

SEMANTIC MEMORY AND GENRE SIGNALS IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN POETIC TITLES

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the title as a concentrated semantic unit in contemporary Russian poetry and studies its role in the organization of meaning, genre orientation, authorial strategy, and readerly expectation. Particular attention is given to the correlation between brevity and semantic density, to the interaction of nominative, metaphorical, and allusive principles, and to the ways in which poetic titles participate in the construction of thematic perspective before the main text begins. The study also considers how modern poets use titles to activate cultural memory, modify lyric tonality, and create additional interpretive tension between the heading and the poem itself. On this basis, the article argues that the title in contemporary Russian poetry functions not as an external label but as an active compositional and semantic element that substantially influences the perception of the whole work.

Keywords: Contemporary Russian poetry, poetic title, semantics of title, poetics, genre markers, intertextuality, lyrical text, authorial strategy, reader reception, cultural memory.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Russian poetry increasingly turns the title into a compact semantic zone in which genre memory, lexical concentration, and the first horizon of interpretation converge. In post Soviet poetic practice the title often performs more than a nominative function, since it frames the reading strategy before the lyric utterance unfolds and directs the reader toward prayer, confession, dedication, note, quotation, or document. The relevance of this problem is reinforced by the fact that Russian scholarship still points to the lack of a sufficiently systematic and historically integrated approach to title theory, while the title itself continues to be treated as a strong textual position that participates in the production of meaning rather than merely introducing the poem.

Within this perspective, the title in contemporary poetry may be studied as a site where semantic compression becomes especially visible. The theoretical basis for such an approach was laid by S.D.Krzhizhanovsky, who understood the relation between title and text as

internally connected and dynamic, and later studies extended this view by examining genre marking, paratextual function, interpretive expectancy, and the historical development of title forms.

METHODS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The research combines close reading with structural semantic analysis of titles in contemporary Russian poetic texts. The main procedure is based on examining the title together with the opening line, the internal lexical recurrences of the poem, and its final semantic accent, since the title changes its value after the whole text has been read. This procedure is complemented by contextual analysis, which allows the title to be correlated with genre signals, biblical and literary allusions, dedicatory formulas, dates, and quotation patterns. A comparative and typological perspective is also used in order to distinguish stable models of poetic naming from individual authorial solutions, while selected observations from earlier Russian studies of title poetics help refine the categories through which contemporary material can be described.

Russian language scholarship on title poetics forms a coherent but internally differentiated field. S.D.Krzhizhanovsky [4] established the conceptual foundation of the discipline by treating the title as a condensed projection of the whole text. Y.V.Babicheva [2] clarified the literary theoretical status of the title at the turn of the twenty first century. M.V.Stroganov [10] shifted the discussion toward historical poetics and showed the need for a broader diachronic model. I.A.Likhodkina [5] examined the title within the framework of paratext theory and translation. S.V.Svivalneva [8] emphasized its prognostic and programmatic role in the reader's perception. I.A.Yudelevich [11] demonstrated the importance of genre semantics in the analysis of poetic titles. S.M.Pronchenko [7] proposed a typology based on a substantial corpus of Bunin's lyric headings. G.V.Mitina [6] explored the problem of title variation and biblical resonance in poetic material. A.M.Koroleva [3] offered a retrospective overview of almost one hundred years of Russian studies in this area, which is especially useful for positioning contemporary poetic evidence within a longer scholarly tradition.

RESULTS

In a twenty five title sample drawn from books by B.Ilyin, E.Zavershneva, S.Belsky, E.Simonova and S.Shuba, the first visible tendency is semantic compression in one word headings such as «рисование», «родина», «сон», «рождество» and «Степь». These names fix an image or existential temperature before the poem begins, yet they withhold plot, speaker, and occasion. Krzhizhanovsky formulated the principle with rare exactness when he wrote: "A dozen or two letters leading behind them thousands of signs of the text are called a title. The words on the cover cannot but communicate with the words hidden beneath the cover" [4. С. 22]. In contemporary lyric writing, this compact form still works as a dense trigger of expectation rather than as a neutral label.

A second group, «Ножницы пустыни», «тощие материка», «в раме окна», «На солнечной стороне», and «Театр в Эпидавре», moves from pure nomination toward orientation, because the title no longer simply names but places the reader within an image, a place, or a culturally marked site before the first line appears. Pronchenko's definition helps explain the effect: "For

the purposes of this study, a lyric title is the first aesthetic nomination, the proper name of a poem that makes explicit the inner mental activity of the verbal artist, his inner world, and his emotional state” [7. С. 146]. In these cases the title becomes not merely a label but an anticipatory semantic frame that already directs interpretation.

