

*Case Studies in Curricula III. Is There  
a World Poetry within the World Literature?  
On the Position of Translated Lyrical Poetry  
in the Estonian and French High School Curricula*

As demonstrated in two other articles in the present issue of *Interlitteraria*, the school canon in older literatures tends to be less open to translated works than in younger literatures. At least the German and Estonian examples described by Silke Pasewalck and Liina Lukas permit to believe so, and similar tendencies will be revealed in the comparison of the French and Estonian curricula. However, while that general comparison is necessary both in order to establish a parallel with the German-Estonian case and to provide context for my own argument, the latter will be based on a slightly different perspective.

It is obvious already from the translation history and contents of curriculum outlined for German literature in Estonia that different genres do not fare identically in translation. It is true also about translations from French to Estonian: the prose is highly dominant in the translation repertoire, a few drama authors have enjoyed a long-term popularity, but only a few poets have made a considerable impact on the Estonian literary tradition (see Talviste 2010). Given the many challenges of translating poetry, this is not surprising, and it is also compatible with the general tendencies concerning translated poetry: it makes up a rather small part of all published poetry, an already small segment of literary production (see Tart 2002: 102–105).

In the light of these general tendencies, I ask the following question: are the proportions of world literature and local literature in curricula the same for all literature or do they vary from genre to genre? The answer itself is, of course, predictable. We can safely assume and will easily find confirmation that in the literature taught in schools translated poetry has a rather marginal role, that is – considerably more marginal than that of the poetry written in students' mother tongue. What I would like to do is to look more closely at that role, to see what pedagogical purposes translated poetry might be called to fulfil and which authors and texts are considered as suitable for these purposes.

### The new curricula: numbers and names

I shall focus on the high school curricula in Estonia and France, both recently revised, and establish at first the lists of recommended reading in the field of poetry. The new French high school curriculum was adopted in 2010 and began to be applied since autumn 2010, the most recent version of Estonian curriculum was adopted in 2011 and will come into effect in high schools in autumn 2013. Both school systems are thus in a period of transition initiated by a need to redefine the function and structure of the knowledge to be dispensed. It seems an appropriate time to ask what sort of future reader is envisioned by these new curricula.

The comparison of these documents must be approached with some caution: the two school systems are very different both in tradition and in their newest organisation. However, the basic characteristics of the compulsory programme for language<sup>1</sup> and literature are similar enough. The Estonian curriculum states that each student has to take 6 language courses and 5 literature courses during the three years of high school. A course is made up of 35 class hours (GRÕK §11(1)), one class hour being 45 minutes long. In France, each student is supposed to take 4 weekly hours of French both in second and first year of high school (BO1–2010), to which 2 weekly hours of literature are added both in the second and the third year of the literary orientation (*série L*). A school year is made up of 36 weeks and one class hour is 55 minutes long. Before converting these data into comparable parameters, it is also important to take into account that for the non-literary orientations (*série S*, *série ES*), second and first year French means literary “objects of study” (*objets d’étude*) combined with activities and goals related to linguistic competences. In Estonia, the latter constitute a separate subject for which six compulsory courses and one optional course are described in the national curriculum.

If we combine the compulsory literature and language courses in Estonian high school, in order to have some sort of equivalent for the French programme on content level, we get a total volume of 289 standard sixty-minute hours of class work over the period of three years. Students of non-literary orientation in

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<sup>1</sup> By language I mean here, as does the curriculum in this context, the first language, i. e. the language of teaching and mother tongue of the majority of students. In France, that would be French, in Estonia, it is Estonian for Estonian-speaking schools and Russian for Russian-speaking schools. Both programmes are covered by the same section of the national curriculum, but I shall analyse here only the programme for Estonian-speaking schools. The comparison of the two traditions in Estonia would also be an interesting and important one, but it cannot be included here as a third element, it would introduce too many variables in data and problematics.

France do 264 standard hours of class work during the first two years of high school. Literary orientation students do 396 hours in three years, of which 132 hours are specifically literature classes. Also, in the first year of high school, before choosing an orientation, all French students can take the optional subject *Literature and Society* (66 standard hours).

