



# Versification

*Metrics in Practice*

Edited by

Frog, Satu Grünthal, Kati Kallio and Jarkko Niemi

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# Preface

It was 2016, on the lovely morning of May 25th. The Great Hall of the Finnish Literature Society (SKS) swiftly became crowded with voices as innumerable hands fastened nametags, flipped through papers and hastened to pour another cup of coffee. The air veritably shimmered with the vibrant bustle of enthusiasm in the beams of sunlight that poured in through the room's dizzyingly tall, slender windows, playing on a chandelier otherwise too high to be noticed. And at the crescendo rose a voice above the multitude, words of welcome washing across the crowd as shuffling feet rapidly found their places, and from the impression of chaos emerged an illusion of order.

Sometimes a lively scholarly event sets into motion spirited discussions that grow for years to follow. Thus began *Versification: Metrics in Practice*, the 13th conference of the Nordic Society for Metrical Studies (NordMetrik), organised by Folklore Studies of the University of Helsinki, the Finnish Literature Society and the Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies, University of Helsinki. This three-day event brought together forty-seven speaking participants and roughly as many additional attendees. The participants represented a wide variety of disciplines, meeting to discuss shared interests in the operation of metrics and poetics as they are and have been used. The cordial atmosphere nurtured rich and fruitful dialogues across the diversity of views, alternating between plenary lectures and parallel sessions on sites of both the Finnish Literature Society and the University of Helsinki. The book that you hold before you has been developed on the platform of those discussions. Rather than conference proceedings that aim to provide a written record of the many papers and lectures presented in that venue, this volume is a continuation and sequel as a publication project. The chapters of this volume have been invited, organized and developed to form a dynamic exposition of discussions surrounding the phenomenon of versification.

We are grateful for the support from the Academy of Finland research project, "Oral Poetry, Mythic Knowledge, and Vernacular Imagination: Interfaces of Individual Expression and Collective Traditions in Pre-modern Northeast Europe" (2012–2016) of Folklore Studies, University of Helsinki, the University of Helsinki Research Community, "Cultural Meanings and Vernacular Genres (CMVG)", the Finnish Literature Society, the Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies, University of Helsinki, and the generous support of the Wihuri Foundation.

— *The Editors*

# Helsinki sive in Tartarum descendens sive *Katabasis*: ad urbis nomen lusus

In Tartarum descendentem mi non eunt  
umbrae viventes obviam, quidem tenera  
luce carentes utque vidimus neque  
Stygias paludes nec cumbam Charonticam.  
5 Quam mirum quam novum quanto inauditum sit.  
Nunc apparent rari nantes in gurgite  
salso, nunc Baltico in sinu laeti manent.  
Mutantur Elysii campique in Piceam  
hanc insulam, pratorum divitem, mare  
10 complectentem fluctusque undasque et aequora.  
Non mirum non novum neque inauditum sit,  
ut prato quondam ranam conspexi levem,  
ranam non ranam quandam, quae minime viret,  
colorem mutans purpureum accipit, caput  
15 summum ferens nigrum vel ambulat et non salit.  
Quam mirum quam novum quanto inauditum sit  
Humanam quasi imaginem dabat sibi.  
Venimus ad illud, linguam conantes mihi  
captare ignotam, quae caret sono lepido  
20 Latinitatis haud mihi inimicissimae.  
Nequit coaxare illud peregrinum sed tamen  
Quid dicit, quid dicit exoticum rogo,  
et audiendo iterum audiendo amplexa tum  
nonnulla verba demum capto: *Terve tervetuloa*.

Ab imo pectore vobis gratias agimus,  
Hans Nollet

# Helsinki or Sinking down into Hell or *Katabasis*: Pun on the Name of the Town

As I sink down into Hell I don't come across  
The living shades, nor did I see the ones who  
Miss the lovely daylight nor did I notice  
The Stygian marshes or Charon's boat.  
5 How strange, how new, so unheard of, this might be.  
Here and there people now appear in the salty  
whirlpool, and they are happy to stay by the Baltic Gulf.  
And the Elysian Fields have changed into Pitch-black  
Island [Tervasaari], rich in meadows, embracing  
10 The sea, the water and the rolling waves.  
Not strange, however not new or so unheard of, will be the fact  
That I happened to observe a moving frog in the meadow,  
A frog who is not a frog, who is not green at all.  
It changed its colour into purple, and on the top of its  
15 Head it wears a black scarf, and it walks instead of hopping.  
How strange, how new, so unheard of, this might be.  
It gave itself the shape and the appearance of a human being.  
I approach it, in an attempt to understand the language  
Which is unknown to me, which lacks the soft tones  
20 Of Latin that is so dear to me.  
This foreign creature cannot croak and still  
I keep on asking myself, what is this exotic saying?  
And I try to listen again and again, I finally capture  
some entangled words: *Terve tervetuloa*.

