

Ringling the Changes: Translating Aleksis Kivi's Most Famous Poem into English

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Abstract. This article examines the challenges of translating Aleksis Kivi's poem "Ikävyys" (1866) within broader debates in translation theory. Although Kivi is widely regarded as the founder of Finnish literature, this bleak and metrically irregular poem has received less attention than his prose and drama. The essay argues that the poem's fractured and inconsistent meter – often seen as a formal failure – should instead be understood as proto-modern experimentation anticipating later developments in poetic form, including those of T. S. Eliot.

Through close analysis of disrupted dactylic patterns, phonetic density, and rhythmic impediments, the article shows how the poem slows reading and produces an embodied experience that mirrors the speaker's depressive stasis. This creates a productive tension between abstract metrical structure and the phenomenology of reading, which is central to the poem's expressive force.

To explore how these effects translate into English, four strategies are compared: literal, rhythm-for-rhythm, iambic, and homophonic. Each captures certain aspects of the original while distorting others: rhythm-for-rhythm smooths irregularities, iambic translation domesticates the meter but retains some resistance, and homophonic translation foregrounds sound over meaning. The article ultimately advocates a perspectivist approach, suggesting that multiple partial translations together offer a fuller understanding of the poem's complexity.

Keywords: poetry translation; meter and rhythm; Aleksis Kivi; "Ikävyys" (1866)

Aleksis Kivi (1834–1872) is widely considered the founder or father of Finnish literature – specifically, of *original Finnish literature in Finnish*, since J. L. Runeberg (1804–1877) was there before him in the creation of Finland-Swedish literature, and Elias Lönnrot's collection and compilation of folk poetry as the *Kalevala* (1835) and the *Kanteletar* (1840) laid important tracks

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for the creation of a new original literature in Finnish. Before Kivi there were a few struggling writers who wrote derivative and forgettable works; Kivi exploded onto the scene in the 1860s with plays like *Nummisuutarit* (*Heath Cobblers*) and *Kihlaus* (*The Troth-Plight*) and his great 1870 novel *Seitsemän veljestä* (*The Brothers Seven*). Despite vicious and highly influential attacks from Finland's sole professor of Finnish literature, August Ahlqvist – attacks that drove Kivi into an early grave at the age of 38 – by independence in 1917 Kivi was being proclaimed Finland's national writer.

Kivi wrote poetry too. Those poems have never been regarded as highly as his novel and his finest plays, but many Finns still today love his poems. Given the image of Kivi promoted by Finnish nationalists as a sunny folk humorist, it is surprising, perhaps, that his most famous poem is a bleak, depressive squib titled "Ikävyys" (1866), or "Misery," or perhaps "Tedium." The complications of translating that poetic death wish into English are what I want to consider here.

Translating Kivi's novel and best plays is difficult too. I have translated his novel as *The Brothers Seven* (2017b) and his three best-known plays as *Heath Cobblers* and *Kullervo* in 1993 and *The Troth-Plight* in 2017(c), and written about all that in my 2017(a) monograph *Aleksis Kivi and/as World Literature*. What makes those works difficult to translate, however, is very different from what complicates the translation of "Ikävyys." The novel, *Seitsemän veljestä*, and the two peasant plays, *Nummisuutarit* and *Kihlaus*, are difficult to translate because Kivi so brilliantly fuses the literary might of great world classics (Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Dante in Swedish translation, Ludvig Holberg in Danish-Norwegian, and the Bible in the 1776 Finnish translation) with peasant dialect and an exuberant sense of humor. Translation of those works, in other words, is complicated by Kivi's *success*. In the case of "Ikävyys," the problem is arguably – at least from an aesthetically conservative perspective – his *failure*.

My brief in this article is that it is considerably more complicated than that. He does not really "fail": what might make purists dub the poem a failure is its problematic verse form.² And problematic verse forms in the 1860s tend to

² Since my focus here is on the difficulty of *translating* Kivi's poetry rather than the difficulties of *parsing* it, I will not delve deeply into the longish tradition of analyzing his metrics. Let one quick quotation from Laitinen (2016: 74) stand in for that tradition:

Anakruusisäkeiden yhteydessä nousee esille yksi Kiven omaperäisistä, salaperäisistä ja ehkä ikuisesti selittämättä jäävistä päätöksistä. Hän sanoutui nimittäin täysin irti jambisesta inversiosta ja samalla myös säkeen sisäisestä sanapainon polkemisesta eli kalevalaisesta murrelma-säkeestä. Se oli iso päätös, verrattavissa riimittömyyteen.

