

An Introduction to the Early Reception of World Literature in Estonia

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Abstract. For decades, Estonian literary scholars have expressed the need for research in the field of our own translation history in order to explain different aspects of the reception of world literature and to treat the history of Estonian translated literature as a separate discourse in the context of national literature as well as Estonian cultural history in general. This article precedes the first attempt at extracting the existing knowledge of Estonian translation history and supplementing it with any new discoveries from literary archives. The article aims to present an introduction to Estonian translation history and covers the period up to the year 1900. It gives an overview of the beginning of the tradition of translation in Estonia from the earliest religious texts in the 16th century to adaptations of pedagogical and popular works, and to the emergence of new principles of faithful rendition of high literature. The article also touches upon the first Estonian professional translators, the reception of foreign literature and the influence of translations on Estonian literature, folklore, and mentality, thus forming the basis for the art of literary translation in the 20th century.

Keywords: translation history, early literature of Estonia, literary reception

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The following article is about the early reception of world literature among the Estonian people, or in the Estonian language, to be more specific about the title. Accordingly, by “world literature” in those early days one should consider any literature written among non-Estonians in any foreign language. The outlines of the history given in this article cover a period approximately from the earliest texts of the 16th century to 1870s when translation acquired a different and more refined status among the literary practices.

It is a well-known fact that since the beginning of the recorded history of Estonia up to the year 1918 there is a period popularly called “the seven hundred years of serfdom”, meaning that the ruling class consisted mostly of Germans and the languages of culture and education were first Latin and later, after the Reformation, naturally German.

However, the spread of Protestantism brought about the idea of giving some education to the simple folks so that they could read the Bible by themselves and in their own language. Therefore, the very first texts that were actually translated into the Estonian language were Biblical texts: the very first partly survived printed text that contains Estonian language is the Catechism of Wanradt and Koell from 1535. Published in Wittenberg, Germany, it contains both Estonian and Low-German parallel texts, and was curiously banned after it reached Estonia, probably because of its non-concurrence with Lutheran catechism. However, some texts, such as the Holy Prayer or the Ten Commandments, which people had to know by heart, must have been translated already before that (Paul 1999: 24) and there is circumstantial evidence of the so-called Kievel's Catechism (Võõbus 1970: 31). The New Testament was first published in the Southern Estonian dialect in 1686. The whole Bible was finally translated into the Northern dialect – which is indeed the basis of our modern Estonian language – by the year 1736 and was published three years later thanks to the donation from Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, one of the founders of Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine in Estonia, and others (Paul 1999: 429).

Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine, a protestant movement originating from Moravia in Central Europe, continued to play an important role in the spread of the translating tradition in Estonia over the next one hundred years or even longer. It emphasized piety and personal faith, it was very active in the missionary field and did certainly a lot to further democratize the Lutheran church which at first was not too eager to fulfil the desire of the serfs to obtain literacy and enlightenment (Põldmäe 2011: 19). The importance of Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine in the history of Estonian literature lies, on one hand, in the reception and translation of literary texts, and on the other, in spreading the awareness about Estonian people through its central publications from Herrnhut to other nations.

Thus, one can mark the beginning of the belletristic translation with the members of Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine who developed their own literary tradition of pious stories and church songs which were translated into Estonian alongside the accounts of the activities of congregations, of the missionary work, biographies, speeches, etc. (Põldmäe 2011: 398ff) From the 1750s onwards there is evidence of the translated manuscript of *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. The translation is often attributed to Mango Hans (Hans Thal), a schoolmaster in Urvaste, a member of the Brüdergemeine and one of the first scholars of Estonian origin (Põldmäe 1939: 405), but sometimes to Adam Koljo, also a schoolmaster in Urvaste (Nirk 1983). It is based on the German version and several copies of the manuscript remain to testify the popularity of this allegorical piece of English Puritan literature among Estonian Herrnhuters. In

the 19th century, when censorship finally allowed the publication of Herrnhutian texts, this work was published as a book in several new translations which, however, were always made from German. First of them, *Öige Risti-Innimesse Töisine Ello-käük Iggawetse Ello pole*, came out in the Southern dialect in 1817, translated by the 16-year old Christian Friedrich Janter (Pöldmäe 1939: 406). This first edition was later manually copied, in 1842 first published in the Northern dialect and by the end of the century there were 10 editions of the book. R. G. Kallas, the pastor of Rõuge, remarks in 1892 that “*Pilgrim’s Progress* has been read with great appetite and religious fervour by everyone among our nation” (Pöldmäe 2011: 408).

