is more and more apparent, the accentual-syllabic and/or rhymed poetry still prevails, especially if we choose a bigger selection for statistics⁶.

Since the publication of *The Iliad* by Nikolai Gnedich, the Russian equivalent for the Greek hexameter has survived as the expected means of translation and, moreover, has not undergone any serious changes. Further on, I will refer to this form as «Russian hexameter», although from the formal point of view it is a 6-stressed accentual verse with zero anacrusis. Nevertheless, many of the lines in each text in question (sometimes the overwhelming majority) are accentual-syllabic dactylic hexameter. This paper aims to describe some new translations from Greek and Latin in the context of metrical history of Russian hexameter. It is important to note that some formal aspects of this verse have recently become the object of explicit discussion among translators and scholars.

Outline of metrical history of Russian hexameter

Speaking about the genesis of Russian hexameter, I have to mention an important English monograph by Richard Burgi (Burgi 1954) and also an exemplary work by Andrei Egunov, who wrote on Russian translations of Homer and made some metrical observations (Egunov 1964). Later

³ This explication of expectations of the audience is based on my regular discussions with high school and university students in their Latin classes. Every year over the last decade we discuss several versions of poems by Catullus and Horatius previously read in the original. The students almost always select one of “equimetric” literal translations as the best, although often vote for a free version as for “the poem I liked best”.

⁴ One can name, for instance, a poetic cycle *Imiarek i Zarema* (“So-and-so and Zarema”) by Grigori Dashevski (a version of four well-known Catullus’ poems for Lesbia) or translation of Horatius’ *Leuconoe* by Olga Sedakova.

⁵ The only important exception that I know is the fourth book of *Georgica* translated by Elena Ivaniuk in rhymed iambic hexameter (Ivaniuk 2009). I would not ignore the full free verse version of Propertius’ *Elegies* by Alexei Liubzhin, but the original is not dactylic hexameter, but rather elegiac couplets. Liubzhin, Classical scholar and poet himself, names Ivaniuk “more co-author than editor” of his work (Liubzhin 2004: 240).

⁶ The important although controversial theory of grounds of comparatively modest ingress of verse libre in Russian literature was presented by Mikhail Gronas (Gronas 2011). The interesting discussion of this theory was soon published in “Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie” (see, for instance, (Kukulin 2012)).

Mikhail Gasparov in his thorough investigation showed the metrical history of Russian hexameter in every detail and placed it in the broader context of several national European traditions (Gasparov 1975). This work is a classical example of “Russian method” (James Bailey) of verse study. On the basis of quantitative methodology, Gasparov outlined the entire history of Greek (including Byzantine), Latin, German, English, and Russian hexameter and compared them with each other.

The main point of the comparison is the evolution of “metric curve”: observing specimens of hexameter which are not exclusively dactylic, one may note that varying frequency of occurrence of two-syllable feet forms various profiles. On the first stage of metrical evolution, Gasparov argues, two-syllable feet are distributed over the line randomly, but later they gradually find preferable places according to general laws of verse, linguistic restrictions and, sometimes, individual history of national literary tradition.

Metrical typology forces the fifth foot into maximum dactylization in order to emphasize the imminent line break; prosodic peculiarities of this or that language might result either in two-wave curve or in one-wave curve with minimum dactylization on the fourth foot. The following picture based on extensive calculations by Gasparov shows a few examples for each national tradition. The ratio of two-syllable feet shows ratio of spondees in Greek and Latin (feet I–IV) and ratio of trochees in German and Russian.