In connection with anacrustic lines we find emerging one of Kivi's most original, mysterious, and possibly eternally inexplicable decisions – namely his

be protomodern. I want to suggest that the fractured meter of “Ikävyys” looks forward most strikingly to T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915):

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table; ...

The first two lines are rhymed trochees, four trochaic feet in the first line and six in the second; the third is a slap in the face of regular rhyme and meter (and poetic decorum). Actually “Like a patient” seems to promise a continuation of the trochaic meter – and then “etherized upon a table” devolves into sassy bathetic prose.

1. The Experience of Reading Kivi’s Poem

Here is Kivi’s whole poem, with my literal translation:

Mi ikävyys,	What tedium,
mi hämäryys sieluni ympär	what darkness my soul around
kuin syksy-iltanen autiol maall?	like autumn evening in barren land?
Turha vaiva täällä,	Vain the pain here
turha onpi taistelo	Vain is the battle
ja kaikkisuus mailman, turha!	and world’s allness, vain!

decision to abandon completely both iambic inversion and internal word stress, which is to say the Kalevala line break. It was a big decision, comparable to the abandoning of rhyme.

An “anacrustic” line is one that begins with a single unstressed syllable; “iambic inversion” means putting the stressed syllable first (DA-da rather than da-DA) in a foot, especially the first one in a line. Both are necessary for iambic verse in Finnish, because Finnish stresses all words on the first syllable, leading to a preference for trochees (and alliteration). An example: the main title of Laitinen 2002 is a quote, “Vaan vahva virta vapaa” (lit. “but strong current free”), which I have translated “But freely flows the flume.” “Vaan” (“but”) is an unstressed monosyllabic word beginning an anacrustic line. I have also approximated the alliteration, with “flume” press-ganged to stand in for “current” or “stream.”

For early studies of Kivi’s poetry, see Hollo 1911 and Lehtonen 1928. For slightly more recent studies, see Viljanen 1953 and Hormia 1960. For the most recent studies, see especially Laitinen 2002 and 2016 (which we have just seen); but also Leino 1982 and Viikari 1987.

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En taivasta
mä tahdo, en yötä Gehennan,
enp' enään neitosta syliini suo.
Osani vaan olkoon:
tietämisen tuskast pois,
kaik' äänetön tyhjyys olkoon.

No, ystävät!
Teit' kerranpa viimeisen pyydän,
oi! kuulkaat mitä nyt anelen teilt:
Tuonen-tupa tehkää
poijan tämän asunnoks;
hän kätköhön mullan astuu.

Mun hautani
nyt kaivakaat halavain suojaan
ja peitol mustal se peittäkää taas,
sitten ainiaksi
kartanostain poistukaat;
mä rauhassa maata tahdon.

Ja kumpua
ei haudallein kohokoon koskaan,
vaan multa kedoksi kamartukoon,
ettei kenkään tiedä,
että lepokammioin
on halavan himmeän alla.

No heaven
do I want, no night of Gehenna
I'll no longer maiden into my arms allow.
My lot only let be:
from knowing's agony away,
all the silent void let be.

So, friends!
You once last I'll ask
Oi! Hear what I ask of you:
Hades' hut make
this boy's dwelling;
he into depths of moldy dirt steps.

My grave
now dig in willows' shelter
and with black blanket cover again,
then forever
depart my mansion
I in peace to lie want.

And mound
let not on my grave rise ever,
but let dirt bow into meadow
so that no one will know
that my resting chamber
is under the willows' dusk.

(literal translation DR)

a. Fractured Dactyls

Kivi's "Ikävyys" is not quite as modern as "Prufrock." Metrically, however, it is equally unruly. To take just the first stanza:

Mi ikävyys,
mi hämäryys sieluni ympär
kuin syksy-iltanen autiol maall?
Turha vaiva täällä,
turha onpi taistelo
ja kaikkisuus mailman, turha!

