

V.M.ZHIRMUNSKY
Selecte**d W**ritings

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|Linguistics|
|Poetics|



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30. R. Menéndez Pidal, *La Chanson de Roland et la tradition épique des Francs*, Paris: Editions A. et J. Picard et Cie, 1960, pp. 471-73; id., *Poesía juglaresca y orígenes de las literaturas románicas; problemas de historia literaria y cultural*, Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Políticos, 1957, pp. 374-76. The same is true of Old Polish syllabic verse of the 15th and early 16th centuries. See M. Dłuska, "Sylabizm", *Poetyka. Zarys encyklopedyczny*. Red. nac. M. R. Mayerowa. Dział 3: Wersyfikacja. T. 3; *Sylabizm*, Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1956, p. 28 ff. However, the modern so-called syllabic verse (French and Italian) actually deviates from isosyllabism: the former as a result of irregular disappearance of the mute -e at the end of words, the latter, owing to the metrical rules of "elision" of the end vowel before the next initial one, which do not reflect the actual pronunciation.

31. *Shorsky folklor*, pp. 24-25, 26-27.

32. W. Steinitz, *Der Parallelismus in der finnisch-karelischen Volksdichtung. Untersuch an den Liedern des karelischen Sängers Archippa Perttunen*, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeka-temia, 1934, (FFC No. 115), S. 1.

33. On the question of the role of stress in the metric structure of Finnish syllabic verse see a recent work by M. Sadeniemi, *Die Metrik des Kalevala-Verses*, Helsinki: Ed. for Folklore Fellows, 1951 (FFC No. 139).

34. W. Steinitz, op. cit., S. 2.

35. W. Steinitz, *Ostjakische Volksdichtung und Erzählungen, aus zwei Dialekten*, Tl. 1, Tartu: Operatud Eesti Selts, 1939 (texts and grammar); Tl. 2, Stockholm, 1941 (metrics and stylistics, commentary).

36. Ibid., Tl. 2, S. 9.

37. Ibid., S. 21-22.

38. Ibid., S. 31-39.

39. Ibid., S. 41-46 ("Die etymologische Figur").

40. W. Steinitz, *Der Parallelismus in der finnisch-karelischen Volksdichtung*, S. 4-14.

41. B. Ya. Vladimirtsov, *Sravnitel'naya grammatika mongol'skogo pismennogo yazyka i khalkhasskogo narechiya* (A Comparative Grammar of the Mongolian Written Language and the Khalkhass Dialect), Leningrad: Institute of Oriental Studies, 1929, p. 97.

42. See M. Auezov, op. cit., pp. 74-76. Cf. I. A. Batmanov, *Sovremennyyi kirgizskiy yazyk* (The Modern Kirghiz Language), I, 4th ed., Frunze, 1963, p. 57; M. Ryasyanin, *Materialy po istoricheskoi fonetike tyurkskikh yazykov* (Materials on the Historical Phonetics of Turkic Languages), Moscow, 1955, pp. 33-41.

43. Some remarks on this question pertaining to the verse of *bylinas* were made in my book *Rifma, yeyo istoriya i teoriya* (Rhyme, Its History and Theory, Petrograd, 1923, pp. 263-96).

ON THE QUESTION OF EPITHET

Epithet has long had a respected place among the artistic devices described by traditional stylistics. The theory of epithet was a matter of concern for most researchers in problems of poetics, such as A. N. Veselovsky, A. A. Potebnya and his disciples; of the German theoreticians, for Ernst Elster, Richard Meyer, and many others. Special studies in the use of epithets by Gogol, Turgenev, Lermontov, Blok and other writers are rather numerous and have long been part of the education at school, insofar as schools take into account the modern achievements in the field of "formal analysis" of poetic works.¹ However, concrete analysis of poetic texts (and not only at school) always shows that the concept of epithet is highly vacillating and unstable. It can become part of a scientific stylistics based on a linguistic foundation only after preliminary critique of established usage.

