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POETIC FORM AND LANGUAGE STRUCTURE IN ESTONIAN POETRY

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To play the game of poetry one needs, according to Aristotle, two things: the native material of a language and the life which it represents, and the self-imposed rules of the game. The latter must, as Aristotle emphasizes, contrast to some extent with the normal condition of the language. And so, poetry is a continuous voyage between Scylla and Charybdis: on the one side, there is the constant threat of losing the tie with life and the living language; on the other, there is the danger that poetry become indistinguishable from prose. In either case poetry loses the dynamic power of its dual nature of expression and structure, of passion and control.

The question is then whether the contrasting element of "form" should be somehow an organic extension of the language itself, and irreducible to another language, or whether it could be brought in from without. There are different answers to this question. T. S. Eliot, having observed that "we have, in English poetry... a kind of amalgam of systems of diverse sources," continues, most emphatically:

"But there is one law of nature more powerful than any of these varying currents, or influences from abroad or from the past: the law that poetry must not stray too far from the ordinary everyday language which we use and hear. Whether poetry is accentual or syllabic, rhymed or rhyme-less, formal or free, it cannot afford to lose its contact with the changing language of common intercourse... The music of poetry, then, must be a music latent in the common speech of its time."

On the other side, Roman Jakobson says:

"Apparently, foreign influence can serve not only as a stimulus toward the choice of one or the other variant of versification, in accordance with the requirements of the prosody of a given language; they can not only sanction the violation of any extra-grammatical element of that language, but actually, under intensive foreign influence, even a violation of its phonological system is possible."

As far as Estonian poetry is concerned, Jakobson is clearly in the right. Introducing a versification system from without (normally, from another language) may lead not only to an eventual adaptation of that system to the structure of the language in question, but also to an adaptation of that language to the versification system. Quite concretely, one can establish a special "poetic" pronunciation to suit the system.

Now, what is the situation in Estonian? First, the linguistic facts. The dynamic stress is always on the first syllable of a word and, of course, non-phonemic. Quantity is a complex phenomenon. In the first syllable, three degrees of length are phonemic. The quantity of non-first syllables (non-phonemic) depends on the quantity of the first syllable ("quantity balance"). Interestingly, the distinction between "long" and "overlong" plays a significant role in Estonian morphology, but has never, to my knowledge, been utilized poetically. On the other hand, the distinction between "short" and "long," grammatically much less productive, is important in Estonian metrics.

The latter fact is historically explained by the circumstance that the Estonian folk meter is older than the quantity system of modern Estonian. The older Estonian folk poetry has what is basically a quantitative metric structure. The meter is a trochaic tetrameter, with certain liberties, including anacrusis in the first foot. Its fundamental law is that no short stressed syllable shall fall on the downbeat, nor a long stressed syllable on the upbeat of a foot. According to some scholars, the ideal rhythmic pattern ("meter") is realized as an actual sequence of "feet," i. e., two syllables the first of which is "long" relative to the second. According to a recent paper by Ilse Lehiste, things are more subtle than this: the art of versification in the Estonian folk song lies not so much in realizing this simple pattern within a set of given rules, as in an intricate play with the various combinations of words-and-syllables with which this can be done.

Alliteration and assonance are an integral part of Estonian folk poetry, becoming frequently an aesthetic end-in-itself. End rhyme (in the sense of English poetry) is unknown, but the prevailing pattern of syntactic parallelism makes for many grammatical rhymes, many of them dactylic or even hyperdactylic. Alliteration and assonance must be seen in conjunction with the phonology of Estonian: the language is rich in vowels, poor in consonants, especially in consonant clusters. No consonant clusters are tolerated initially, as a result of which alliteration is always quite blunt and striking. Since unstressed vowels are not reduced, assonance and vowel modulation have great possibilities. The language of Estonian folk poetry is lexically and grammatically distinct from spoken Estonian. It shows many archaic traits. I believe that the old folk song died of having become overly archaic, formalized, manneristic, and lacking in synchronic connections with the live, colloquial idiom: it is all playful form, rhythm, image, art — and often no expression.