What tedium,
what darkness my soul around
like autumn evening in barren land?
Vain the pain here
Vain is the battle
and world's allness, vain!

Lines one, two, three, and six are dactyls – but fractured dactyls. Line two ends on a trochee – and why? The word in standard Finnish is *ympäri* ("around"), a

dactyl; dropping the *-i* at the end of the word is part archaic poetry, part southern Finnish dialect, and in either case hard to justify from a puristic point of view. Line three ends on a spondee; again the final vowel has been dropped, *maalla* (in a land, on a terrain) becoming *maall*. What should be the first dactyl in that line is *syksy* “autumn” – again a trochee. Again the model seems to be a combination of archaic poetry and southern dialect; and again the first-time reader wonders why. Line six again ends on a trochee, *turha* – this time with no dropped syllables.

Lines four and five are trochees – but flat ones, almost prosaic. The only poetic heightening in those two lines is the archaic/poetic word *taistelo* for “battle,” standardly *taistelu*. Not a huge difference, but significant enough to catch the Finnish reader’s attention. To modern Finnish ears, *taistelo* sounds ostentatious.

b. Impeding the Poem’s Forward Progress

But here is the next problem: parsing those lines so closely, tracking the poetic feet in each line, seems counterintuitive. One almost has to read the lines in a fakey sing-song to bring out the meter.

The fact is that the lines are packed with impediments – effects that slow the reader down. The first line is two words standing alone, followed by a comma. One reads those two words slowly and stops. “*Mi ikävyys*”: not only does one have to chop “*mi*” off from “*ikä*” with a kind of mild glottal stop to pronounce the two *i*’s; the long vowel in “*vyys*” sounds like coasting to a stop. Note in fact how the long vowels all through the stanza (“*yy*,” “*uu*,” “*aa*”³) pull at the dactylic meter, as if there were a speed limiter on every word, dragging each line toward cessation, abeyance, arrest.

In a dactyl the stressed syllable is supposed to be long and the unstressed syllables short. Typically Kivi’s long vowels land on unstressed syllables, tellingly making his meter back-footed, or off-footed.

Following the echo of the title in the first line, the second line begins with a kind of brief explanatory paraphrase that is structurally and thematically parallel to the first: “*Mi ikävyys, >>> mi hämäryys*.” Both are slow, languid nouns; and the parallelism tends to import the deep pause at the end of “*Mi ikävyys*” to the end of “*mi hämäryys*” as well. It’s possible to push through – “*hämäryyssieliuniympär*” – but it feels wrong. “*Mi hämäryys*” goes with “*Mi*

³ Note that the long “*aa*” appears not only explicitly in *maall* but also implicitly in *mailman*, which is Kivi’s poetic spelling of *maailman* “the world’s.” In fact it is the same long-voweled *maa* “earth/land/dirt” in both *maall* and *maailman*: *maailma* “world” is *maa* “earth” + *ilma* “air.”

ikävyys.” They are tonalized identically. They are a pair, a couple. The tedium, or the misery, or the unpleasantness – all possible translations of *ikävyys* – is troped as a darkness, or a duskiness. The darkness is around my soul, yes; but first we have to establish the parallels between the first two images. Only then can we move on to where the second image is to be found (“around my soul”).

And then that second line ends with the weird archaic word *ympär* – and it would have been archaic and weird in Kivi’s day as well. So we pause after “mi hämäryys” and move on to the one ordinary word so far, *sieluni* “my soul” – and then get tangled up again with *ympär*.

The beginning of line three is fairly ordinary Finnish again – “kuin syksy-iltanen” (like an autumn evening) – but “syksy” is a trochee, missing a syllable for the dactyl we expect; and the “k” in the middle of the fricative jungle of “sy-sy” is another speed bump, an obstacle, an impediment. And the last two words of that line, “autiol maall,” are definitely an impediment as well. An archaism? Southern dialect? Who knows, but it sounds distinctively odd – like Kivi is trying too hard to be poetic.

