

Petrović, Svetozar

The metametrical function of verse forms

In: *Teorie verše. II, Sborník druhé brněnské versologické konference, 18.-20. října 1966*. Palas, Karel (editor); Levý, Jiří (editor). Vyd. 1. Brno: Universita J.E. Purkyně, 1968, pp. 15-22

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/120146>

Access Date: 01. 03. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

SÉMANTIKA VERŠE

THE METAMETRICAL FUNCTION OF VERSE FORMS

SVETOZAR PETROVIĆ (Zagreb)

It is on the question of the semantic function of verse forms that the specialists in the theory of versification, on the one side, and the interested non-specialists, including not only literary critics but frequently also poets themselves, on the other side, are most often inclined to complain about the other side's behavior.

The complaint of the specialist, most commonly, would be that the semantic function — especially the autonomous semantic value — of verse forms, in literary interpretation, is, generally speaking, overestimated. The complaint of the non-specialist, most commonly, would be that the theoreticians of verse have no ear and no eye for the semantic function of forms of versification.

There is, I believe, some truth in both of these complaints but, taken as they are, none of them seems to be completely justified.

To do away just in one sentence with the first complaint (as I am going to return to the matter of that complaint, in a way, later on), one could say that the non-specialists (including here a fair number of the specialists of a more casual attitude) aren't so much overestimating as they are wrongly estimating the semantic function of forms of versification. They are looking most often for the a priori given, unchangeable, rudely direct one-to-one correspondences between form and meaning. They are looking, in other words, for the type of relation which does not exist, ordinarily, between sign and what is said even in the natural language.

Speaking about the complaint addressed to the specialist, one should say that it was completely justified when addressed to the 19th century science of prosody, and that it is only partly justified if addressed to the studies of versification of, broadly taken, our own times.

The 19th century situation one may well estimate by glancing through the chapter on "The Principles of Versification" of a book published in 1901 — Gayley and Scott's "Introduction to the Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism", a book which was widely used in its own times (it was a sort of "Wellek-Warren" of our English-speaking grand-uncles), and which still may be very useful for a number of purposes though it is completely forgotten today. There are a few hundred scholarly books and papers referred to, described and evaluated in that chapter: only two or three of them seem to show any interest at all in the semantic function of verse forms, and these, one might feel, were introduced into the discussion only to be ironically commented upon.

Since the beginning of our century, things have changed considerably. The interest in semantic aspects of versification has become respectable in literary and even in linguistic scholarship; it was admitted even by those trends in modern

philology which used to show a marked uneasiness in dealing with questions of meaning in linguistics; and it has been growing during the last decade, as the proceedings of the First Brno Conference on the theory of versification have clearly shown.

So, the contemporary theory of versification does not seem to be open to the objection of not being sufficiently interested in the meaning of forms of versification. Nevertheless, it does seem to be open to a number of related objections.

First of all, our discussions on verse and meaning are still most frequently conceived as discussions of a special, relatively autonomous question — of a question only dimly connected with the main body of metrical research. Our theory, in the more recent decades, has achieved an important progress in devising comparatively objective and precise techniques of description of the poetic meter, but it has failed so far in devising as systematically and as objectively the procedures of dealing with the results of that description. So, after establishing certain facts in the metrical organization of a poem, having arranged our results neatly in an order of sentences or figures, having presented them in words, in a notation of some sort, or on a chart or graph, we have little to expect from the next step. Most often we shall be inclined just to turn the page, to leave our results to eternity if not to scholars who may use them as a kind of fingerprints in textual criticism. And we shall be inclined to start our discussion of the meaning of verse forms — of their relevance to a critical interpretation of a poem — by turning to another level of the poetic structure, by studying sentence intonation, syntactic phrasing or whatever else it may be.

In other words, the contemporary theory of versification does not seem to be open to the objection of not being sufficiently interested in the meaning of forms of versification, but it does seem to be open to the objection of not being able to interpret, in a systematic and predictable fashion, the critical meaning of its own descriptions of verse.

What does it mean, for example, to say that the lines of a poem are iambic pentameters, or iambic pentameters of a kind, except that the lines are of a certain length and of a certain distribution of stresses? What does it mean to say that a poem is a sonnet, or a sonnet of a kind, except that it is a poem of a certain organization of lines and of a certain rhyming pattern? In what sense, if any, it may influence my interpretation of a poem to note that the poem in question consists of iambic pentameters, or that it is a sonnet? To what extent, if any, my observation that a poem consists of iambic pentameters, or that it is a sonnet, may be relevant for my understanding of the poem as a whole, except for the indication this observation may give me about the possible composition of the poem's matter?