The development of Estonian *Kunstdichtung* is not connected directly with the tradition of Estonian folk poetry. Some works, not too numerous, written in imitation of the old Estonian folk song present an exception. Only one of them is of real importance: the Estonian national epos *Kalevipoeg* (1857-1861) by F. R. Kreutzwald (1803-1882). It is a conglomerate of authentic Estonian folk verse recorded by Kreutzwald himself or by others, Estonian folk traditions versified by Kreutzwald, and Kreutzwald's own poetry loosely adapted, both in style and in meter, to the Estonian folk song. As Johannes Aavik and other scholars were to show several generations later, Kreutzwald lacked both the folk singer's intuitive and the scholar's analytic knowledge of even the fundamental metrical rules of the Estonian folk song. In the sections created by him, there is an obvious tendency toward a syllabotonic trochaic tetrameter (such as we know from German or Russian poetry), instead of a quantitative one. *Kalevipoeg* also contains many lines which clearly violate the cardinal rules of Estonian folk verse. On the other hand, it has lines, composed by Kreutzwald himself, in which the rules of quantitative folk verse are applied correctly, and against those of tonic verse. Finally, there are lines which seem to follow the rules of neither system: perhaps a concession on the part of the poet to his empiric notion that authentic folk verse will frequently refuse to follow a standard syllabotonic pattern. We have here a most instructive example of how the interference of a foreign pattern, German syllabotonic verse in this case, may cause the disintegration of a native versification system, without actually replacing it by a definite new system. Prosodically, *Kalevipoeg* is a hybrid.

The *Kunstdichtung* of the 19th century is initially imitative of German Classical, Romantic, and pseudo-Romantic poetry, largely the latter. Technically, this means the mechanical transfer of German syllabotonic versification and rhyming rules into Estonian poetry. Specifically, a total disregard of quantity causes short accented syllables to carry the ictus, while long unstressed syllables hit the upbeat. Furthermore, Estonian has very little secondary stress, which happens to be an indispensable element of German versification. And so, one actually has to use a faulty, "artificial" pronunciation to realize the rhythm of some of this poetry. There are many other types of violation of the rules of Estonian grammar in nineteenth-century poetry: truncated forms and ungrammatical contractions (Estonian, unlike German, does not reduce unstressed vowels!), unnatural word order — all induced by the transfer of German poetic license into Estonian, without any "organic" linguistic basis.

The situation was similar as far as rhyme was concerned. The German poetry which served as an example to nineteenth-century Estonian poets used exact — and often extremely trite — rhymes. Estonian being a language poor in exact rhymes, except grammatical, the inevitable effect was one of monotony.

The natural task of an Estonian poet was, under these circumstances, to overcome the practice of mechanical, schematic application of the German syllabotonic system and, instead, either to build the rhythmic patterns of his verses around quantity as well as stress, or else, make the syllabotonic system work by avoiding outright violations of the structure of Estonian. As regards rhyme, there were also two sensible alternatives to the pursuit of a rapidly dwindling supply of exact rhymes: abandon rhyme altogether, replacing it by the assonance and alliteration patterns of folk poetry, or switch to "inexact" rhymes of various types. In a word, the task was to develop the rules and the license of poetry organically, instead of mechanically. This job was actually accomplished, and brilliantly so, by such poets as Juhan Liiv, Villem Ridala, Gustav Suits, Ernst Enno, Marie Under, Henrik Visnapuu, and others. In effect, we see in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century Estonian poetry many traits which are derived from the native resources of the language itself, rather than from imported patterns: virtuosic use of vowel assonance and consonant alliteration as well as acoustic metaphors are much more common than, say, in German or Russian syllabotonic poetry; vowel modulation plays a great role; and, as Ants Oras has recently demonstrated, vowel quantity is often used discriminately and in fact metaphorically.

Estonian poets have learned, in imitating the driving binary meters of Russian and German, to use the resources of their own language intelligently and artistically: short stressed syllables come to stand in the "pyrrhic" feet of the line, i. e., where an "acceleration" is in order, while the main stresses of each line tend to rest on long syllables.