The Estonian school system has no equivalent for the French division into different pre-defined orientations, each high school having to develop its own orientations within guidelines set by the national curriculum. However, these guidelines state that a school has to offer at least 4 facultative courses (105 standard hours) of language and literature, and may offer more, if the school has developed a literary orientation (GRÕK §11(4–7)). Students who choose such orientation, can thus take at least 394 standard hours of language and literature in high school, the volume of literature classes therein being at least 210 hours.

These numbers show that students taking the compulsory minimal amount of language and literature classes take a relatively similar number of classes in France and in Estonia. In France, the number of hours is slightly smaller, but the proportions of content seem to be in favour of literary education, whereas in Estonia, the national curriculum allots more time to acquisition of language skills. For “literary” students, the national curriculum defines a somewhat bigger volume of courses in France than in Estonia, however, it is likely that schools with actual literary orientation in Estonia offer a comparable hourly volume, completing the national curriculum with locally developed courses, as required by that same curriculum (GRÕK §11(6)). The learning content is thus much more heterogeneous in Estonia. Also, the percentage of French students opting for the literary orientation is undoubtedly a lot larger than the percentage of Estonian students in schools with a strong literary orientation. Nevertheless, the status of such an orientation is comparable to that of the *Série L* in France.

Therefore, I shall consider the learning content of French and Literature for all orientations in France and the programmes for all Literature courses, five compulsory and three facultative, described in the Estonian national curriculum. As shown by the data above, this particular corpus is not entirely balanced. I do not have information about the content of locally developed literature courses in Estonia, nor do I have information about the exact application of the French programme in the actual learning process in different schools. The French national curriculum prescribes more literary content than

the Estonian curriculum, but it is largely the result of differences in the structure of curriculum and of school work.

At the moment there actually is more information about the intended learning content in Estonia. The *Annexe 1* of the Estonian national curriculum gives more precise suggestions for application than the new French curriculum (BO9–2010) does, and as of yet there is no explanatory document (*Document d'accompagnement*) for the latest programme. On the other hand, many textbooks and learning aids, both printed and web-based, have already appeared on the French market, whereas Estonian publishing houses have yet to produce study materials compatible with the new high school curriculum. In this aspect, the corpus is thus also unbalanced, although it presents a certain lopsided symmetry.

I shall therefore establish an equally vague repertoire of references to translated lyrical poetry on the basis of available sources. These sources represent partly the recent didactical tradition, naturally still present in today's teaching, partly the new didactical agenda, as much as it is revealed in sufficient detail.

Approaching said repertoire with all precaution warranted by the elusiveness of the corpus, we may still observe that the list of translated lyrical authors in the didactical tradition is longer in Estonia than in France. While looking at a random selection of the most recent materials published in France, Petrarch is the only lyrical poet mentioned (Cahen et al. 2011: 53; ANNABAC 2011), and no translated lyrical texts are proposed for actual reading and analyses. The earlier versions of the curriculum (2006, 2001) were accompanied by explanatory documents (DA 2002; DA 2007) mentioning also Byron and recommending Dante, Goethe, Rilke, García Lorca and Neruda (DA 2007: 39).

Brigitte Quilhot-Gesseume, in her analysis of programmes and textbooks of this earlier period (1987–2006), makes the same observation. Although both the French curriculum and textbooks have been more open to translated literature since 2000, the most abundantly represented genre is theatre and poetry is almost non-existent: “Almost never do we find translated poetry, except for the Renaissance and Baroque period, but still marginally.” (Charvet, Quilhot-Gesseume 2007: 119) Where textbook tradition is concerned, the Estonian school has had many advantages in this respect: there has been some sort of special high school anthology for translated literature since before the Second World War and even though the content has varied and changed according to the political context, availability of translation and simply with

time, poetry has always been an important part of it. In the first four generations of post-war school anthologies (Leht 1957; Leht, Ojamaa 1965: 249–304; Ojamaa 1976; Talvet et al. 1993), the lyrical authors constituted a bit more than a half of the repertoire. In newer anthologies (Kalamees 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007; Nahkur 2009) they have a lesser part – one third in average in those edited by Katrin Kalamees, and a bit less than a half in that of Anne Nahkur. The authors most constantly present have been Goethe and Schiller, followed closely by Shelley, Heine, Rimbaud, then by Shakespeare, Mickiewicz, Whitman, Petőfi, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Éluard and Neruda. Also, the ancient Greek and Roman authors as well as medieval poetry have been quite well represented. Pushkin and Lermontov have also had an important place. The list of authors present in only one or two anthologies is far longer still.