These are a couple of questions we are answering practically, with more or less success, from case to case but with no established, critically tested and more than individual approach.

Of course, what I have in mind here, and what is implied in these words as an ideal aim of the contemporary theory of versification, is not a single and generally applicable method of the semantic interpretation of the facts of any metrical analysis. It is, after all, perfectly possible to imagine a number of different and still valid procedures aiming at the analysis of the meter of a poem. There is, as a matter of fact, already in existence a number of different methods

of studying the versification, each of them, generally speaking, corresponding to a type of interest in versification, and aiming, one may suppose, at one aspect of the poem's meter. Some of these methods do not aim at an independently conceived description of the metrically relevant linguistic facts of a poem but start from a clearly defined concept of the meter's poetic effect: they contain, consequently, the critical interpretation of the results of metrical analysis in their very procedure.

There is, for example, a type of prosody which implies the interpretation of a poem, and becomes possible only at the moment when the analysis of the poem as a whole is over. It is, one could say, deduced from a function of meter — from its function to clarify the meaning by telling us how the poem should be read. It understands the meter primarily as the “harmony that adds force to reason, and gives grace to sublimity; that shackles attention and governs passions”, as Samuel Johnson said. In a word, it is the metrical analysis trying to fulfil the function which used to be ascribed to metrical analysis since the earliest times. Method of the Germanic scholar A. Heusler could be quoted, though with some reservations, as a more recent example of it, and the method of the American critic E. Olson could serve as another example, one more conscious of its own nature. This type of metrical analysis is quite a legitimate one but, obviously, it is not the one I had in mind while speaking about the theory of versification here.

What I had in mind here, while insisting on importance of our ability to interpret the results of metrical analysis in the terms of literary criticism and literary history, was, obviously, that type of approach to the study of versification — the most widespread one, and the most influential one in our days — which insists on an exact and objective description of the metrical facts of a poem, and which considerably profited from, and owes some of its serious limitations to, its close association with one or another trend of the modern linguistics.

While keeping an eye on this type of approach to the study of versification, I will be trying to describe here in some detail a kind of relation between the meaning of a poem and its verse form. The purpose of the following lines will be to suggest a possible way of interpreting the facts of an objective metrical analysis in more general critical terms, so they will also have to indicate some prerequisites a metrical analysis would have to satisfy to allow for such an interpretation.

Of course, what I am going to say here won't be more than a suggestion of a possibility.

It will be based just on one or perhaps two examples, and the examples selected will be intentionally extreme, non-typical, for the reason of a clearer explication. The examples will be taken from Croatian and Serbian literature, not only because these are the literatures I am most familiar with, but also because here we have the chance to observe, in many points of the literary history, certain processes and developments which could be described as non-typical or abnormal (non-typical and abnormal in the sense in which Italian and Spanish, French and English literary histories, in most of their periods, can be described as typical and normal, that is to say in the sense in which Greeks were normal children to Karl Marx). Here some non-typical and extreme situations are likely to be found more frequently than elsewhere, and something non-typical and extreme, in literary scholarship as in every other scholarship, is likely to tell us more about

the nature of the phenomena we are studying than something typical and average.

If we return now to one of our questions — to the question: What does it mean to say that a poem is a sonnet? — we may speculate that we should come closer to the answer to our question if we would be able to peel the sonnet form, experimentally, off the poem and to observe what is left and what is missing. Now, that is clearly impossible to do, but, I think, in certain literary-historical contexts an approximation to it, or better to say: a substitute for it, can be found.

What I have in mind is the fortune of the sonnet form in the renaissance and baroque Croatian poetry.

That poetry appeared in the second half of the 15th century along the Dalmatian coast under a strong influence of the Italian renaissance and later on of the Italian baroque poetry. With its main center in the free republic of Dubrovnik, it lasted as a poetry of a continuous, unbroken tradition for more than three centuries, and it declined completely only by the beginning of the 19th century. It produced a vast body of literature of different kinds, and a number of poets of distinguished merits.

All the centers of that poetry were in the sphere of influence of the Italian culture, language and literature. All of them, except Dubrovnik, continued to be, for most of the time, under an Italian, Venetian, political rule. Many of the writers of that literature studied in Italy, and for all we know there was hardly anyone among them that couldn't speak or read Italian, and that wouldn't be, to some degree at least, acquainted with the Italian literature of his times.