As a token of sincere gratitude,  
Hans Nollet

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## Introduction

Versification describes the marriage of language and poetic form through which poetry is produced. Formal principles, such as metre, alliteration, rhyme or parallelism, take precedence over syntax and prosody, resulting in expressions becoming organised as verse rather than prose. The aesthetic appeal of poetry is often linked to the potential for this process to seem mysterious or almost magical, not to mention the interplay of particular expressions with forms and expectations. The dynamics of versification thus draw a general interest for everyone, from enthusiasts of poetry or forms of verbal art to researchers of folklore, ethnomusicology, linguistics, literature, philology and more. The authors of the works in the present volume explore versification from a variety of angles and in diverse cultural milieus. The focus is on metrics in practice, meaning that the authors concentrate not so much on the analysis of the metrical systems per se as on the ways that metres are used and varied in performance by individual poets and in relationship to language.

This volume is straightforwardly organised. It opens with an introductory chapter, “Metrics in Practice”, followed by three sections that bring particular aspects of versification into focus, illustrated through focused empirical studies or investigated through broader comparative settings. In the first section, *From Metre to Performance*, the authors explore how metres operate and evolve in social discourse, with a focus on oral traditions. Metre is often approached abstractly as the formalisation of how words, sounds and sometimes also semantics relate to rhythm. Such models of metres developed in research provide invaluable frames of reference for discussion, but the chapters of this first section highlight that abstract approaches to metres can be highly idealised and conceal the range of variations in a broad tradition, the evolution of a poetic form over time, and the flexibility with which individuals may manipulate metrical form in specific situations. In the second section, *Poets and Metres over Time*, particular poets are then brought into focus, with their choices and strategies. These chapters focus on literary poetry and how individual agents engage with and manipulate poetic forms, ranging from a heritage of oral tradition to that of Classical Latin. In the

third section, *Language and Poetic Form*, the chapters pay attention to formal dynamics at the heart of versification. Together, these different discussions not only elucidate specific cases in numerous traditions; they also unite to offer a deeper understanding of how versification operates both socially and at the level of individuals, and both in the technical operation of forms and as a vehicle for meanings bound up with ideologies.

### *From Metre to Performance*

We have become so accustomed to discussions on metre and poetics in abstract terms that it is easy to lose sight of the fact that poetic metre exists only through the use of language. It is still easier to forget that such use of language is not simply theoretical; it is connected with social practices that provide a framework for poetry and its reception. Such frameworks are especially salient in oral poetics, which offer rich laboratories for developing insights into the operation of versification and perspectives on variation in practice.

Discussions about many traditions of oral poetry tend to become reduced to a generalised abstraction of the poetic form as a frame of reference for discussing particular performances or recorded texts. As a consequence, local conventions of poetry become marginalised, and variations linked to practices outside the generalised model easily remain beyond discussion. Kati Kallio illuminates these issues through traditions of the so-called Kalevala-metre poetry of Finland, Karelia and Ingria. This poetic form seems to belong to the common linguistic heritage of Finnic-speaking peoples. Kallio uses it to illustrate what can occur as historical language changes lead spoken language forms to become unmetrical, structural impacts of adapting new singing forms to metrical verses, and the potential for the metrical form of linguistic verses to shift to a deep structure where the performance mode transforms the surface structure in singing.

Traditions of song and metre do not exist in isolation, and understanding a tradition of versification may require perspectives on interactions among different poetic traditions. Jarkko Niemi explores the challenging case of sung metres in the Uralic languages of northern Eurasia. These different language groups have a long history of contacts and interactions that have affected the evolution of their respective metres and singing traditions. Only by gaining perspectives on the relations among these traditions can their particular manifestations be fully understood.

The potential for variations in the relationships between metre and music may also be built into a tradition. For example, rather than simply having a predictable metre that might be used with different musical forms, the court poetry of the Ottoman Empire was produced within a complex system with principles for generating metrical structures, on one hand, and a complementary set of principles for musical structures, on the other hand, along with conventional strategies for how these might be combined. Nicolas Royer-Artuso presents the dynamics of this system of poetry and music, illustrating its workings through an experimental approach that shifts the

perspective from considering these systems at a level of abstraction to their pragmatic and flexible operation in use.