Literature is a separate school subject in Estonia and translated literature's part in the literary tradition is considerable, so it is rather natural for the school to perpetuate that tradition. The current curriculum lists the following lyrical poets to illustrate its topics and objectives: Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Pushkin, Whitman, Baudelaire, Tagore, Rilke, Leino, Blok, Mayakovsky, Akhmatova, Eliot, García Lorca, Godiš, Hix, Kronbergs, Nummi, Szymborska (GRÖK-L1: 20, 22–23, 26) and, in an optional course, Brodsky (GRÖK-L1: 54). However, even the curriculum itself points out that not all authors mentioned therein are intended for reading, and only for one course it states that students should actually read a whole book of poetry not explicitly described as being written by an Estonian author.

Since, in French high schools, literary content is supposed to be used for learning language skills (analytical reading, different types of writing), it is natural enough for it to be selected from original French literature. Philippe Le Guillou, inspector general of the *Éducation nationale*, declared only a few years ago: “We also study translated texts [...]. Their difficulty lies in the fact that they cannot be the basis of what we call ‘analytical reading’, one of the tasks expected at the final exam in French.” (Le Guillou et al. 2007: 7) This statement was part of the opening speech of a seminar about ways of using translated literature in teaching. A special working party led by outstanding comparatists and educators was formed in order to analyse the difficulties and potential and to develop methods, and the afore-mentioned seminar was organised in Paris in 2006. The proceedings of the seminar published in the two following years were rich both in insight and practical suggestions, which I shall discuss more closely in my last chapter. Here I only want to point out that such a forceful approach to the matter clearly indicates that the idea of

translated literature being taught and read at school must have thrown the French pedagogical thinking somewhat off balance. Before looking more closely at what came of this, it would be reasonable to ask why these shockingly new ways of teaching have been imposed on teachers. What is the new mindset the educators wish to develop in young people?

### Objectives and challenges

Differences of tradition and heterogeneity of sources aside, it appears that the core of the canon is similar in both countries. The newest attempts to broaden it are also similar in some respects. The new Estonian curriculum urges teachers to be less centred on Western European poetry and tries to open the school canon up to include authors from the closer geo-cultural space, from around the Baltic (Finnish, Latvian, Polish poets).

The French curriculum has also intentions of broadening the canon. The objective here is better understanding of European cultural identity, to which end a special object of study is proposed for second-year students of literary orientation: *Towards a European cultural space: Renaissance and Humanism* (BO 9–2010). As shown by the title, the European space is defined by one of its earliest moments of considerable cultural unity, and it is also obvious that it is defined by its “old”, that is Western, tradition.

Although the tradition itself is old, the wording of the topic and its stated objectives indicate that its relevance in our contemporary world is equally important. As shown by the structure and statements of the Estonian programme, authors of such early periods, who make up the repertoire for the course *Literature from the Antiquities to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, are mostly considered from a historic perspective. Their presence in the canon is justified principally by their place in their own era, much less in ours. The ratio of translated to original lyrical poets is very much in favour of the translated ones in this historical part of the canon, for the simple reason that there is almost no Estonian poetry dating from that period.

However, the ratio is relatively translation-oriented in the third period-centred course, too. In addition to the course that covers all literature until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there are also courses *20<sup>th</sup>-century Literature* and *Contemporary Literature*. In the latter, the opening of the canon to poets from “new” cultures is the most obvious: it is the compulsory course *Recent Literature* that contains recommended authors such as Guntars Godiņš, Harvey Lee Hix, Juris Kronbergs, Lassi Nummi, Wisława Szymborska. Even though it

is not clearly stated in the document, it reveals two intentions. First: guiding students towards not only contemporary foreign poets, but also contemporary translators' tastes and achievements. Second: reconstructing the canon in such a way that readers' horizons will be both widened and more localised. The authors of the curriculum wish future readers to be aware of other poetry than that of great (western) European models, and that other poetry is found in the neighbouring countries and/or in the works of authors who have something to do with the Estonian culture. While the explicit goals of this course are all related to Estonian literature and understanding contemporary (Estonian) society, this is the only course in the curriculum where a poetry book is demanded as a piece of reading without specifying that it should be an Estonian book (GRÖK-L1: 23).