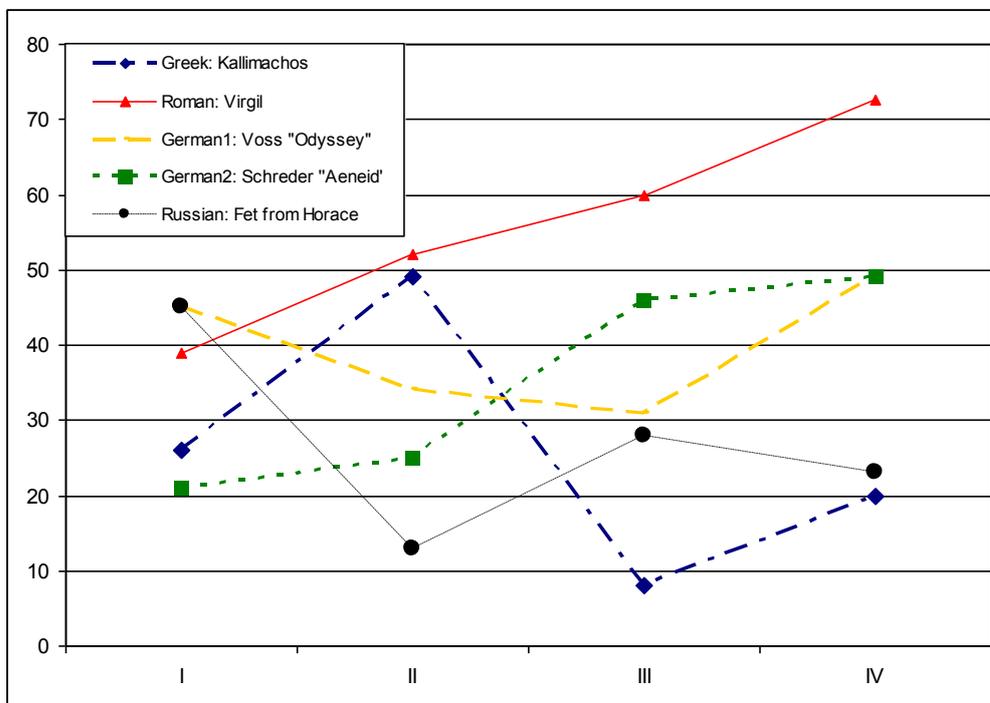


Fig. 1. Ratio of spondees in I–IV feet of Russian hexameter exemplified by Afanasi Fet and compared with the representatives of other traditions (figures from (Gasparov 1975)).

Although the graph seems to show the multidirectional “movement,” Gasparov finds structural resemblance of German hexameter with the Latin prototype and emphasizes close similarity of Greek epic verse and its Russian derivative: both curves are bimodal (Gasparov 1975: 380). Along with the type of hexameter exemplified by Fet’s works, Gasparov’s calculations show another trend: *The Iliad* by Gnedich displays hexameter with high dactylization. This metrical form is more typical for translations (unlike original poetry), in particular, translations from Greek.

Maksim Shapir continued and sometimes questioned Gasparov’s investigations in his article on hexameter and pentameter in Katenin’s poetry (Shapir 1994). He listed even more detailed calculations, which cover the early period of evolution of hexameter from Lomonosov to Zhukovski. “It is necessary to reject the concept of rhythmical evolution of the verse as of gradual dactylization (...): during the first century of the history of Russian hexameter the tendencies of rhythmical monotony and variety used to be easily combined” (Shapir 1994: 47).

Hexameter of Soviet times, according to Gasparov’s calculations that cover primarily earlier period, is characterized by the abrupt decrease of the contraction index after Valeri Briusov’s and Serguei Soloviev’s low-dactylized translations made at the beginning of the century. The important contribution to this change was that of Vikenti Veresaev, who have translated *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, both poems by Hesiod and Homeric hymns. High dactylization in Veresaev’s translations can be explained partly by following the examples of Gnedich and Zhukovski, partly by the fact that the originals were in Greek and are abundant with dactyls compared with Latin verse. I may also surmise that maximum dactylization made scansion easier, and the urge towards better readability for Soviet audiences seemed to be one of the main principles of Veresaev’s work.

An important problem that is closely connected with the subject of this paper, but is not going to be discussed here, is the typology of metrical derivatives of Russian hexameter in contemporary poetry. The only fact that I have to mention is that some contemporary poets use the metrical forms that strongly resemble hexameter, but more or less deviate from its structure. Description and typology of these derivatives have been recently discussed not infrequently: (Gasparov 1990), (Shapir 1994), (Gasparov 1999), (Orlitski 2006), (Lotman 2008), (Orlitski 2013).