The first translation of profane stories in the Estonian language is *Juttud ja tegud* (*Stories and Acts*) by Friedrich Wilhelm von Willmann in 1782. It is a collection of 54 fables, 35 stories, 125 riddles (taken from Anton Thor Helle’s 1732 grammar book), and some practical advice, based on a similar book published in Latvian sixteen years earlier (*Jaukas Pasakkas un Stahsti* by Gotthard Friedrich Stender). After the translation of the Bible, this was the first time that Estonian readers were introduced to foreign literary themes. The collection includes adaptations from the Arabian Nights, and from the Graeco-Roman and European medieval literature (e. g. *The Decameron*) and folklore, including the first retelling of the German fable cycle *Reineke Fuchs* (Vinkel 1970: 58ff). The book was reissued three times (1787, 1804, and 1838).

Still there was no remarkable growth to be seen in literary activity and book publishing until the mid-19th century when Estonian peasants gained enough wealth to have time for reading and to buy books. Even then the repertoire was widening at a rather slow pace. The more valuable works of literature were considered to be of interest only to highly educated people who naturally were able to read them in German. Despite the odd translations of canonical literature such as *Römo kitus* (*An die Freude*) by Friedrich Schiller, which was published in the Estonian Farmers’ Calendar in 1813 and as a book in 1815, translated by Otto Reinhold von Holtz, the vast majority of translated literature remained clerical, and since 1840 one can also notice a surge in the publishing of sentimental stories, adventure books and popular science. This was the time when academically educated Estonian writers such as Fr. R. Faehlmann and Fr. R. Kreutzwald became active and started to create their original works, inspired by and sometimes adapted from those of German literature and folklore. In addition to them, several half-educated translators brought into the Estonian language second- or third-rate authors such as Christoph von Schmid, himself the adapter of pious and sentimental folktales including *Genovefa* which was first published in Estonian as *Jenowewa ellust* in 1839 (translated by Caspar Franz Lorenzsonn) and remained immensely popular up to the beginning of

the 20th century. In the period of 1839–1917, this medieval legend of Genevieve of Brabant was reissued 13 times in several versions and translations. Among those, the most famous and refined is Kreutzwald's adaptation of *Wagga Jenowewa ajalik elloaeg* (based on Gotthard Oswald Marbach's book) from 1842. Other sentimental stories that found their way to the hearts of Estonian readers included *Hirlanda* (*Irlanda, ehk puhta ello wõit*) and *Griseldis* (*Griseldis ja Markgraf Walter*), first published in 1844 and 1843 respectively, the latter being a folktale loosely based on the last tale of Boccaccio's *The Decameron*.

As for adventure stories, the subgenre of robinsonade conquered Europe already in the 18th century after the successful publication of *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe in England in 1719. The first written evidence of the theme of shipwreck in Estonian, a so-called pre-robinsonade (Vinkel 1960: 725) *Inkle ja Jariko*, was published in *Juttud ja teggud* and was based on Jean Mocquet's 1617 travel book which was retold in 1657 and again in 1711 (Vinkel 1960: 725). The boom of robinsonades finally reached Estonians in 1839 with the publishing of *Weikise Hanso luggu tühja sare peäl*, adapted by Johan Thomasson, based on Christoph von Schmid's (again) pious and sentimental version of Defoe's story, *Gottfried der Einsiedler*. The actual atmosphere of Robinson Crusoe living on a desert island emerges in the 1842 issue of *Norema Robinsoni ello ja juhtumised ühhe tühja sare peal* by Joachim Heinrich Campe (originally titled *Robinson der Jüngere*). This German youth author adapted Defoe's original story to convey Rousseauesque ideas, therefore this "pedagogical robinsonade" (Vinkel 1960: 727) is built upon a dialogue between a farmer and his son. The Estonian version of this voluminous work is fully translated – the first translation of a novel in the history of Estonian literature (Vinkel 1960: 728) – but available only as a manuscript. Due to the lack of funds, the printed version is considerably abridged, but was nevertheless one of the biggest books (240 pages) at the time, so its high cost is probably one of the reasons why it was never reprinted, although otherwise it does mark a considerable leap in Estonian youth literature (Vinkel 1960: 728). Various robinsonades continued to be published in Estonian throughout the second half of 19th century.

In the Estonian translation history, one can distinguish the period from 1875 to 1918 when book and newspaper publishing really gathered momentum and the leading figures of the Age of Awakening started to pay attention to the "enlightening" of people. As said, the pious, the sentimental and the adventure-oriented subject matter was still there and the vast majority of translations were still made from German, but we can already note a wider geography and a wider spectre which allowed outstanding and canonical works of literary art to enter into the local tradition. From that period we can gradually start to distinguish Estonian translation history as a discourse separate from that of Estonian national literature.