While social relevance and young readers' personal capacity to relate to the texts are clearly among the most important goals of the French educators, too, no document that I have encountered insists on the need for the literary texts themselves to be contemporary. The necessity to find new ways of reading and new ways to bring students to this activity is often expressed. Also, relations between literature and other, more recent media, are defined as an important object of study and exploration, together with relations between text and visual art. While nothing, of course, prevents the texts used for these purposes to be selected from contemporary literature, it is not defined as an obligation. Estonian educators seem to set great store by the contemporaneity of the texts themselves, apparently hoping that works of literature have some high intrinsic relevance for readers from their own time. That hope has, of course, legitimate foundations, but at the same time it carries the risk of not thinking through the methods and trusting the content to do all the work on its own.

On the French side, content is not ignored either. Patrick Laudet, another inspector general of the *Éducation nationale*, reflects upon the "return of the signified" (Laudet 2011: 9): the importance of teaching students to tackle the referential meaning of texts, to understand the historical context and the language of the original time period, to be able to place a text within an appropriate network of intertextual relations (Laudet 2011: 7). For him, this seems to be one possible way of desintellectualizing literary education, a goal apparently very much on the mind of French educators today. The realization that high school students of our time are no longer as reading-oriented as decades ago, has made the French look for ways of bringing literature closer to students, which goes a long way to explain why the new curriculum recommends many learning activities and topics that do not concentrate on the

purely textual (grammatical, stylistic) aspects of literary works. A content students can emotionally relate to, creative writing exercises, a corpus that includes works from different domains (cinema, pop music, painting, photography) – all that could be helpful in educating new readers to whom literature must be taught in a world where literature is no longer the dominant pastime and the main vehicle of ideas and images.

In the Estonian didactical tradition, overintellectualized reading, concentrating on textual analysis, has never been an issue. The traditional scholarly component of literary education has been literary history, and students' active work has mainly taken the form of discussing the content and doing creative writing or free-form essays. The new curriculum actually makes an attempt to move a fraction towards analytical, textually oriented reading, building several courses around analysis of genres.

In that field, as far as poetry is concerned, both traditions are equally self-centred: when teaching poetics, they only turn to their own authors, with a small exception in Estonia where Petrarch and Shakespeare, great masters of sonnet, are among the illustrations of lyrical and lyro-epical genres (GRÕK-L1: 22). Despite this small opening to foreign poets, the curriculum clearly states that in order to study poetics it is advisable to choose prose texts from both Estonian and world literature and poetry predominantly from Estonian literature (GRÕK-L1: 15). French examples and exercises of poetics of lyrical works (from metre to metaphors) are also generally constructed with the aid of French corpus.

Since poetry, versified or not, is deeply rooted in its original language and acquires a particularly complex set of additional linguistic and stylistic problems in translation, these choices are evident. It is also understandable that for the more general objectives discussed above, lyrical poetry, translated or otherwise, presents no particular advantages. For certain comparative approaches (for instance, comparing literature and cinema), narrative works are better suited, for content-oriented reading there is no specific need to prioritise lyrical poetry. The highly marginal status of translated lyrical poetry in the school canon is therefore easy to explain. But is there a way to explain its presence, such as it is?

### Translations and teaching

The first reason both pedagogical traditions seem to embrace is literary history. Since the Estonian curriculum is traditionally more history-oriented, it is



bound to make more room for examples of lyrical poetry from the canon of world literature, and inasmuch as the French curriculum guides teachers and students towards European literary history, it suggests a few foreign authors as well. More interesting and undoubtedly more significant than the comparison of the length of these suggested reading lists is the fact that both traditions, in their latest curricula, have shown an interest in moving towards new teaching and reading patterns.

The comparison of the previous curricula, which dated from 2002 in Estonia and 2006 in France, worked well as an exercise in contrastive thinking. In her BA paper, Pille-Riin Rimmel constantly points out, up until the final conclusions of her analysis (Rimmel 2009: 41), that the Estonian way of teaching world literature means opposing it to Estonian literature and treating it as a separate discipline, while the French do not make such distinctions and consider literature as a whole. Now the new curricula have set out to blur this contrast from both sides. Estonian students are expected to learn to perceive Estonian literature and all other literatures as parts of the same cultural field: “Whenever possible, Estonian and world literature are studied comparatively. [...] Attention will be paid to the contacts between Estonian and world literature, to their common and specific characteristics. The courses develop the understanding that Estonian literature is not an isolated phenomenon, but constitutes, together with the works of authors from other countries, the whole of the world literature.” (GRÕK-L1: 14)