Poets and scholars: experiments with Russian hexameter

Since 1991 a substantial number of Russian translation of Greek and Latin hexametric poetry has been published: it includes not only some new versions of well-known texts, but also works that previously were not available in Russian. From the point of view of dactylization we may notice the difference between two lines: one of Gnedich and Zhukovski, the other of Fet (who to a certain extent followed the example of Trediakovski). Both lines are extant in contemporary translations, but the dominance of the second is apparent. Some translators choose medium

dactylization, but others use two-syllable feet even more often than Fet did. The material might be classified according to one parameter: ratio of trochees in feet 1-4. If this ratio is less than 10%, I will attribute the translation to Gnedich line; the values between 20% and 30% will indicate the followers of Fet.

Tab. 1.

Forms of hexameter grouped by syllabic length and ratio of trochees

(in percentage points)

Author and work	Translator	Syllables in line					% of trochees
		17	16	15	14	13	
XIX century							
Homer <i>The Odyssey</i>	V. Zhukovski	99	1	0	0	0	0,3
Horace <i>Saturae</i>	A. Fet	28	45	20	7	0	26,5
Persius <i>Saturae</i>	A. Fet	22	53	23	2	0	26,4
Soviet period							
Hesiod <i>Theogony</i>	V. Veresaev	95	5	0	0	0	1,4
Lucretius <i>De rerum natura</i>	F. Petrovski	77	22	1	0	0	6,1
Virgil <i>The Eclogues</i>	S. Shervinski	34	45	18	2	0	22,1
Callimachus <i>Hymns</i>	S. Averintsev	29	47	21	3	0	24,5
Contemporary translators: line of Gnedich and Zhukovski							
Aratus <i>Phaenomena</i>	K. Bogdanov	97	2	0	0	0	0,7
Contemporary translators: line of Fet							
Stattius <i>The Thebaid</i>	Ju. Shichalin	33	50	15	1	0	21,0
Homeric hymns	E. Rabinovich	23	43	26	7	0	29,5
Contemporary translators: medium line							
Germanicus <i>Phaenomena</i>	N. Fedorov	43	47	9	0	0	16,8
Aratus <i>Phaenomena</i>	A. Rossius	44	48	8	0	0	16,1
Virgil <i>The Aeneid, I</i>	A. Podosinov	66	25	8	1	0	11,4
Stattius <i>The Achilleid, I</i>	A. Podosinov	50	37	12	1	0	16,1
Contemporary translators: experimental line							
Apollonius <i>Argonautica</i>	N. Chistiakova	22	39	28	9	1	31,9
Nonnus <i>The Dionysiaca</i>	Ju. Golubets	15	39	35	11	0	35,8
Nonnus <i>The Metabole</i>	Ju. Golubets	17	43	32	8	0	32,6
Catullus, verse 64	M. Amelin	2	19	45	29	5	54,1
Homer <i>The Odyssey, I</i>	M. Amelin	18	43	32	7	1	32,5

I attribute a translation to the “experimental line”, if it has more than 30% of trochees in the first four feet. The works by Natalia Chistiakova and Elena Rabinovich are very close to each other in this respect, but formally fall into various groups.

The comparatively low interest in the line of Gnedich among contemporary translators can be explained by the monotonous sound of highly dactylized verse⁷ in lengthy texts. The opposite trend is much more popular: its advantage is not only in increasing variety, but also in closer affinity to contemporary experiments with derivatives of hexameter. Translators-poets and translators-scholars are often opposed to each other. Interestingly, professor Natalia Chistiakova⁸ and poet Maxim Amelin⁹ fall into the same group. Amelin reflects on the metrics of his translation explicitly: “I view Russian hexameter as accentual verse (...), where each stress, except the stress before the caesura and the last one, can be omitted and become imaginary or supposed, as it is normal for Russian accentual verse. The main rhythmical law of the original (i.e. *The Odyssey* — V.F.) is as follows: every three adjacent verses should not repeat the same metrical pattern. This makes variety necessary, which prevents the reader or listener from falling asleep” (Amelin 2013: 138).

The “main rhythmical law” referred to by Amelin is definitely a fiction: it can be easily demonstrated that three successive identical patterns of hexameter are frequent in Homeric epic and even more so in Hellenistic and later poetry. That has been one of the reasons for criticism of the translator (Grintser 2013), although it cannot be denied that Russian hexameter is indeed much more monotonous compared with its prototype. Homer uses all the possible 32 metrical schemes, while Gnedich utilizes only 14 variants and Zhukovski’s *Odyssey* is even less diverse (Gasparov 1975: 381-2).