Epithet in the broad sense is interpreted as an attribute, as one of the devices of the poetic style. That is implied, e.g., by A. Shalygin, author of the popular *Teoriya slovesnosti* (A Theory of Verbal Art), whose views may illustrate the common use of this term: "Epithet is one of the extremely effective means heightening the picturesqueness and emotionality of speech. This term is applied to a word or several words added to the ordinary name of the object to increase its expressiveness, to stress one of the features of the object—that which must be foregrounded because of its importance, as if recommending it to the reader's special attention."² From this standpoint Veselovsky may speak of the history of epithet as "the history of the poetic style in an abridged edition", "and not only of style but of poetic consciousness as well",³ for an epithet singles out in the concept of which it is an attribute an "essential" feature, the choice of "essential" features among "inessential" ones characterising in its

turn the poetic consciousness of an epoch or a poet. Such works as the well-known dictionary by A. Zelenetsky,⁴ and most of the special studies in the style of Russian writers, also refer to epithet in the broad sense. For instance, B. Lukyanovsky, on the strength of a similar definition, cites a number of examples of Turgenev's epithets "emphasising the various properties and features of phenomena": *tyoplyi svet* 'warm light', *vostorzhennaya ulybka* 'delighted smile', *rumyanye luchy* 'rosy rays', *zolitisto-tyomnaya alleya* 'a golden-dark lane', *lunnyi, do zhestokosti yarkiy svet* 'moonlight, bright to the point of cruelty', *boyazlivoye i beznadyozhnoye ozhidaniye* 'fearful and hopeless expectation', *zhidkiy, ranniy veterok* 'thin, early puff of wind', and many others.⁵

Next to this wider usage is current another, a narrower one, both definitions often occurring in one and the same author. Thus in the view of Shalygin, whose definition we have already cited, an epithet does not communicate anything new about the object and is not needed for precision of expression.⁶ In the opinion of B. V. Tomashevsky, an epithet "does not introduce any new feature that is not contained in the modified word", repeating the feature inherent in the modified word itself. This distinguishes an epithet as a poetic definition from a logical one, which "narrows the extent of the term" (a wooden house, a three-storey house, official house, are logical definitions).⁷ A. Gornfeld, contrasting epithet to the other kinds of grammatical attributes, uses the distinction, established in logic, between analytical and synthetic propositions; an epithet is an analytical attribute, which repeats the feature already contained in the concept being modified, one that is extracted in the process of its analysis.⁸ Examples of such epithets cited by Shalygin are *belyi sneg* 'white snow', *kholognyi sneg* 'cold snow'; by Tomashevsky, *shirokaya step'* 'wide steppe', *sineye more* 'blue sea'; by Gornfeld, *yasnaya lazur'* 'clear azure', *dlinnotennoye kop'yo* 'spear throwing a long shadow', etc.

Undoubtedly, the term "epithet" in the second sense covers a much narrower range of phenomena than in the first: a special group is singled out among poetic attributes with its specific features which exclude from this group not only

logical definitions in the precise sense of the term (e. g., *platyanoi shkaf* 'wardrobe [for clothing]' as opposed to *bel'yevoi shkaf* 'a chest of drawers [for linen]').

From this new viewpoint, Turgenev's epithets quoted from the article by Lukyanovsky, such as *tyoplyi svet* 'warm light', *zolitisto-tyomnaya alleya* 'a golden-dark lane', etc., do not belong among epithets: the attribute here introduces a new feature that is not contained in the concept being modified, narrowing its meaning (light can be cold as well as warm, lanes green, silvery, etc., as well as golden-dark). Any passage from Turgenev's descriptions of scenery will include poetic attributes introducing a new feature that is not contained in the object being modified, which thus cannot be brought under the heading of epithet in the narrow sense. For instance: "*Molodye yablони koye-gde vozvyshalis' nad polyanoi; skvoz' ikh zhidkiye vetvi krotko sinelo nochnoye nebo, lilsya dremotnyi svet luny; pered kazhdoi yablonei lezhala na beleyushchei trave yeyo slabaya pyostraya ten'*" ("Three Meetings"). 'Young appletrees rose here and there above the clearing; the night sky peered gently blue through their thin branches, and the moon poured its drowsy light; before each appletree lay its faint dappled shadow on the pale grass'. It should be noted that poetic attributes of this kind are no less essential and characteristic for the style of Turgenev's prose than epithets in the narrow sense (*step' shirokaya* 'the wide steppe') for folk poetry. Moreover, inasmuch as these definitions narrow down the extent of the concept modified, introducing a new specific feature, the boundary between them and the so-called logical attributes becomes less distinct.⁹