The most active formal shift in the sample appears where the heading begins to sound like the poem’s first syntactic movement. This is clear in «Ощупываю свою одежду», «путешествие начинается», «ненавижу горчицу», «я жил я знаю и живу», and «ты засыпаешь, пока рычат», where the title already behaves like utterance, not caption. Because the verbal center stands in the foreground, the reader enters not an object but an action or state. The difference is substantial, since the heading now performs the work of onset, rhythm, and voice at the same time. Stroganov states the theoretical problem in a form that remains directly relevant: “An analysis of works devoted to the poetics of the title has shown the absence of a systematic approach and the necessary historical perspective. It is precisely this that makes it necessary to reconsider titles as a form of authorial reflection” [10. С. 53].

Table 1. Typology of title structures in contemporary Russian poetic texts

Title model	Count	Representative examples
One-word nominal	5	«рисование», «родина», «сон», «рождество», «Степь»
Compact image or place	5	«Ножницы пустыни», «тощие материки», «в раме окна», «На солнечной стороне», «Театр в Эпидавре»
Name or dedication	5	«Павел Филонов», «Колыбельная Артюру Рембо», «памяти БК», «Памяти Л.», «Винсент»
Predicative opening	5	«Ощупываю свою одежду», «путешествие начинается», «ненавижу горчицу», «я жил я знаю и живу», «ты засыпаешь, пока рычат»
Extended event sentence	5	«белый зверь подходит к женщине со спины», «небесную сферу время перекидывает, как мяч», «Слово ведь не сказано но верно...», «У воды есть звон и всё в глубине, всё в глубине...», «В 20:20 сел на Степной на «семёрку», начал трястись...»

A different result emerges in the group built on names, dedication, and cultural recall, where «Павел Филонов», «Колыбельная Артюру Рембо», «памяти БК», «Памяти Л.» and «Винсент» introduce a relation with biography, art history, memory, and literary ancestry before the poem unfolds. Koroleva describes the reading situation with useful precision: “The title is the first thing the reader encounters when taking a book in hand. Then, throughout the process of reading, the name of the book leads the reader from the beginning to the end of the work” [3. С. 56]. In these titles, the guiding function is especially clear, since the heading does not merely accompany the poem but summons an external field of names that continues to resonate inside every subsequent image.

The longest titles in the sample reveal yet another tendency, namely the conversion of the heading into an eventful sentence with temporal or perceptual pressure. «белый зверь подходит к женщине со спины», «небесную сферу время перекидывает, как мяч», «Слово

ведь не сказано но верно...», «У воды есть звон и всё в глубине, всё в глубине...», and «В 20:20 сел на Степной на «семёрку», начал трястись...» already contain motion, scene, or duration, so the reader meets not a signboard but a partially unfolding poem. Here the title absorbs functions that older lyric naming usually left to the first stanza. Length alone does not create this effect, because the decisive factor is the shift from designation to process, from object to event, and from static image to unstable present. Such headings deserve further comparison with opening lines, since contemporary Russian poetry increasingly tests how much of the poem can begin before the poem officially begins.

DISCUSSION

In the analyzed material, nominal headings and compact locative formulations do not simply identify the poem, since they prearrange perception through image, place, and emotional temperature. Against this background, S.V.Svivalneva formulates the readerly effect with particular precision when she writes that “the title functions as a fully independent concept capable of predetermining the reader’s impression of the content and of creating conditions for an adequate perception of the text” [8]. When S.M.Pronchenko counted 452 Bunin titles, he showed that one-word headings dominated with 331 items, whereas the contemporary set discussed here does not allow one grammatical model to dominate in the same way. Placed before the lyric statement, titles such as «родина» or «Театр в Эпидавре» work less as labels than as early semantic instructions that narrow the field of reading.

By contrast, predicative openings and extended sentence headings shift the title from nomination toward unfolding speech, and this movement corresponds to M.V.Stroganov’s historical observation that predicative titles remain sporadic until later stages of literary development. Seen from this angle, S.D.Krzhizhanovsky’s formula remains strikingly apt, since “a precisely made title serves as a seeker of the book; for this, strict parallelism is necessary” [4. С. 26], while headings such as «путешествие начинается» or «белый зверь подходит к женщине со спины» test precisely that relation between the initial wording and the poem that follows.

A different issue appears in titles built on anthroponyms, dedications, and memorial formulas, where the poem enters literature, painting, or biography before its first line. Here the title activates an external cultural field and makes reception dependent on recognition, even when the poem later complicates that first association. I.A.Likhodkina gives a concise definition that is especially useful for this group when she states that “the title of a book is an important component of the paratext, playing a significant role in the fate of the entire literary work” [5. С. 112]. Because names such as «Павел Филонов» or «Винсент» carry prior semantic weight, they intensify the relation between authorial choice and reader memory more sharply than neutral noun headings do.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the material shows that the contemporary poetic title no longer privileges one stable grammatical solution, since noun forms, locative groups, names, predicative openings, and full sentence headings perform comparable work at the threshold of the poem. At the same time, the evidence confirms three persistent features noted in title theory, namely the strong

position of the heading, its dependence on later textual development, and its inclusion in the paratextual zone that directs reception from the first moment of reading.

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