



Ain Kaalep

Ain Kaalep (04.06.1926–09.06.2020)

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Ain Kaalep was not a poetry scholar; although he received a diploma in the field of Fennougristics at the University of Tartu, *stricto sensu*, he was not a scholar at all. In the Estonian humanities, particularly poetics, Kaalep was a kind of cultural hero who, defeating the old system, established new templates and rules for Estonian poetry and poetics. During the 1950s and 1960s Kaalep was the only Estonian author who was engaged in versification theory – his work bridged interwar Estonian poetics and the rebirth of Estonian versification studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Kaalep left a significant imprint on the research of Estonian verse. His studies were the most important contributions to the field of Estonian poetics before his disciple Jaak Põldmäe's (especially Põldmäe 1978; see also Gasparov, Lotman, Rudnev, Tarlinskaja 2017).

Kaalep's university studies began in 1943 and ended in 1956. Shortly after entering the university, he volunteered for the Finnish Army and fought in the Continuation War.¹ From 1946–1947 he was imprisoned for this. After his release Kaalep was banned from continuing his university studies for several years.

Before the Second World War, the field of humanities – including linguistics, poetics and poetry itself – was rapidly evolving in Estonia. The Soviet occupation meant, among other things, a disruption of culture. Many cultural figures emigrated, others were repressed, and the remainder were forced into silence or conformity with the new ideological and aesthetic order. Although this new order permitted revolutionary “accentual” verse in the style of Mayakovsky, but for the most part, the new meant the old: the realist canon of the 19th century was reaffirmed, which in verse meant the predominance of the syllabic-accentual system. The “progressive” turned out to be monotonous traditionalism.

Ain Kaalep was one of the few figures determined to carry on cultural continuity in Estonia, and he was the only one who accomplished this in poetic,

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¹ Kaalep belonged among the so-called Finnish Boys, an Infantry Regiment 200 composed mostly of Estonian volunteers.

translation and scholarly work. Like the modernists of the early 20th century, he fought against the hegemony of syllabic-accentual verse, but the context had changed: for the modernists, the fight against syllabic-accentual monotony was foremost a fight against the German tradition in Estonian poetic culture. In Soviet Estonia, however, syllabic-accentual versification meant the reorientation to 19th-century romantic and realist poetry, both Estonian and Russian. In addition, it must be noted that a campaign against cosmopolitanism and “groveling before the West” began in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1940s.

This was the context in which Ain Kaalep began his fight, manifested in his poetic and translated works as well as in his poetological and philological journal articles and essays. A cosmopolitan, whose ideal was Goethe (with his West-Eastern Diwan), Kaalep worked to make Estonia open to global culture. Under the political and social conditions in the Soviet Union, one could of course speak only of poetry, and Kaalep did indeed begin with prosody.

However, this field was politicised as well. The problem of free verse was especially acute; it was treated as a Western and decadent form and also appeared suspicious on ethical and aesthetic grounds. It only became possible to openly polemicise on the subject of free verse at the beginning of the 1970s. The most important Soviet literary journal – *Voprosy literatury* – dedicated a forum to free verse in 1972. Arguments in support of free verse were permitted, yet the more famous Russian authors partaking in the discussion were against free verse for one reason or another (*Voprosy literatury* 1972). While Kaalep spoke out in defence of free verse as early as the end of the 1950s (Kaalep 1959a), in 1969 he had a chance to present his arguments, in Russian, in a prestigious collection of papers from across the Soviet Union (Kaalep 1969b). Kaalep chose a risky strategy in his article, arguing that, while free verse may be a form of Western poetry, the foreign origin of the metre is an advantage. The foreign can be progressive, whereas the traditional can be reactionary, he argues, and presents Roman epic verse as an example: when Livius Andronicus translated Homer into traditional Saturnian verse, which “differs significantly from hexameter”, the work found few admirers (Kaalep 1969b: 78–79). Translation into a separate, familiar verse form did not go on to create a tradition. Quintus Ennius, however, tried to convey not only the content, but also the verse form of the epic poems. Despite numerous mistakes, his hexameter formed the basis of a tradition that gave rise to the poetry of Virgil and Ovid. Kaalep gave this example to demonstrate the progressive character of domesticating a foreign form.