But theoretical impreciseness is not the main fault of experimenting translators. Along with general esthetical weakness and particular flaws Classical scholars denounce Golubets and Amelin for unhappy metrical innovations. One of them is described by Marina Soboleva who even coined the term *versus Golubetzianus* derived from the name of the translator on the analogy of *versus Reizianus* and *versus Wilamowitzianus*: “either an accented syllable of every dactyl or two unstressed syllables can be replaced by one unstressed syllable in each foot except the last (...). In case of replacement of dactyl by Pyrrhic we have only two unstressed syllables instead of two expected unstressed and one stressed. (...) What is then the rhythmical expectation that fastens the *versus Golubetzianus*?” (Soboleva 2000: 97).

In her article the scholar wittily flays the translator for the cases when the expected rules of recitation (in some instances combined with rather strange accentuation of Greek proper names)

⁷ Pure dactylic hexameter is even more monotonous. This accentual-syllabic verse was sometimes used in translations from Greek into Russian instead of more common accentual hexameter. Recently A. Bolshakov has produced first full Russian version of the poem *Posthomerica* by Quintus Smyrnaeus. Interestingly, as Quintus reduces complicated Homeric metrics to a set of easier rules (Fayer 2015), Bolshakov simplifies Gnedich’s hexameter to full dactylization. This observation should not be taken for reproach of the translation.

⁸ She was a professor of Classical department in Sankt-Petersburg university (1920-2008).

⁹ He was the winner of several prizes, among them Anti-Booker (1998) and Solzhenitsyn prize (2013).

produce serious obstacles for a reader¹⁰. One more problem is the impossibility of traditional metrical analysis in the cases when two possible irregularities meet¹¹. Soboleva recapitulates with an ironic disavowal: “We omit as unworthy of examination the fact that these rules make the composition of “hexameters” and “pentameters” easier. (...) We are more alarmed by the following question: could the translators of Nonnus and Catullus, the poets with Classical education, use two or three “false stresses” in a word, had they not been trained to do so with Greek and Latin verse (...)? Should we do the same with Russian [verse]?” (Soboleva 2000: 99), see also (Chernenko 2000)¹².

The scholar is fully aware that all this criticism is appropriate only if this new *versus Golubetzianus* is considered an impaired version of hexameter. But if the reader does not set up a claim of strict metrical uniformity, the abovementioned problems with scansion almost disappear. Such books as the Russian translation of *Dionysiaca* are usually read to oneself, and the substantial part of the audience is not well-informed of hexametric technique. So in most cases these metrical liberties will pass unnoticed on the conscious level, but the higher metrical diversity might make reading less monotonous on the subconscious level.

One might find similarities of *versus Golubetzianus* with some metrical derivatives invented on the basis of hexameter by contemporary poets. The mere fact that Amelin and Golubets do not draw on each other is of some importance (Soboleva 2000: 95). One might also remember that the idea to follow “the metrics of the original” is impossible on a full scale¹³. Finally, one might notice that in original Russian poetry strict accentual-syllabic principles gradually recede in the wake of less constrained poetic forms. All these considerations lead to the assumption that the much criticized effort to slightly loosen up the metrical structures fits contemporary poetic practices very well. This statement, however, should not be interpreted as the approval of Amelin’s and Golubets’ translations from the esthetical point of view; I leave this discussion aside, because literary criticism is not within the scope of my current work.

With regard to Nonnus, the formal experiments of the translator are meaningful not only from the point of view of readers’ perception, but even more from the point of view of reproducing

¹⁰ For instance, the line *Лебедь крылатый птица Аполлона, не лошадь* (XXXVIII, 204) (Golubets 1997: 370) can be read only if the reader makes two stresses: *Апóллона* (“of Apollo”), none of which sounds good in Russian (Soboleva 2000: 97). An additional atypical stress in proper names is not infrequent (for example, two stresses per word is a common *licentia poetica*), but the combination of two such stresses, when both are atypical, is very controversial. One more case of two licences at the same place is a long word with three strong metrical positions, i.e. three “stresses”, two of which are false, for instance, *Недостроенный, когда священная жертва* (Cat. 68, 75) (Amelin 1997: 199), where the first word should be scanned with three stresses.