Very clearly, Estonian is a language not "naturally" suited for iambic meters. J. Poldmäe; in a recent study, points out that in the 19th century 84% of all Estonian poetry was still trochaic (85% in quatrains, 70% with *abab* rhyme), while in the 20th, with 71.3% of all poetry syllabotonic, iambs take 41.5% of the total and trochees a mere 16.8%! In other words, Estonian poets have learned to write iambs. And certainly very well, too, as some of the most famous Estonian poems are in iambic meter, "The Churchbells" (1913) by Gustav Suits, for example. Here is a stanza from this poem:

Oh kuulu: kerkokella	Oh listen, they're
lüüväs,	ringing the
see lõõja om so oma	churchbells,

lell!		the bellman is your
Heng niikui taiva psole		own uncle!
püvväs,		It is as if your soul
nii rasselt kaibap, ikep		were straining
kell.		heavenward,
		so heavily does the
		bell grieve and weep.

The alliteration patterns are obvious here, as is the sound symbolism. Looking at the whole poem (it consists of fourteen quatrains), we see that in about half the lines the iamb in the first foot is created by the use of a proclitic monosyllabic word (such as the proclitic form of the personal pronoun, particles such as *ei* 'not,' and interjections such as *oh*). Dissimilation of accents takes care of the rest (lines 2, 3, and 4 of the quatrain quoted above). In both instances the line must start with a monosyllabic word. There is not a single exception from this in the whole poem. And this in spite of the fact that monosyllabic words are much less common in Estonian than, say in German (Estonian has neither a definite nor an indefinite article). Under these difficult conditions, Estonian poets still manage to write excellent iambic verse.

Unlike in the West, traditional syllabotonic meters have not as yet exhausted their possibilities, especially now that Estonian poets are consciously aware of the linguistic conditions under which the syllabotonic system must operate in Estonian verse, conditions which, from a difficulty and annoyance, can be turned into a challenge and a rich source of rhythmic and metaphoric effects.

The possibilities in the area of accentual verse are equally great. Some of the best Estonian poetry is in accentual verse, for instance, much of Juhan Liiv's late verse. Stress in Estonian, though non-phonemic, is of the "dynamic" type and strong enough to be the sole bearer of rhythm.

Vowel assonance and vowel modulation, as well as very rich alliteration patterns are absolutely "natural" in Estonian: they occur to the articulate speaker even in colloquial prose. Being so readily available, they are good for a sufficient amount of poetic integration even where the integrating effect of rhythm is weak. For this reason, *vers libre* offers great possibilities in Estonian and is much more popular there than, say, in Russian.

Furthermore, there is the almost virgin territory of quantitative and tonic-quantitative verse, cultivated by such contemporary poets as August Annist, Ain Kaalep, and Aleksis Rannit. And finally, there are poets who occasionally return to the traditional meter of Estonian folk poetry, and with good success.

The possibilities are equally great in the area of rhyming techniques, once the requirement of "perfect rhyme" has been replaced by flexible and much more rewarding "free rhyme", alliteration, assonance and consonance patterns. It should be mentioned that, in contradistinction to German and Russian poetics, Estonian poetic usage has not developed any abhorrence against tautological rhyme, grammatical rhyme, or dactylic and hyperdactylic rhyme. Skilled versifiers, such as for instance Betti Alver, come up with whole poems which have nothing but perfect dactylic rhymes — with an intriguing metaphoric effect, such as teasing, mockery, or urgent insistence.

In all, then, at least seven different systems of versification are at present current in Estonian poetry. Let me just list them:

I. Tonic systems: 1. syllabotonic, 2. accentual, 3. *vers libre*.

II. Quantitative systems: 1. traditional folk verse, 2. secondary quantitative (devised by Ervin Roos in imitation of classical quantitative meters), 3. quantitative-tonic.

III. Syllabic verse used by Ants Oras and August Sang in translations of Romance syllabic poetry).

I am not claiming that all of these systems are equally well suited to be the vehicle of fine Estonian poetry. But any advantage which one system or the other may seem to have may all too easily dissipate before the magic wand of a poet of genius who may decide to use a "different" system.