Such attributes as *pryamye dorozhki* 'straight paths' (as opposed to *winding ones*) or *molodye yablони* 'young appletrees' (as opposed to *old ones*) impose a logically necessary limitation on concepts; however in the context of a poetic work they do not serve for logical classification and nomination but are included in Turgenev's system of descriptive devices in accordance with the principle of selecting poetic attributes conditioned by Turgenev's whole artistic style. From this viewpoint, *molodye yablони* 'young appletrees' and *vysokiye lipy* 'tall limes' are just as essential for a thematic characterisation of Turgenev's

scenery as *tyoplyi svet* 'warm light' and *zolotisto-tyomnaya alleya* 'golden-dark lane', and a student of Turgenev's style must use both kinds of examples in discussing epithets in the broad sense.

Thus the boundary between epithets in the broad and the narrow sense is not made clear with the setting up of a special group of logical attributes. The difference between these two categories may be elucidated by considering concrete examples. In phrases like *belyi sneg* 'white snow', *sineye more* 'blue sea', *yasnaya lazur* 'clear azure', we have classical example of analytical attributes, which do not introduce anything new into the word they modify. In the combinations *buryi sneg* 'brown snow', *rozovatoye more* 'rosy sea', *zelyonoye more* 'green sea', which also belong to the class of poetic attributes, a new feature is introduced which enriches the modified object. In the former cases we have attributes that have taken root and are canonised by the literary tradition, and in the latter, with novel and individual combinations. Connected with this is another and deeper distinction: in the first group the attribute denotes a typical and, as it were, constant feature of the modified concept, in the second, an occasional one, reflecting one of the special aspects of the phenomenon. Of course, *the whiteness* of the snow or *the blue* of the sea can also be individual and accidental features corresponding to a definite aspect; but when the poet uses an epithet in the other sense, he does not, in speaking of *white* snow, think of *white* snow as opposed to *brown*, or a *blue* sea as opposed to *rosy*: for him, white is a typical feature of snow in general, of ideal snow (of the general concept of snow), and blue is a typical feature of sea in general (of the concept of sea). On the contrary, *brown* snow or *rosy* sea always denote special features, inherent in the object at the given place and time, in a given aspect, from a certain individual viewpoint.

In analysing Pushkin's poem "*Brozhu li ya vdol' ulits shumnykh...*"¹⁰ I have already indicated examples of the use of epithets in the narrow sense, i.e., as poetic attributes denoting typical, ideal features of modified concepts. Examples of such epithets are: *ulitsy shumnye* 'noisy streets', *mnogolyudny khram* 'a crowded temple', *yunoshi bezumnye* 'mad youths', *dub u yedinennyi* 'lonely oak', etc. The poet does not mean to say that thoughts

of death come to him only in noisy streets (and not of some other kind), only in crowded temples (not empty ones), etc., he does not delimit or individualise the concept being modified but singles out a typical feature of the phenomenon in the idea of 'it'. From this point of view, Potebnya rightly sees these epithets as a poetic trope, namely a synecdoche (transition of meaning from the particular to the general): "the specific feature (characteristic of the object temporarily rather than permanently) ... not only precludes but, on the contrary, compels one to see a species as a genus and the temporary as the permanent".¹¹ The use of such epithets is indeed a characteristic feature of the metonymic style (synecdoche being a special case of metonymy, as we know).

It is not accidental that the term "epithet" has two meanings in modern stylistics, a narrower and a broader one. This duality reflects changes in usage connected with the evolution of the poetic style in the late 18th and early 19th century. Originally the term "epithet" was used only in the sense of poetic attribute which did not introduce a new feature in the modified concept ("... *non significendi gratia, sed ad ornandam ... orationem*"¹²); hence the usual term which the antique theoreticians employed to designate the corresponding trope, *epitheton ornans* (the "ornamental epithet") as opposed to *epitheton necessarium*, a term which has now gone out of use but which correctly denoted an essential feature of this poetic device. Old-time theoreticians therefore often viewed epithet as a special type of pleonasm¹³ or amplification.¹⁴ All examples cited by Lomonosov in his *Ritorika* (Rhetoric) belong to phrases traditional in the European poetry of that time, with the poetic attribute denoting a typical (ideal) feature of the modified concept (cf. *dolgiy put*, 'long way', *bystriy beg* 'fast running', *kudryavaya roshcha* 'leafy (lit. curly) grove', *rumyanaya* and *blagovonnaya roza* 'pink and fragrant rose', *smradnyi trup* 'stinking corpse', *gor'kaya zhelch* 'bitter gall', *palyashchaya znoyem Abissiniya* 'Abyssinia burning with heat', *prekrasnyi Avessalom* 'handsome Absalom', *Borey, polnochnyi zhitel* 'Boreas the dweller of the north; etc.).¹⁵