Older Croatian poets followed the lead of the Italian renaissance poetry as carefully as their counterparts in the countries of Western Europe did — with Petrarch as a supreme model all the time, and some minor poets (of the kind of Serafino and Bembo) as usually more convenient immediate sources of inspiration.

There is just one slight difference: although we may state as a rule without exceptions, for all the renaissance literatures of Europe, that there is no Petrarchan love poetry where the sonnet form wouldn't appear and flourish, here, poems in the sonnet form are hardly to be found.

Even more. Not a single important and influential lyric poet of the times ever wrote a poem in the sonnet form. Some of those poets, beside writing in Serbo-Croatian, wrote in Italian as well; there are numerous Italian sonnets among their poems, and some of these sonnets achieved a comparatively broad international fame. A few of these poets engaged even in a comparatively unpopular literary game of the times — they wrote sonnets in Latin. All of them used to translate Italian sonnets, often literally, but none of them (with a single and unessential exception) ever tried to preserve, in the translation, the original sonnet form.

Here, really, we find a picture which is directly opposite in the order of its components to the one we know from the literatures of Western Europe. Here, there is not a single poem in the sonnet form in the work of the leading and most characteristic Petrarchan poets, in the poetry of the main centers of the Croatian renaissance, in the work of the poets who have most profoundly absorbed the influence of the Italian renaissance literature. When the sonnet form, after all, does exceptionally appear, it will appear on the outskirts of that literature (on the island of Pag, for example). or in the work of a few poets (e.g. J. Bara-

ković) where it is difficult to establish any certain traces of an important and direct influence of the Italian Petrarchan poetry.

In this context it is not possible to enumerate, not to speak about testing, all the hypotheses that could be suggested as possible explanations of this paradoxically constructed case. I did discuss them, at length, on another occasion. Let me summarize, therefore, just what appears to me to be the only acceptable explanation.

In our case, the sonnet form — the sonnet form itself, apart from its Petrarchan subject-matter, or its original style, or even the way of composing the poem it suggested to the poets — was felt to mean something. The sonnet form itself — the naked form, separated from the poem — was understood as a sign directly expressing a message, as a part of what is communicated, if you like (and not as an organising principle of communication); it was understood as a part of content, if you like (and not as a form that shapes it).

The meaning the sonnet form stood for in the consciousness of the Croatian renaissance and baroque poets (and obviously of their readers) had something to do with the associations the form had collected in its history in Italian literature; it had something to do with the type of relationship which existed between the Croatian and Italian literatures at that time; and it had something to do as well with the circumstances under which Croatian renaissance and baroque poetry was created. Still, it was much more specific than it would have been had it been just a part of a general attitude to the foreign metrical forms (there are, after all, some Italian stanzaic forms, such as *sesta rima*, and some Italian metrical conventions, such as ellision, which were liberally accepted in the Croatian poetry of the times).

The meaning the sonnet form stood for in the older Croatian poetry may be a little difficult to define precisely, especially if one would have to do it in a couple of sentences, but it doesn't matter much in our discussion here. It is always difficult to translate from one system of signs into another, particularly when signs of a complex nature are in question. While translating from the language of metrical forms into the natural language one is bound to have more difficulties than while making a translation into the natural language from the language of the traffic signals, but already with the languages of gestures and facial movements we are going to have difficulties of similar kind and proportions.

The general acceptance and stability of the meaning of a sign at a given time — and the very existence of it — may still be well established by the studies and comparisons of reactions which the relevant population shows to a sign. In the case of the fortune of the sonnet form in older Croatian literature, this can be shown remarkably well — not only by drawing one's attention to the fact that for a long time, for a large number of people (irrespective of their talent or artistic inclinations) it had a universally accepted, firm meaning, but also by drawing the attention to those significant exceptions, to those individual appearances of the sonnet form in instances in which it was accepted as a mere collection of metrical rules, as a form without a specific meaning.

The ability of verse forms to suggest a meaning, in the way in which it was shown here, we may describe as their metametrical property.

It has been illustrated here, paradoxically, by an example in which the meaning was projected by the poets of a literature into another literary tradition but did

exist, as a firm meaning, only in the tradition of their own. It could be illustrated by another characteristic example from the Serbian and Croatian literatures, that of the asymmetrical decasyllable, taking this time into account the opposition between the two stages of the poets' attitude to the meaning it stood for: the 18th and the 19th century one; when it found its way from the oral into the learned poetry, and the 20th century one, when it has completely disappeared from the literary scene.