Historical poetic traditions surviving only as texts naturally give rise to various hypotheses about the ways that they might have been performed. Particularly where such poetries diverge from familiar forms, such hypotheses easily drift as speculation, untethered from empirically grounded frames of reference. A significant strategy for evaluating different possible manners of performance is a comparison with more extensively documented later traditions. Jacqueline Pattison Ekgren and Joe Siri Ekgren reveal the formal correspondence of Old Germanic verse forms to twentieth-century recordings of Norwegian *stev* songs. Old Germanic verse forms, similar to those in Old English and Old Norse, were composed in an accentual metre that lacks a regular rhythm, for which performance analogues have been difficult to identify. Ekgren and Ekgren show the formal similarity to *stev*, composed in corresponding accentual metrical structures and performed with a rather free rhythm that people raised in the tradition could nevertheless predict. This case study illustrates comparative methods' potential to offer new perspectives on practices behind poetry traditions that have reached us only as texts.

Whereas the four preceding chapters consider versification and its variations in performance as phenomena linked to and shaped by particular social-historical settings, this section's final chapter considers versification as an integrated part of complex practices. Through their study of interactions between music and language in Yattuka funeral chants, Maria V. Stanyukovich, Galina B. Sychenko and Sergei B. Klimenko reveal the complexity of the practices, of which verbal art may be just one part. The context of the practices provides a framework for considering larger structural units in performances and how these operate in versification.

These five perspectives on performance, variation and change in metre are complementary. They form a progression from local and regional variations to broader traditions in multicultural networks and return to a versification form's potential for internal variation and embeddedness in situated practices. Together, these chapters offer insights into the processes through which poetic forms operate and evolve in relation to factors beyond simply words and metres.

### *Poets and Metres over Time*

Although metres and poetics have social foundations for the production and reception of texts as poetry, they are nevertheless engaged by individuals. What occurs in such engagements – both during the course of an individual's life and, more generally, concerning the individual's relations to poetry and poetics in society over time – is most observable through literary traditions.

In the second section of this volume, attention precisely turns to literary poets and the poetic systems with which they engage or potentially even transform. When approaching individual poets within a literary tradition, the individual's perception of poetics – that is, the subjective understanding

of poetry and its principles – is brought into focus. Erika Laamanen leads us into the world of the poetics of the Finnish poet Lauri Viita (1916–1965) and their evolution across his career, with a particular focus on what she refers to as *metalyric* or poetry that reflects on the lyric genre. Through her investigation, Laamanen reveals the complexity of an individual’s engagement with poetic forms. The case of Viita’s adaptation of (literary) Kalevala-metre and statements about it are explored to uncover interfaces between poetics proper and broader ideologies, which in this case is an ideology of the life and evolution of poetic forms.

Within a tradition of written poetry, poets may engage with models of form and language that span centuries. Hans Nollet introduces Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) as an example of a neo-Latin poet who engaged with models of verses that go back to the works of Vergil and Ovid. Nollet subjects Lipsius’ poetry to a detailed statistical analysis of form against the context of other evidence of influence. Rather than principles of metrical form varying in isolation, influences on Lipsius’ lexicon through the models of certain Latin authors are revealed as significant factors affecting the preferred rhythmical shape of his verses. The emerging perspective on impacts affecting the language of a poet in his use of metrical form anticipates the discussions in the closing section of this volume.

In contrast to Kalevala-metre, rhymed metres are less known among Finnic traditional poetic forms. During nineteenth-century Romantic Nationalism, the role of folk poetry was self-contradictory. The elite’s interest and appraisal mainly focused on folklore in the Kalevala-metre, which was nonetheless being rapidly replaced by end-rhyming types of folk songs composed in couplets and stanzas similar to those found in many European traditions. These new types of rhymed couplets became very popular among the people, and many poets started using them by the end of the nineteenth century. Hanna Karhu explores the adaptation of oral tradition to written poetic forms in the works and the notebooks of Otto Manninen (1872–1950). She brings into focus rhymes as used by Manninen alongside rhymes in oral poetry, with comparisons that offer insights into the processes whereby traditional forms of verbal art could be used as resources in composition or adapted more directly to the milieu where written rather than oral poetry was valorised.

Together, the authors of the three chapters in this section offer insights into how diverse strands of influence shape the uses of verbal art by particular poets, as well as how poets draw on, use and manipulate models that they regard as constituting the heritage of the poetry in which they participate. These three studies serve as reminders that versification is not simply something that happens in the world but is an activity engaged in by agents. These agents use it to do things, ranging from supernaturally affecting the world or pacifying children with lullabies to constructing individual identities as poets and collective identities as members of certain cultural traditions.

## *Language and Poetic Form*

Versification is fundamentally concerned with relating language to poetic form, irrespective of its social or personal significance, its varieties of synchronic or diachronic uses, or its use and manipulation by individual poets or other agents. Relationships between language and metre and how these interact are repeatedly addressed in the first eight chapters of this book before being brought into targeted focus in the final section.