The rest of that stanza is a bit of a letdown. The repetition of *turha* “useless, pointless, in vain, a waste of time” makes the three lines themselves seem useless and pointless. The experience of reading the poem rehearses the speaker’s depression. Reading the poem is as big a waste of time as all of life is to the speaker.

c. The Layering of Poetic Experience

What we are seeing here is a layering of poetic experience: a complexly cultural and physical phenomenology of reading overlaid on top of a schematic of verse form. This is invariably the case when reading a traditional poem: there is a gap between the verse form and the phenomenological feel of the piece. In fact, the greater the tension between the two layers, the more sophisticated the poem tends to be; the less tension there is between them, the more like doggerel the poem is. The schematic in this first stanza looks something like this:

da DA-da-da
 da DA-da-da DA-da-da DA-da
 da DA-da DA-da-da DA-da-da DA
 DA-da DA-da DA-da
 DA-da DA-da DA-da-da
 da DA-da-da DA-da-da DA-da

We could in fact indicate a further tension between this “actual” schematic and the “ideal” dactylic schematic, by inserting the “missing” syllables in gray:

da DA-da-da
 da DA-da-da DA-da-da DA-da-da
 da DA-da-da DA-da-da DA-da-da DA-da-da
 DA-da-da DA-da-da DA-da-da
 DA-da-da DA-da-da DA-da-da
 da DA-da-da DA-da-da DA-da-da

Arguably those abstract formalizations of meter constitute a poem in their own right – but a boring one. The dynamism in a poem emerges not simply out of the words but out of the clashes the words provoke with the verse form. Those clashes are found in all traditional poems, not just protomodern and modern ones; (proto)modernist poets just push harder on the clashes than older poets. They want you to feel the artifice, and especially to feel its failure.

2. Translating That into English

a. Replicating Kivi's Exact Rhythms

We might start, then, with Henri Meschonnic's (2007, Boulanger 2011 in English) urging that the translator replicate the exact rhythms of the source text. In the first two stanzas of Kivi's poem that might look and feel something like this:

Mi ikävyys,
 mi hämäryys sieluni ympär
 kuin syksy-iltanen autiol maall?
 Turha vaiva täällä,
 turha onpi taistelo
 ja kaikkisuus mailman, turha!

What misery,
 what crepuscule carpets my spirit
 like evening cloaking this desolate land?
 Useless struggle all here,
 useless is all enterprise
 and everything in the world, useless!

En taivasta
 mä tahdo, en yötä Gehennan,
 enp' enään neitosta syliini suo.
 Osani vaan olkoon:
 tietämisen tuskast pois,
 kaik' äänetön tyhjyys olkoon.

For paradise
 I long not, nor night of all torment,
 I'll never hold a sweet girl in my arms.
 Destiny mine let be:
 cast away knowledge and pain,
 let all be the void of silence.

(rhythm-for-rhythm translation DR)

At the 2026 Modern Language Association convention in Toronto – but we were a virtual session – I gave this paper in a session convened by Gaby Bedetti titled “Translating Rhythm in World Poetry.” The session was not explicitly tied to the theories and practices of Henri Meschonnic, but I was the only speaker who did not translate from French and did not engage Meschonnic’s work at length; still, this one translation was at least tacitly aligned with Meschonnic’s radical insistence on rhythm-for-rhythm translation, because rhythms are temporally serial. You have to experience them in the body, in the mouth and ear of embodied affect. (See also Robinson 2012) for more on Meschonnic on the seriality of rhythm.)

Gaby’s double comment on this one translation of mine was trenchant – surprisingly so, since she has no Finnish: that “crepuscule” seems to come from too high a register for Kivi’s poem, and that “your translation replicating Kivi’s exact rhythms seems sonically richer than the compressed original. How does this affect the intensity of the despair?”

I agreed with her completely. The obvious answer to her question about “crepuscule” was that it was the only English noun I could think of for darkness or duskiness that had the same dactylic stress pattern as *hämäryys*. My idea, I said, was not to create a single translation that does everything a good translation should do, but to illustrate the various aspects that *could* be usefully highlighted in a series of approximate translations. “Crepuscule” captures the rhythm: that’s good enough.