¹¹ For instance, the line *Так божество, промолвив, с сестрами удаллось* (XII, 173) (Golubets 1997: 127) can be scanned either *сёстрами удаллось* or *сёстрами удалилось* (“left with her sisters”). Neither variant can be preferred for the other (Soboleva 2000: 97).

¹² For favorable evaluation of Amelin’s experiments see (Summ 2006).

¹³ “The belief that the ancient hexameter is an equirhythmic copy of quantitative hexameter has lasted for two centuries up to our times. It is necessary to mention that this confidence is based on a rather primitive fallacy. Greek metrical dactyl is a quadruple foot, because the duration of its first syllable is equal to two shorts. Accentual dactyl is a triple foot consisting of three syllables, the first of which is accentuated. The difference will become evident if one uses musical notes to represent it” (Egunov 2001: 375).

the peculiarities of the original. Nonnus of Panopolis was a reformer of Greek hexameter; in many metrical aspects the works of Nonnus differ conspicuously even from the epic poems of late antiquity (like Quintus' *Posthomerica*), let alone Homer. Some important facts are presented in Table 2.

Tab. 2.

Metrical and prosodic peculiarities of Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*

	Homer <i>The Iliad</i>	Apollonius <i>Argonautica</i>	Callimachus <i>Hymns</i>	Quintus <i>Posthomerica</i>	Nonnus <i>Dionysiaca</i>
Medium word length (in syllables)	2,205	2,381	2,308	2,355	2,724
Variants of hexameter	32	27	20	26	12
Ratio of spondees	25,4%	23%	21,8%	16,9%	14,9%
Elisions (per 100 lines)	71	57	45	66	9

The hexameter of both *Dionysiaca* and *Metabole* was in many respects unique compared with the previous tradition. As the Nonnian reform mostly rejected rare metrical and prosodic phenomena, it resulted in reducing diversity and increasing monotony of the verse. On the contrary, the hexameter of Russian *Dionysiaca* is less monotonous than it could be expected. It might be conjectured that Golubets could not possibly invent something that was even less varied than the hexameter of Gnedich and decided to experiment with the opposite, as *Dionysiaca*, being the longest poem of antiquity, sounds monotonous enough for a modern reader even with all the formal deviations of standard Russian hexameter.

Maksim Amelin had different and even more important reasons for his metrical and lexical experiments with *The Odyssey*, as the intricacy of Homeric diction would present the main challenge for a translator of Homer. This complexity lies not only in enormous lexical variety, but also in phonetic and morphological diversity, which can hardly be translated into Russian even partially. Indeed, many prepositions and other syntactic words have their duplicates, and the subtle semantic aspects of numerous Greek particles are not always clear for a modern reader. Moreover, all the forms of various dialects and periods and all the poetic words could be used simultaneously only in oral epic diction, which was unlike any spoken variant of Ancient Greek. This very flexibility and diversity of language enabled an oral poet to improvise. Some of the peculiarities of Amelin's translation, which are completely absent from Veresaev's version, are apparently intended to reproduce these important features of the original. For example, the "unnecessary" usage of phonetic variants of Russian prepositions, which was severely criticized by Nikolai Grintser, serves as an evident analogy to Homeric practice (Grintser 2013), (Fayer 2014).

The adaptations of Greek and Latin hexametric texts made in the recent 25 years show almost total predominance of Russian hexameter as means of translation. From the formal point of view these translations continue the line of Afanasi Fet, who resorted to relatively high dactylization. The level of dactylization does not depend on the language of the original, as it has often been before. Some poets go even further and invent some unprecedented metrical forms; this practice echoes the experiments in Russian contemporary poetry. These efforts to change the sound of Russian hexameter are sometimes subjected to severe criticism by Classical scholars, although they acknowledge the importance of new translations. Some of those scholars prefer either to go back to abandoned tradition of non-equirhythmic translation or to experiment with verse libre.

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