For poetry, this approach is best supported by actual reading recommendations from translated literature in the course programme for contemporary literature. This course emphasizes, among its other goals, the social functions of literature and the importance of reading as a means of cultivating social awareness and understanding of others (GRÕK-L1: 17, 25–26). There is no explicit or necessary connexion between this particular goal and translated poetry, but it does present an intriguing parallel with the French curriculum where the optional subject *Literature and Society* also appears potentially among the most open to translated texts of poetry. Since no such texts are actually suggested for reading, the parallel should not be pushed very far, but it justifies at least pointing out the possibility of poetry being used as a means of cultivating social and ethical awareness and thus being pedagogically relevant even in translation.

This possible, although not explicitly suggested way would make students focus principally on the ideological content, steering them away from all the complex linguistic and cultural issues of translated poetry. However, it is the

opposite way that is actually recommended in France. Looking for methods of working with translated texts, French educators have found one which is rather well suited to poetry. While not new in itself, it has not been widely practiced in schools in either country: comparison of different translations of a foreign text. Now it is being recommended to teachers (*Parcours et méthodes* 2008: 11, 13–14), examples have been constructed and the need for publishing more materials has been stated.

Here, poems constitute an excellent corpus from which to choose texts for exercises. They are relatively short, so that students are easily able to read several texts for comparison, and different versions of one text are often available. As shown by the model lesson plans based on texts of Tanikawa Shuntarô (Chevrel; Risterucci-Roudnick 2007) and Góngora (Legras 2008), which were introduced by the working party mentioned above, complex issues of poetics and cross-cultural communication can be approached in a manner high school students ought to be able to follow.

The Estonian curriculum remains much less attentive to the problematics of translation itself. It is said there that “discovering foreign authors and works may create interest in learning foreign languages; reading and discussing works originally written in a language studied at school may, if the student is purposefully guided, create interest in that country, its culture and in reading its literature in the original” (GRÕK-L1: 4). Seeing as translations have always been a large and natural part of school reading, it is understandable that the educators have not suddenly began to look for a specific way of pedagogical instrumentalization for them. On one hand, it can be considered as an advantage: overthinking ways of dealing with translations may feed the impression that translations are not a natural part of literary culture, which, of course, would not be true in any European literature, small or large, old or new. On the other hand, not thinking these ways over at all means leaving several important problematics and possibilities of development unexplored.

In the conclusion of the 2006 seminar, Yves Chevrel said: “We have to think about exercises that we could give to students, and we shouldn’t limit these to simple commentary – reading a translated work of literature is not intellectually or aesthetically less demanding than reading a work written in reader’s own language. Also, it would be useful to ask ourselves what kind of training we need to set up for future teachers...” (Chevrel, Charvet 2007: 179). In a country where translated literature has always been in the centre of readers’ and teachers’ attention, nobody needs a specialist of comparative literature to tell them the first part. However, thinking about how to train the teachers and guide the students

according to the renewed pedagogical concepts would be useful anywhere. And, as my (occasionally rather far-fetched) attempts to find traces of lyrical poetry in the curricula indicate, it would not be useless to think about the functions of different genres either, to make sure storytelling and drama are not the only ways of literary expression the students are familiar with.

As far as the general concept of teaching world literature is concerned, the recent changes both in France and Estonia reflect rather similar way of thinking, although the previous tradition and therefore also the exact new course taken are different. Both curricula are obviously promoting some relatively new values: French educators have discovered the need to pay attention to cultural differences instead of concentrating on their own classics; Estonian ones are set on erasing the perception of the traditional self-evident difference between “ours, small and local” and “theirs, important and universal”. The old centre makes an effort to open towards what it has considered as peripheral, the old periphery struggles to replace the former hierarchies by an equalizing comparative approach.

As far as translated lyrical poetry is concerned, both curricula seem at a loss about what to do with it at school. Which brings me, as a scholar interested first and foremost in translated lyrical poetry, to the question what exactly is the cultural relevance of my own object of study. It is a practical, not an existentially despairing question – I am still certain that translated lyrical poetry needs to be studied, but seeing that people are never actually taught to read it, it needs to be studied with special vigilance towards its reception.

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