Her other comment was even more useful – though upon reflection I would modify it slightly. I would say that my rhythm-for-rhythm translation is not so much “sonically richer” as it is sonically *smoother* than Kivi’s Finnish original. It lacks the impediments of his poem:

mi hämäryys sieluni ympär
kuin syksy-iltanen autiol maall?

What crepuscule carpets my spirit
Like evening cloaking this desolate land?

That translation slides across the tongue like an expensive red wine. “Evening,” like “syksy” in Kivi’s Finnish, drops a syllable and becomes a trochee – I am, after all, reproducing the exact rhythms – but “evening” is smooth where “syksy” is a stumbling block. That initial “e” can easily be stretched out to maintain the easy flow through the line, whereas “syk” obviously cannot. “Iltanen” becomes “cloaking this”: the c-words in those two lines, “crepuscule carpets” and “cloaking,” create a kind of imagistic/sonic cluster, with the fabric

of carpets and cloaks naturalizing the crepuscular obscurity of the Latinate noun.

Another way of putting it is that in my rhythm-for-rhythm translation there is far less tension between the physical phenomenology of reading and the abstract schematic of verse form than in Kivi's Finnish. My rhythmic translation clings far more closely to the schematic than Kivi's does. That in turn suggests that Gaby Bedetti was arguably wrong to call my translation "sonically richer": it is actually sonically more conventional. Kivi's impediments, his halting and his stumbling, are actually *richer* than my smooth parsings: more complex; more iconoclastic; more protomodern.

One possible conclusion to draw from this observation is that Meschonnic's insistence on the mouthability of rhythm-for-rhythm translation is a great way to please target readers, but may not be the best way to honor the phenomenological complexity of the source text.

b. Iambic Translation

A more traditional approach to translating traditional poetry is to assimilate whatever meter the source author used to one that is more familiar in the target language. Since Finnish favors trochaic and dactylic feet (first-syllable stress is universal), the most familiar meters used in English poems have been anapestic and especially iambic, we could turn Kivi's poem into iambs like these:

Mi ikävyys,
mi hämäryys sieluni ympär
kuin syksy-iltanen autiol maall?
Turha vaiva täällä,
turha onpi taistelo
ja kaikkisuus mailman, turha!

What deadness drear,
what gloaming gloom looms round my soul
like an autumn's eve in a barren land?
All here is vain,
the strife and struggle vain
the world's wide wholeness, vain!

En taivasta
mä tahdo, en yötä Gehennan,
enp' enään neitosta syliini suo.
Osani vaan olkoon:
tietämisen tuskast pois,
kaik' äänetön tyhjyyks olkoon.

No heav'nly joy
want I, no hellfire's dead of night.
No maid will e'er again snug in these arms.
My lot, let now it ever be:
away from knowing's aches,
let all be voiceless void.

(iambic translation DR)

In the translation-studies rifts and tiffs between domesticators and foreignizers, turning Kivi's fractured dactyls into iambs is immediately suspect as domestication – encouraging smug laziness in target readers by giving them

a verse form with which they are already familiar. By contract, the rhythm-for-rhythm method on which Henri Meschonnic insists, because it clings to a formal feature in the source text, would give off the ethical glow of foreignization.

As we have seen, however, my rhythm-for-rhythm translation of the first two stanzas of Kivi's poem failed to capture the phenomenological complexity of the source text – smoothed his impediments out, made the poem easier to parse in English than the Finnish is for Finns. So perhaps it's not enough to reproduce key formal aspects of the source text in the target language?

And in fact a careful reading of my iambic translation shows that I have also mimicked some of Kivi's phenomenological complications. Look at the first two lines:

Mi ikävyys,
mi hämäryys sieluni ympär

What deadness drear,
what gloaming gloom looms round my soul

Look at "deadness": as in "syksy," the consonant clusters in "d-dn-ss" impede rapid reading. And almost every other word in those two lines has precisely the kind of long vowel sounds that Kivi used to impede his dactyls: "drear," "gloaming," "gloom," "looms," "round," "soul." To be sure, most of those fall on stressed syllables; only "looms" is unstressed. But once again the embodied phenomenology of reading complicates easy domesticating/foreignizing binaries.

c. Homophonic Translation

Finally, just for fun: homophonic translation, the translation not of the meanings but the sounds of source-textual words, is one of the oldest and most enjoyable forms of experimental translation. It is also arguably a more holistic strategy for clinging close to the source text, for ethical or aesthetic reasons, than say the stylized literalism of foreignization or rhythm-for-rhythm translation.

