

Verse Meter as a Tune*

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A possible definition of the verse meter as a certain prosodic pattern followed by speech, however obvious, is somewhat misleading, for metrical schemes that we keep for such prosodic patterns would actually describe the result and not the cause of such following.

Those who ever consulted musical transcriptions in their study of sung verse may have noticed that speech there follows the prosodic pattern of the tune, where prosodic means of speech perform additional (to those of representing functional units of speech), non-language functions of metrical and rhythmical units within a temporal acoustic form. The fact that it would be practically impossible to deduct metrical structure of the tune from a written text of a song without its musical transcription does not deny the very existence of the tune as a form and its specific prosody – the way that prosodic means of speech are used for building or expressing this form, a prosody where syllables get quantitative values and form quantitative rhythmical patterns within the accentual grid. You may notice that such a definition of this prosody is quite different from those that we are able to formulate on the ground of “pure linguistic” evidence of the written texts (e.g. qualifying the verse as accentual). Why do we, in this particular case, insist on the “quantitative” definition and studying quantitative syllabic patterns withing a tune rather than on calculation of the average number of unstressed syllable between the varying number of stressed ones in a line?

At least for one reason that most of so called quantitative meters of ancient poetical traditions were sung and if some still draw a line between verse prosody and musical prosody, we never can say which of the two actually had motivated the prosodic patterns cast in these metrical schemes. For just imagine how would behave say speech of an ancient Greek within quantitative rhythmical patterns of the above tune. I would suspect, and may be I am wrong, that it would feel much more restricted in and conscious of placing long and short syllables within its rhythmical pattern and would not care much of accentual weights that the syllables get in the

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grid. In fact quantitative patterns that we find in ancient meters do not differ much from same in musically transcribed folk tunes, the resulting verse meters of Greeks lacking to reflect accentual structure of the metrical grid and ours – lacking to reflect quantitative proportions between the syllables that they get within such a grid, and each group of meters providing limited means for reconstruction of the form standing behind.

Further we will dwell upon some general properties of temporal forms and possible prosodies, or ways of their realization in speech, treating the verse meter as a projection of the form of more or less known properties onto phonetic system of the language. The speaker believes that verse meters preserve precious casts from language prosodies and may become still more a powerful tool for prosodic reconstruction.