In the poetic practice of the French classicism of the 17th and 18th centuries, a poetic attribute was usually an epithet

in the old, narrow sense of the term: the poetry of the classical style had at its disposal a certain range of traditional, canonised attributes conventionally singling out a typical, ideal feature of an object. These stable paired combinations may be illustrated by such examples as *riant bocage*, *forêt obscure*, *rochers déserts*, *fleuve rapide*, *onde fraîche (pure)*, *flots mugissants*, *rameaux touffus*, *grotte solitaire (humide)*, *prés délicieux*, *rapide éclair*, *bouche vermeille (riante)*, *désirs secrets*, etc. Similar examples occur in great numbers in the English poets of the 18th century; that is the so-called stock diction, characteristic of Alexander Pope and his school, i.e., ready-made phraseological clichés sanctified by the literary tradition, e.g., *floating clouds*, *lucid stream*, *flowery vale*, *umbrageous grots*, *shady grove*, *dusky hill*, *purling rill*, *smiling fields*, etc.¹⁶ They are also familiar to us from the Russian poetry of the 18th and early 19th century; cf. Batyushkov's: *kudryavye roshchi* 'leafy groves', *prozrachnye vody* 'limpid waters', *kristal'nye ruch'yi* 'crystal streams', *luga vesyolye*, *zelyonye* 'merry meadows', 'green meadows', *mshisty dub* 'mossy oak', *dymnaya lachuga* 'smoke-filled hut', *ostryi plug* 'sharp plough', *svetlyi mesyats* 'radiant half-moon', *zadumchivaya luna* 'pensive moon', *ten' gustaya* 'dark shadows', *mрак gustoi* 'heavy gloom', *deva yunaya (stydlivaya)* 'a young (shy) maid', *usta alye (vlazhnye)* 'crimson (moist) lips', *zlatye mechty* 'golden dreams', *gor'kiye slyozy* 'bitter tears', etc. Many epithets of this kind are international in character. A closer stylistic scrutiny will reveal their sources in French and Latin poetry and trace their history in the new European literatures. The Russian poetry of the 18th century is particularly rich in such stylistic calques, and establishing the sources of poetic phraseology, especially as regards traditional epithets, is an urgent task of the poetics of Russian classicism.

The romantic reform of style in France and in England was largely directed against the traditional ornamental epithets. The injunction to seek for the *mot propre* (precise naming of objects) and *couleur locale* (local colour) in the school of Hugo and Saint-Beuve facilitated the destruction of the canonised paired combinations in which the attribute became an empty and conventional common place in the course of

time; the struggle against "poetic diction" and the striving towards the simplicity of everyday speech, declared in Wordsworth's literary manifestos, had the same results. Romanticism was the first trend which justified in principle the individual viewpoint and individual usage: instead of the traditional *blue sea* the poet saw the sea as *rosy* or *green*, and *ryzhyyi parus* 'ginger-coloured sail' appeared in poetry instead of the *white sail*. In other words, the general idea of the object is superseded by the individual aspect of the phenomenon conditioned by a definite time and place, and at the same time the objective and ideal artistic style is superseded by the individual manner conditioned by the poet's viewpoint or temperament. The climax of this development is in the artistic technique of the epoch of impressionism, which finally destroyed in art the static and extra-temporal ideas of objects and transposed art into the domain of momentary, flowing and vacillating shades of immediate perception. The stylistic equivalent of this last stage is the search for the rare epithet (*épithète rare*), which concludes the evolution begun by the romantic demand for the *mot propre*.