The examples I have quoted — as simple as they are — may perhaps help to distinguish, from what is called here the metametrical property, some other qualities of verse forms, properly semantic or expressive in a more general way. The metametrical property of verse forms, it should be clear after all, is not what we are speaking about when we speak about the mutual correspondence, state of adequacy, or some other type of relation, between a form and a feeling, or a theme, or a subject-matter, or a genre; equally, it is not the thing we may have in mind while trying to establish the internal artistic capacity of a form of versification.

Though it has not been systematically studied in the past, the metametrical aspect of verse forms has been, of course, noted, implied, or indirectly indicated in many instances, in the studies of versification, and in literary criticism, both of the older and of the more recent times. When the literary critics, among the functions of the meter, sometimes mention its function to bring us into the historical distance towards the poem, they are pointing really to the ability of the meter, of the meter as a naked form, to mark the poem historically. When we are trying, in the theory of translation, to establish the correspondence of a native to a foreign meter, we are doing it essentially with respect to their metametrical (and not purely metrical) character.

By its metametrical property a meter (and a verse form in general) may be compared to a word. Similarly to a word, a meter has a comparatively firm meaning before any particular use in poetry; that meaning is not necessarily one and is not necessarily sharply pointed; in the course of a specific use, in a context, it grows more precise, and the original, "dictionary", meanings get more or less changed.

As much as the meaning of a word, the metametrical meaning of a verse form is able to persist in general acceptance and in comparative stability for a long time. The origin, the character and the changes of meaning, in both cases, have to be treated historically; in our case, it is the literary tradition the historian is primarily concerned with.¹

¹ A few words of explanation about the term *metametrical* may be in place here. Writing about essentially the same phenomenon, J. Hollander speaks about "titling, framing, emblematic, badge-like function of meter" (Kenyon Review 1959, p. 294), about those effects and uses of meter that are emblematic "in the sense that their function is metapoetic, is directed toward commenting on the poem itself, almost in the manner of a subtitle" (*Style in Language*, 1960, p. 192). Our *metametrical* is derived from Hollander's *metapoetic*. Titling is taken here to be just an aspect of the function which seems to be considerably broader: when marking a poem historically, the meter acts more in the manner of a signature, and even more often, as the comparison between a meter and a word in the preceding passages should have shown, a meter may act metametrically much in the manner of the words that are left in the poem between a title and a signature. The specific meter's function we are concerned here with is seen, therefore, as being directly poetic, and metametrical in the sense that it is satisfied along with some other, properly metrical and indirectly poetic, function of the meter. Meta-

As this paper has been moving closer to its end, one has been able to note that both the examples and the explanations offered in it are aimed at advocating a thesis on a very elementary level. One may perhaps hope that some further implications of the thesis have also become more or less apparent by now.

The thesis is that a verse form — the term form being used here to mean a sum of metrical features that can be exactly defined and objectively described — may say something by itself, independently of the words through the arrangement of which it is created, contributing also in that way to the total meaning of a poem. The thesis has been examined on a very simple level — it has been proved by showing that an abundant presence and a complete absence of a verse form, in a literary-historical context, may by itself be meaningful.

The hypothesis implied here would be that, in a certain tradition, specific closer definable varieties of a verse form of the kind of the sonnet, or of the kind of the Serbo-Croatian decasyllabic verse, will be metametricaly marked as well.

What one is to count with, if trying to establish the content of the metametrical aspect of a verse form, is, of course, that the metametrical function is not likely to be of an equal importance in all the cases we are going to face. Sometimes we are bound to be faced with a form whose metametrical aspect will be as undeveloped as to be practically non-existent. Both the forms of a modest past, and the forms widely spread and at the same time poorly marked, will incline to belong to this group.

What one is to keep in mind yet is the understanding that there is only one step from the analysis suggested here to those wrongly directed efforts at the description of the semantic function of verse forms which were mentioned at the beginning of this paper. One may perhaps save himself from that step by not forgetting the difference between what may be called the dictionary meaning, and the real meaning which gets established in the specific use of a form; by noting that the verbal description of the meaning of a verse form is an extremely sensitive affair; by understanding, finally, that the interpretation of the meaning of a verse form may be done only through the code of a literary tradition, that

