

The success of the shortest literary forms: why did poetry became small?

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The paper studies long-term changes in the length of Russian poetry (1750–1921) to reveal the relation of poem length (counted in lines) to a poetic form and its evolution. Computations were based on the data of 45,000 poems from National Corpus of Russian Language (ruscorpora.ru/search-poetic.html). The research has shown a notable decrease in the mean and median poetry lengths during the 19th century. On the figure below the clear decline could be seen even when the corpus is limited to rather „smaller” poems of 5–50 lines. Shorter text were filtered from observation because they constitute traditionally small poetic genres like epitaph, epigram or inscription.

This decrease is followed by the decline in length diversity, which resulted in short poems (8–20 lines) overpopulating the literature during the age of Modernism. We argue that this transformation towards the short (predominantly lyrical) form could be understood in the general framework of cultural evolution and „environmental” literary pressures: Russian poetry (and arguably other European poetry traditions) struggled to keep its literary niche, while being continuously under the pressure of successful large narratives of the 19th century. Therefore, it was forced to develop complexity while being highly constrained formally (accentual-syllabic verse and rhyme maintained for a long time) by the shrunk length of a lyrical poem. We also argue that similar processes could be noticed in other European literary traditions (based on Czech and English poetry datasets).