Thus epithet in the traditional narrow sense of a poetic trope disappears in the epoch of romanticism and is replaced by the individual, characterising poetic attribute. The theory of epithet follows in the wake of this evolution, although it does not realise its direction clearly enough. The new, extended use of the term "epithet" in the sense of a poetic attribute in general corresponds to the artistic manner which became established in the 19th century. However, textbooks of the theory of verbal art traditionally carry also the narrower old definition pertaining to the ornamental epithet, despite the fact that this definition completely contradicts the modern artistic technique with its orientation towards novel and individual attributes, and even the examples cited by the authors themselves from 19th- and 20th-century writers. These remarks may serve as a basis for introducing a certain terminological clarity in the question of epithet, which may be of some use for specialist historical works on the subject.

Following the old and quite precise meaning of the term "epithet", we should apply it only to ornamental epithets, i.e., to the special type of poetic trope described by antique

authors and particularly frequent in the epoch of classicism—a device which must have a special designation. In the other cases we can speak of poetic attributes. Using this terminology, we may say, for instance: in the 18th century, metonymies, periphrases, and epithets are widely resorted to; in the 19th century, epithets are less often used, supplanted by individual attributes: to suit the dominant taste, poetic attributes must be novel, original, and individual. Fully justifiable is also the use of the term “epithet” with reference to folk songs and heroic epics (antique, Germanic, or Slavic): indeed, the so-called standing epithet of the Homeric epics or of Russian *bylinas* is an ornamental epithet traditionally singling out a typical, ideal feature of an object and introducing nothing new in the content of the modified concept.¹⁷

For the rest, it should be remarked that works of the type “epithets in such and such a writer” usually pose a whole series of questions, mostly pertaining to extremely diverse chapters in linguistic stylistics and only fortuitously connected with the problem of poetic attributes. For example, when the reference is to colour, emotional, etc. epithets, what is implied is the question of verbal themes. From the thematic viewpoint, however, the grammatical-syntactic form of a given theme is completely irrelevant: *belyi sneg* ‘white snow’, *belizna snega* ‘the whiteness of the snow’, and *sneg beleyet* ‘the snow appears white, is seen white’ will equally fall within the category of colour themes, and *nezhnyi* ‘tender’, *nega* ‘voluptuousness’, and *nezhit* ‘caress, pamper’, within the category of emotional themes. On the other hand, stylistic analysis can also raise the question of the grammatical-syntactic categories characteristic of a given writer (the use of substantives, adjectives, or verbs).

From this position, in characterising Turgenev’s style with its usual agglomeration of adjectival attributes, one should ignore the semantic function of these attributes: ornamental epithets, individual poetic attributes, and even logical attributes form one rhythmico-syntactic category characteristic of Turgenev’s lyrical prose.¹⁸ Some theoreticians believe it necessary to single out a special group of metaphorical epithets (Tomashevsky’s examples: *svintsovye mysli* ‘leadен thoughts’, *zhemchuzhnye zuby* ‘pearly teeth’). The phenomenon of metaphorisation pertains to the sphere of poetic semantics; metaphors may vary in their

grammatical-syntactic structure: next to metaphorical adjectival attributes (*zhemchuzhnye zuby*) we may find metaphorical substantives (*zhemchuzhiny zubov* ‘the pearls of teeth’), verbal metaphors (*metel’ trubit* ‘the snowstorm trumpets’), metaphors extended to the whole of the predicative group (*metel’ syplet zhemchugami* ‘the snowstorm scatters pearls’), etc. So there is no need at all to set up *metaphorical* adjectives as a special group of epithets.

Thus only one fundamental question remains, for which we save the term “epithet”—whether the given poet uses ornamental epithets, i.e., traditional poetic attributes employed in the special figurative meaning of a typical, ideal feature of the modified concept, or whether he permits himself only individual, characterising attributes following the ordinary prosaic usage. In this sense, the question of epithet pertains to the theory of tropes, that is, to poetic semantics.

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NOTES

1. See, e.g., M. Rybnikova, *Kniga o yazyke* (A Book About Language), 2nd ed., Moscow, 1925, pp. 141-96.

2. A. Shalygin, *Teoriya slovesnosti i khrestomatiya* (A Theory of Verbal Art, with a Reader), 5th ed., Petrograd, 1916, p. 37 ff.