Mi ikävyys,
mi hämäryys sieluni ympär
kuin syksy-iltanen autiol maall?
Turha vaiva täällä,
turha onpi taistelo
ja kaikkisuus mailman, turha!

Me eek a verse,
me hammer hearse, see a loony impair
queen sexy ill tannin' audio mall?
Tour ha! vivat à la,
Tour ha! own pee taste a low
ya kikey sluice mile man, tour ha!

En taivasta
mä tahdo, en yötä Gehennan,
enp' enään neitosta syliini suo.
Osani vaan olkoon:
tietämisen tuskast pois,
kaik' äänetön tyhjyys olkoon.

Antipasta
methodo, in iota gay henna,
Limpin' Annie toast a sirloiny sue woe.
Owe sonny Vaughan ole cone:
Tia Tammy's into sassed boys,
kike Annie tone turf years ole cone.
(homophonic translation DR)

3. Conclusion: Perspectivism

Of course from one perspective it is hard to justify homophonic translation. What *good* is it? What do we *gain* from it?

One might protest that that is just one perspective, and why should it dominate the discussion? – but of course it happens to be the normative perspective for the two most prestigious text types, scholarly and literary. From that perspective, the purpose of translation is to give target readers the *total experience* of the source text: style, form, and meaning. The fact that that is impossible gives advocates of that perspective just cause to despise translation: a translation can never give the target reader the full experience of a source text, so translation is worthless. Learn foreign languages. Read literary and scholarly texts in the original languages.

One (speculative) way of unpacking Gaby Bedetti's question to me about "crepuscule" being too lofty a register for Kivi's poem might go something like this: Meschonnic insisted on rhythm-for-rhythm translation; the translation that asked "what crepuscule carpets my soul" was rhythm-for-rhythm, which makes that translation *the one*, the best one, effectively the only one that aspires to provide target readers the total experience of Kivi's poem; but if "crepuscule" is in fact (as it seems to be, and of course is) too lofty a register for Kivi's poem, using that word is a flaw in my translation. Kivi's word there is quite ordinary: *hämärä* is the most common adjective for "dark, dusky," and *hämäryys* is the ordinary noun derived from it. "Darkness" or "dusk" would be a better fit than "crepuscule."

But that perspective, dominant as it has been for six hundred years or so in Europe – Leonardo Bruni protested against it in 1405/6 and enforced it angrily a quarter of a century later⁴ – is not "intrinsic" in any way. It is a historical development, tied to the rise of Humanism and the desire of educated middle-class people to experience foreign texts fully without having to master foreign

⁴ For Bruni's actual pieces referenced here, see Robinson (2026c: 81–86).

(especially classical) languages. Humanism was all about empowering the emergent middle classes – the merchant and artisan classes, which believed in working hard and hopefully becoming wealthy, and which with growing wealth wanted social legitimation through at least second-hand knowledge of the works that experts considered important. (That the middle classes still today want the same thing is evident from the fact that they send their children to university, where the first two years are largely devoted to “General Education,” with courses in foreign languages and in the mother tongue, ultimately teaching literary texts in the original languages and in mother-tongue translation.)

The perspective I have been cultivating in this article, by contrast, is a metaperspective, a series of perspectives on perspectives – or what is called “perspectivism.” To the extent that my perspectivist series of perspectives teaches you something about Kivi’s most highly regarded poem, it does so kaleidoscopically. Not one of the four translations I offer – literal, rhythm-for-rhythm, iambic, and homophonic – gives you the total experience of the poem in Finnish. All four together may work like visual saccades, snapshots that your brain has to splice together into a more or less coherent sense of the poem. But really, do you care about Aleksis Kivi, or his greatest poem? Maybe; but it is likely that most readers of this article are hoping to learn not about Kivi or “Ikävyys” but about translating poetry.

In other words, this is not primarily literary criticism or literary translation criticism, but literary translation theory. Kivi and his poem are useful test grounds for theoretical explorations.

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