metrical here should not be understood as something that would come chronologically after properly metrical; in terms of chronology, metametrical is rather pre-metrical, both in the experience of a reader and in the imagination of a poet (as Hollander justly remarks, poets think ordinarily in terms of *choosing* a meter). — If we are to relate the interest in the metametrical to our other interests in meter, we could profit from distinguishing between the three levels a discussion of meter might be attached to. A linguistically oriented theory of versification is ordinarily concerned only with the *stylistics* of a poem; here, one would be inclined to study a poem as a self-sufficient entity; both "intentional" and "affective" are carefully avoided; an objective and reliable description of meter seems to be possible primarily from this point of view, but the critical relevance of the results of the description does not seem to be very great, or, at least, is not obvious; while consistently remaining on this level of discussion, one is likely to look for the semantic effects of meter primarily by trying to interpret semantically variations from the established pattern (one would be inclined to suggest aesthetic significance for particular occurrences of the "frustrated expectation", or for the particular type of interplay between the pattern and the variation achieved in a poem). On the level of *rhetorics* — and it is on the level of rhetorics that the prosody which implies the interpretation of a poem is founded — the question of meter and meaning would ordinarily be discussed in terms of the meter supporting, or modifying, the meaning expressed by the words of a line. We find ourselves on the level of *poetics*, from Aristotle's to our own days (cf. R. Poggioli, "Poetics and Metrics", Comparative Literature I, 1959), when discussing the question of meter appropriate to a type of poetry, to a genre, or to a feeling. It is to the level of poetics that the discussion of the metametrical also primarily belongs, and it is an attempt to relate, in a specific matter, the level of stylistics to that of poetics that this paper is concerned with.

is to say only by referring a specific use of the form to the metrical context of a literary history and of a literary situation.

But what is most important to mention here, in these concluding remarks, has to take us back to that original objection on account of the linguistically oriented theory of versification — to the objection that it is still unable to interpret, in a systematic and predictable fashion, the critical meaning of its own descriptions of verse.

The reason why it is not able to do so, one may add now, could easily be its excessive preoccupation with collection of facts that is not always governed by a proper feeling of discrimination, and that is more often supplemented, on the level of the theoretical reflection, by the attempts to state the metrical problem in the conceptual language of one or another trend of modern linguistics, than by the attempt to learn the meter's proper functions in poetry.

For our purpose here, and for most of other purposes a literary scholar may find relevant while studying versification of a poem, at least two distinctions seem to be essential: on the one side, the distinction between the living and the dead in the history of a verse form, that is to say between something that exists as a part of a literary tradition and something that may only be discovered and reconstructed by the labor and the insight of a scholar; on the other side, the distinction between the elements of a verse form that may become a part of our experience of a poem (that may be normally perceived, sensed as different, in our experience of the poem) and the elements that show themselves only to our post-mortem analysis, and that, therefore, may have no aesthetic significance. It is enough to mention in this context the great importance which is almost generally attached nowadays to that type of comparative metrics which aims at reconstruction of the Indo-European, or of the Old Slavic, meters, to show how some basic discriminations are badly needed today in the theory of versification.

Whatever the value of our modern objective descriptions of meter may be, the discussion of the meter's function in poetry, of its essence, or of its relation to meaning, cannot simply follow from a description of it; it cannot be just deduced from what an objective analysis of meter has to tell us. It is really in the terms of the meter's poetic function that the content and the orientation of the metrical analysis has to be decided. And if a meaning-oriented theory of versification is, as I believe it is, one of the important needs of modern literary scholarship, and if an orientation toward meaning is, as I believe it is, the most essential internal need of our own scholarly discipline, it would be necessary to re-examine the existing procedures of the description of verse in view of the distinctions that have just been suggested.

METAMETRICKÁ FUNKCE VERŠOVÝCH FOREM

Současná teorie verše, zvláště taková, která vznikla v úzkém sepětí s moderní lingvistikou, vypracovala poměrně objektivní a přesnou techniku popisu básnického metra. Dosud se jí však nepodařilo stejně systematicky a objektivně vypracovat postupy, jak zpracovat výsledky takového popisu v obecnějších kritických termínech. Autor ve svém příspěvku ukazuje, že těchto výsledků lze úspěšně použít při výkladech o tzv. metametrickém významu, kterého verš nabývá jako čistá forma uvnitř básnické tradice a v kontextu básnické situace. Uvádí podmínky, za kterých je možno metrických popisů takto použít, a zdůrazňuje potřebu revize popisných postupů vzhledem k některým kritériím, která jsou často opomíjena (co je živé a co neživé v dějinách veršových forem, které formální prvky pocítujeme při normálním vnímání básně a které objevujeme pouze rozbořem).