Metres tend to be formalised templates that organise phonic and syllabic features of language that are salient for language users. As stressed in the opening chapters, historical language changes affect how words and phonology function and are perceived in relation to metre. Janika Oras and Mari Sarv stress that the potential for variability resulting from such changes may make the variations impossible to analyse independently of melodic form. They return to a discussion on Kalevala-metre poetry, now in the Seto singing tradition, that is, the poetic form in the Finnic language branch most distantly related to Finnish and Karelian and the traditions earlier addressed by Kallio. The Seto tradition has been affected by both language changes and singing traditions of neighbouring cultures. Metrical analysis raises distinct issues because verse lines appear far more flexibly handled than in other regions, with potentially multiple available solutions for making a verse well-formed in sung performance. When the sung form is taken into account, Oras shows that changes in syllabic quantity that occurred in several branches of the Finnic language fed back into the evolution of the Seto metre. She reveals how phenomena that appear as simple or perhaps almost random variations, when viewed against Kalevala-metre as a common abstract system, are in fact regulated by the language's conventions for the relations between language and metre in performance.

Perhaps the most iconic example of the relations between language and metre is formulaic phraseology that is fitted to regular use in particular metrical contexts. This relation is turned on its head in the tradition of Icelandic post-medieval *pulur*, a form of poetry that is simultaneously written and oral and that organises verses through metre, rhythm, parallelism, alliteration and rhyme or other phonic patterning. However, poetic features are mixed and matched in a more or less continuous density rather than employed periodically or even consistently. Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir explores the interaction between language and poetic form in the movement of poetically structured phraseology between other genres and *pulur*, revealing how they may be reformed in the movement across different poetic environments. She stresses that although *pulur* lack periodic metre, formulaic language used in them crystallises in relation to metrical or other poetic principles. As a consequence, formulae not only develop stable relationships with poetic principles but also import those principles into the stretches of text where they are used.

Conventional linkages between language and poetic principles are found in an astounding variety of forms and contexts, of which formulaic language in *pulur* is but one. In the final chapter of this book, Frog theorises this broad phenomenon as *metrical entanglement*, which he discusses in relation to

different poetic principles for organising discourse both at the level of whole texts and in smaller units of utterance used in larger sequences of text, like the formulae of *pulur*. In this wide-ranging chapter, Frog addresses formulaic sequences in metred verse and considers preferential uses of individual words in particular metrical positions or in order to carry alliteration or rhyme. He examines how language can become entangled with semantic parallelism and how metrical entanglement is even manifested in idioms of conversational talk. Frog's overview closes the collection by bringing into focus a phenomenon lurking in the background of the preceding discussions.

The authors of the three chapters in this section explore subtleties of the relations between language and poetic form, even if this cannot be done exhaustively within the confines of a single book. The authors progress from considering impacts of language changes on metrical form to asking what happens to formulaic language when it moves between poetic environments and, finally, to considering conventional relationships between language and poetic form that evolve socially through discourse. Taken together, their works offer new insights into the dynamics of versification as contextualised in the preceding sections of this volume.

### *Into the World of Versification*

No natural language in human history is known to have been without some form of verbal art. Even where it has not been recorded, some form of poetically organised discourse can be inferred. This fact suggests that versification is somehow fundamental to culture and underscores the importance of subjecting this phenomenon to concentrated discussion. The contributors to this volume examine many facets of versification as a process and a practice from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives across a wide range of forms of cultural expression. The three sections bring different relations of poetic form in versification into focus: performance, individual agents of composition or performance and language. The order of the sections is less important than reading the chapters of each section in dialogue with those of the others. Against the background of the discussions in the other sections, the significance of individual chapters comes in full bloom. Together, the contributions to this volume yield new knowledge and understandings of this quite fundamental phenomenon of metrics in practice. They should also be recognised as contributions to not only one book but as contributions to much broader networks of discussions in a fertile exchange of knowledge, with roots digging deep into the past and with branches growing towards the future. The negotiation of such knowledge with our readers will undoubtedly lead to new understandings and open new directions for investigation. We are glad that you have been able to join us.



Versification describes the marriage of language and poetic form through which poetry is produced. Formal principles, such as metre, alliteration, rhyme, or parallelism, take precedence over syntax and prosody, resulting in expressions becoming organised as verse rather than prose. The aesthetic appeal of poetry is often linked to the potential for this process to seem mysterious or almost magical, not to mention the interplay of particular expressions with forms and expectations. The dynamics of versification thus draw a general interest for everyone, from enthusiasts of poetry or forms of verbal art to researchers of folklore, ethnomusicology, linguistics, literature, philology, and more. The authors of the works in the present volume explore versification from a variety of angles and in diverse cultural milieus. The focus is on metrics in practice, meaning that the authors concentrate not so much on the analysis of the metrical systems per se as on the ways that metres are used and varied in performance by individual poets and in relationship to language.



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