3. A. N. Veselovsky, *Istoricheskaya poetika* (Historical Poetics), Leningrad: Goslitizdat, 1940, p. 73.

4. A. Zelenetsky, *Epitety literaturnoi russkoi rechi* (Epithets in Russian Literary Speech), Part 1, Moscow, 1913.

5. B. Lukyanovsky, “Epithets in Turgenev”, in: *Tvorchestvo Turgeneva* (Turgenev’s Writings), Moscow, 1920, p. 142.

6. A. Shalygin, op cit., p. 37.

7. B. V. Tomashevsky, *Teoriya literatury* (A Theory of Literature), 3rd ed., Moscow-Leningrad, 1927, p. 34.

8. A. Gornfeld, “Epithet”, *Voprosy teorii i psikhologii tvorchestva* (Questions in the Theory and Psychology of Creativity), Vol. 1, 2nd ed., Kharkov, 1911, p. 340.

9. Cf in the same passage: “Pryamye dorozhki skhodilis’ na samoi yeyo seredine v krugluyu klumbu ... vysokiye lipy okruzhali yeyo rovnoi kaimoi... Molodye yabloni koye-gde vozvyshalis’ nad polyanoi” ‘The straight paths converged in

its very middle in a round bed ... tall limes surrounded it in an even fringe... Young apple-trees rose here and there above the clearing'.

10. See V. Zhirmunsky, "The Tasks of Poetics", the present book, pp. 273-74.

11. A. A. Potebnya, *Iz zapisok po teorii slovesnosti* (Notes on the Theory of Verbal Art), Kharkov, 1905, p. 211.

12. *M. Fabii Quintiliani institutionis oratoriae, libri duodecim*, lib. VIII, Lipsia: Teubner, 1884, cap. 6.

13. See G. Gerber, *Die Sprache als Kunst*, Bd. 1, Berlin: R. Gaertners Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1885, S. 437 ff, 449 ff; Bd. 2, S. 251 ff.

14. M. V. Lomonosov, *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy* (Complete Works), Vol. 7, Moscow-Leningrad: USSR Academy of Sciences, 1952, p. 130 ff.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-32.

16. See Th. Quayle, *Poetic Diction. A Study of Eighteenth Century Verse*, London: Methuen, 1924, pp. 25-54 (Chapter 3, "The 'Stock' Diction").

17. A. N. Veselovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

18. See V. M. Zhirmunsky, *op. cit.*, pp. ... 309-11.

ON NATIONAL FORMS OF IAMBIC VERSE

1

Prof. B. Unbegaun's book *Russian Versification* (1956), written in English,¹ twice reprinted and translated into French, is, in its basic orientation, very characteristic of certain directions in modern literary criticism abroad. The author's main source were Russian (Soviet) works of the 1920s (B. Tomashevsky, V. Zhirmunsky, R. Jakobson, and to a lesser degree of G. Shengeli), and partly works of a later period (L. Timofeyev), which are not as a rule quoted in the text but are summed up in the bibliography at the end of the book. However, along with the indubitable facts that were for the first time established in these studies, the author also borrowed from them some erroneous theories characteristic of Russian formalism of that time and in most cases revised by the researchers themselves.

Prof. Unbegaun opens his book with this thesis: "The language of poetry is far from spontaneous. On the contrary, it is highly artificial: nobody employs verse in ordinary speech. Therefore, the rules governing prosody must also be conventional."²

Hence the historical conclusion: the laws of verse, being "artificial" and "conventional", are in most peoples "borrowed" from the outside: from Greeks by Romans, from medieval Latin by the Romance peoples, from Poles (syllabic verses) and from Germans (the reform of Trediakovsky and Lomonosov) by Russians. This mechanistic conception of a chain of "borrowings" is brought into relief by the fact that the author ascribes the status of an important stage in the assimilation of syllabo-tonic verse, German in origin, by Russian poetry, to the handwritten exercises of Pastor Johann Glück (1652-1705) and Magister Johann Paus (1670-1734), two Saxons who had but a poor command of Russian and translated rhymed psalms equimetrically, substituting Russian equivalents for the German syllabo-tonic