

*Stuck in the Funicular: the Deceptive Levity
of Translating Poetic Stoppages of Imagery*

The process of translating Estonian literature into English that has rapidly accelerated since the beginning of the twenty-first century has shown its benefits and its drawbacks. Like a funicular railway offering views above the panoramas of the voluminous literature of the small Baltic nation, the translations carry the messages of Estonian poets and prose authors with apparent levity and smoothness. All the same, it is not quite clear how much those messages are expected at the other end of the funicular. And there remains the danger of a shaking halt high in the air during the transmission process. One may find oneself thinking once in a while whether instead of English, another language of wide international spread would not better serve the purpose of acquainting the world with the works in the Estonian language, a lingua franca that would be less overloaded with masses of translations and original writings, both popular and literary, to such an amorphous extent as English is.

In the foreword to the selection of poetry of the Estonian classic poet, Juhan Liiv (1864–1913), “The Mind Would Bear No Better”, that was published in Tartu, Estonia, in 2007 and that includes poems both in Estonian and English, translated by H. L. Hix and Jüri Talvet, Professor Talvet has delineated a profound poetic quality in one of Liiv’s early poems.

Liiv’s poetry embodies an interior movement, a quality that could be treated as a basic feature of essential world poetry of all times. In a number of Liiv’s poems an invisible border or a stoppage is created. Its overcoming means a bi-directional movement: simultaneously backwards and forwards. In the famous early short poem “The Forest Rustled”, “dark” and “true” (ominous) rustle of the forest is obviously a symbol of death. The penultimate line of the poem, “as if in mourning for it” creates a “border”, blocks the progress of the previously presented idea. “Rustle” is not something from which the poet would like to flee, but on the contrary he mourns for it. The symbol becomes ambivalent, it can allude also to life’s infinity, to promises which emerge from the darkness of nature, life’s totality, and to a yearning to merge with life’s totality, to find final liberty. (A powerful parallel with Hölderlin’s image philosophy.) (Talvet 2007: 46–47)

Mets kohas

Mets kohas tumedalt, tõelt ...
 Ma kuulasin himuga.
 Ta kohin tiibu laotas
 mu üle ju hällissa.

Ta tume kohin jäi rinda,
 seal kohab nüüd alati –
 ma nagu tad taga leinan,
 ei röömsaks saa iialgi.

[1891]

(Liiv 1989: 29)

The forest was murmuring darkly, truthfully ...

I listened with desire.

Its rustle was spreading its wings [Its rustle spread wings]

Over me in the cradle. [already]

Its dark rustle stayed in my chest, [into chest]

Now it is rustling there forever – [there it rustles always]

As if I were mourning for it,

Never finding joy again. [never getting joyous]

How come if the forest is rustling in the speaker's chest forever, its rustle ingrained into him, as it were, can he, or even need he, be in mourning for it? The ponderable quality of the image, that appears in the seventh line causes a halt in the imagination and a bi-directional groping in the intellect. Its lyrical power in the original is weakened by the literal translation, by the author of this article, above. Can one find even a slight equivalent in the poetic, verse translation by William Kleesmann Matthews that appeared in 1953?

The Hooded Forest Was Murmuring

The hooded forest was murmuring
 With tongues of tried sorcery;
 Deep in my childhood its rumour
 Bent shadows over me.

The dark mysterious rumour
 Outstrips the faltering years;
 My spirit is heavy with grieving,
 And my eyes are spent with tears.