Together with the economical wealth of Estonian peasantry now gradually liberated from serfdom and the surge of national consciousness there appeared a generation of writers that were actually able to give original quality to the even mediocre source texts. Thus, in addition to a version of Genevieve, Kreutzwald is also noted for *Wina-katk* (1840), inspired by Heinrich Zschokke's *Brannteweinpest*, an enlightening book on the harmfulness of alcohol. (Indeed, many of Zschokke's pedagogical books were translated into Estonian, which in a way formed a welcome rationalist opposition to the new-pious and Herrnhutian worldview.) Other remarkable examples are *Ojamölder ja temma minnia* (1863), *Perùama wiimne Inka* (1866), *Juudit ehk Jamaika saare viimsed Maroonlased* (1870), and *Martiniiko ja Korsika* (1869, published 1874) by Lydia Jannsen (Koidula). The reviews were enthusiastic about the artistic use of language and skilful storytelling, but only decades later it was established that those works were actually translations or more precisely adaptations from German books, rather than original works (Suits 1932).

To be sure, adaptations were still symptomatic, but the principles of faithful translation, as well as the issues of copyright gradually came to prevail. For example, there is the translation of *Notre-Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo, first published in Estonian in 1876... at 74 pages! And there is *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* by Jules Verne from 1875... which has only 32 pages! Anyhow, it was a start. It is worth mentioning that in newspapers critics started already to pay attention to the quality, the faithfulness and linguistic aspects of translations.

Another remarkable episode in the development of the culture of translation is from 1890 when Jakob Kõrv, the winner of the first prize of the Estonian Literary Society for his work *Luigemäe Olli*, was forced to return the prize when it turned out that his story was in fact an adaptation of Chateaubriand's *Atala*. A usual practice in earlier days was now something to be ashamed of and punished for.

Thus, the last quarter of 19th century saw a considerable development in the culture of translation. Alongside German authors, translators and publishers "discovered" Russian literature (Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, Karamzin, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev) and started to introduce Finnish and Latvian authors. Other languages were still not so well-known, so for instance French, English, Scandinavian or Hungarian authors, as well as Andersen's and Perrault's fairy tales were still translated via German.

An exception is Moritz Maximilian Põdder (1852–1905), a linguistically talented Estonian writer and translator whose translation of *Un capitaine de quinze ans* by Jules Verne, published in 1894, was indeed made from French (and is a considerably more faithful rendering at 465 pages). Põdder's remarkable contribution to Estonian translation history includes mostly popular

science and entertainment literature from German, but more importantly Russian classics, e.g. short stories by Alexander Pushkin, Ivan Turgenev, Maxim Gorky and Anton Chekhov, as well as the epic novel *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy.

As it happened, one of the few cases of rivalling translations in the Estonian translation history ensued, as *War and Peace* was published almost simultaneously as a newspaper series in two different Estonian periodicals. One of these periodicals was *Valgus* which got a head start with Jakob Kõrv's translation in 1893. *Postimees* caught up with a more faithful and fully licenced rendition in 1898 and issued it as a book in the same year. The version published by *Postimees* was probably the greatest achievement of Põdder as a translator regardless of the fact that due to the competition the publishing time was limited and consequently a part of Volume II was translated by Mihkel Neumann and the first half of the last volume (Volume IV) by Jakob Tamm.

In this view one must point out an outstanding feat of Jaan Bergmann (1856–1916) – perhaps the first seriously professional translator in the Estonian history – who translated for the periodical *Meelejahutaja* a part of the comic epic *Batrachomyomachia* in hexameters from Ancient Greek in 1879. Thus, for the first time, we can witness a professional method of translation which emphasizes as faithful rendering of the original text as possible. In addition to this Bergmann has translated 5 songs from *The Odyssey* by Homer and his translations from other languages (again German and Russian), include ballads by Alexander Pushkin, Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich Schiller (*Das Lied von der Glocke*, 1879), Gottfried August Bürger, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Adelbert von Chamisso, and others.

To sum up, however fragmentary and marginal the early history of the Estonian translation may seem, the practice of translating did actually have a huge impact on the Estonian language and folklore, as well as on the future Estonian national literature. Foreign literary influence did for one thing change considerably the structure of Estonian folk songs, as well as give Estonian folktales new themes and motives – such as Puss in Boots, or *Open, Sesame!* The style and vocabulary had gained considerably since the translation of Biblical texts and the process was unstoppable.

Furthermore, when we consider the history of translation more widely as a history of reading, it is very relevant to note that there is also evidence of the implicit reception of world literature among Baltic Germans or even Estonians who read texts in German or other languages and being inspired by them, began to create original Estonian literature. The earliest experiments of literary practice in the Estonian language obviously reveal the principles of German poetics, and the first great Estonian poets and writers actively adapted

the German tradition, creating their own original body of work and paving the way to the altogether more mature and full-bodied national literature and the art of translation of the 20th century.

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