Kaalep relates another story to the rooting of syllabic-accentual verse in Estonian poetry. Paul Fleming, student and friend of Martin Opitz, arrived in Tallinn in 1635 and established a circle of Estophile poets who wrote original

poems according to Opitz's system, i.e. using verse feet and rhyme. They also translated church songs with this method, but these songs were not published until decades later, in 1656. When the new collection of church songs was finally printed, the foreword explained that the translators had been suspected of using the new verse form to smuggle a new religion into Estonia. "A heavy ideological accusation – and only over the matter of a new, as yet unknown system of versification!" (Kaalep 1969b: 82–83). Kaalep was clearly alluding to his contemporary context and the prevailing ideological accusations against using Western verse metres; syllabic-accentual verse, heavily favoured by Soviet literary science, itself had Western origins, not just in Estonian poetry, but also in the Russian poetic tradition. Kaalep reminds readers that Trediakovsky-Lomonosov's reform, like Fleming's, was conducted on the basis of Opitz's templates. In the contemporary realm, Kaalep also points out that free verse is used not only by Western decadents, but also communists, including Bertolt Brecht, Pablo Neruda and Nâzım Hikmet.

Ain Kaalep was a poet and translator, but also one of the leading theorists of poetry translation. Kaalep's primary merit in the field of Estonian versification studies is related to the theory of systems of versification. Unlike his predecessors, he connected the problem of verse systems with linguistic, specifically phonological structures (Kaalep 1959b, 1959c). He tried to prove that, since quantity is an important phonological factor in the Estonian language, the quantitative system of versification can be used not only in ancient verse metres, but also in modern originals. Kaalep categorized five systems of versification that appear in Estonian verse both in theory and in practice: quantitative, syllabic, syllabic-accentual, accentual, and free verse. He was the first – and not only in Estonia – who began to talk about free verse not just as an infringer of norms, but as a separate system of versification (Kaalep 1959c, 1969b, see also Lotman, Lotman 2018: 59).

Kaalep's position on the quantitative system of versification must be treated in context of polemics over the possibilities of quantitative verse that arose in Estonia in the first half of the 20th century. The central question of quantitative versification was largely related to the evolvment of phonetic studies, which described quantity as inextricably linked to the phonemic structure of the Estonian language. A laboratory of experimental phonetics was established in Tartu. The working group evolved into a school of phonetic scholars, the most famous of whom was Ilse Lehiste, who later emigrated to the West. First the quantitative basis for Estonian runic verse was discovered (the quantitative structure of Finnish *kalevalamitta* had already been noticed earlier), then a question arose: if the Estonian language is characterised by quantity contrast, as in classical languages, why not translate ancient verse into an authentic

form? It turned out, however, that the quantitative principle of Estonian runic verse is fundamentally different from those of ancient verse, and secondly, the Estonian system of three syllabic durations poses a separate issue for translators. Theorists developed different types of quantitative verse in response to this quandary.

Classical philologist Ervin Roos (Roos 1938) proposed an original solution. Independently from Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson, he formulated the principle of proportionality, according to which the quantitative value of a syllable only becomes apparent in a syntagmatic context. While school grammars considered all monosyllabic words to be of the third duration, i.e. overlong, Roos regarded monosyllabic words as *incipitia* (Roman Jakobson had an analogous viewpoint in the case of stress: a stressed syllable is only stressed when it is syntagmatically contrasted with unstressed syllables).

On the other hand, translators and poets solved the problem of quantifying Estonian verse differently than Roos. There were two main approaches. The first was to take quantity contrast into account only in stressed syllables, as in runic verse. This was the method of Ants Oras and August Annist, who also wrote original texts in runic verse metre. The second approach, championed by poets and translators like Gustav Suits, derived the principle that quantity contrast could be attributed to every syllable from ancient verse. As in classical languages, they posited, a syllable is long when it is closed. This was the tradition Kaalep himself continued, both in his translations and in his original poetry. Unlike other authors, he also offered theoretical justifications to his verse practices (Annist, Kaalep 1963, Kaalep 1969a, 1969b, 1972).

Ain Kaalep was not an academic scholar. For him, verse science was foremost a tool for understanding verse in practice, and he tried to realise different theoretical models of verse in his original poetry. In addition to his original work, Kaalep translated from German, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Turkish, Ukrainian, Greek, Latin and other languages. While he often used free verse in his original work, in his translated poetry he always conveyed not only the original metre, but also the system of versification. Thus, one encounters syllabic, syllabic-accentual, accentual-syllabic (*dolnik*-type), as well as different quantitative metres in his translations. He has enriched Estonian verse with different compositions and strophic forms, whereby he followed his great example Goethe and used not only European, but also Eastern forms, including ghazals and other complicated patterns.

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