(Matthews 1953: 1)

A similar paradox, with the apparent levity of conveying images in another language, undermining the genuineness of the poet's original thought process, may be found in translations done in the opposite direction, from English into Estonian, as in the renderings by Minni Nurme of Robert Frost's (1874–1963) poems that appeared in Estonia in 1965. While in Liiv, the stoppage (Estonian, *ummistus*) causing a bi-directional motion, is enveloped in the central image, in Frost it is rather contained in what the procession of images is referring to on the "backstage", which makes the phenomenon audible in Liiv but only surmisable, beyond direct representation, in Frost. Even though Frost's succession of images mostly presents a linear evolution towards the surprise of a moralising climax, the latter, organically, always springs from the living tissue of imagery. In his better poems, a gnoseological imaginative charge of tension grows into the invisible background of the apparently simple, rather one-dimensional logic of the poetic process – a new figurative thought is born, filling the whole poetic entity with two-directional movement ("The Oven Bird", "Acquainted with the Night", "Neither Out Far nor In Deep").

The Oven Bird

There is a singer everyone has heard,
 Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
 Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
 He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
 Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
 He says the early petal-fall is past,
 When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
 On sunny days a moment overcast;
 And comes that other fall we name the fall.
 He says the highway dust is over all.
 The bird would cease and be as other birds
 But that he knows in singing not to sing.
 The question that he frames in all but words
 Is what to make of a diminished thing.
 (DiYanni 1987: 212)

Acquainted with the Night

I have been one acquainted with the night.
 I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.
 I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
 I have passed by the watchman on his beat
 And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
 When far away an interrupted cry
 Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;
 And further still at an unearthly height,
 One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
 I have been one acquainted with the night.
 (DiYanni 1987: 219)

The imagery of Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), oscillating on an infinity of associations (with a balance of mental tying of linguistic units and of the denotees of their reference), is in fact nearly always multi-directional. Nevertheless, one can find in her poems (as in Poem 324) solutions in the progress of imagery basically of a bi-directional character nearly of the same kind as in Liiv.

324

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
 I keep it, staying at Home –
 With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
 And an Orchard, for a Dome –

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –
 I just wear my Wings –
 And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
 Our little Sexton – sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
 And the sermon is never long,
 So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
 I'm going, all along.
 (DiYanni 1987: 178)

PILTER

The Estonian woman poet, Triin Soomets (born in 1969) has written a number of short poems, with rhymes and interior rhymes appearing at random, that display notable intensity in a compressed form. In the following example, the recurring “it” of the poem remains ambivalent but requiring for an answer. Like the rustle of the forest in Liiv’s poem, the “it” is both general and particular. Thus, in six brief lines, a multi-dimensional feeling of the mystery of life is created, accentuated by the unexpected ending almost like a punch-line.

See valdab, see valutab
 sõnades, soontes,
 see tapab! see talutab
 tõeise poole,
 põletav, talutav.
 Valetab.
 (Soomets 2009: 101)

It governs, it aches
 in words, in veins.
 It kills! It leads by hand
 towards the real,
 scorching, bearable.
 Lying.
 (Trans. by L. Pilter)

A lot of Juhan Liiv’s poetry is close to imagism, albeit with (loose) rhymes. It is an imagism with a fabulative element, with nature images building up into a mental soulscape painting, a soul-shaping fable. While a lot of the images are snatched, as it were, from immediate, unpremeditated impressions, in a way similar to the early poems of Ezra Pound, the lyrical wholes form a mental journey with a slight narrative element, as of the message of a spiritual fable, somewhat like the poetic wanderings of William Wordsworth. The latter quality, in general, constitutes the tie between the imagistic side and the Enlightenment or Romantic tradition (G. E. Lessing, H. Heine). Ernest Howard Harris’s seven English translations of Liiv’s poems, from the 1950s, carry some of the simple serenity of the originals, but on the whole finding English counterparts to both the rhythms, rhymes, and imaginative texture of Liiv’s lyrical oeuvre appears an impossible task. As a ready-made product of full satisfaction, the rendering of such a major Estonian poet lies beyond hope. What one can look for is a translation of a purely scholarly type, the kind Ms. Ilse Lehiste presented about a long poem by the Estonian woman poet Marie

Under, with the linguistic, grammatical, lexical, idiomatic, prosodic qualities of both the source and the target languages taken wholly into account and demonstrated in a literal (to the extent of explaining case endings) as well as in a poetic translation.

References

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