

*“A Handful of Dust”: the Case of Estonian Russians and Existential Outsiderness*¹

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Abstract. The article deals with the definition of Estonian literature and the status of Estonian Russian literature by taking Andrei Ivanov’s novel *A Handful of Dust* (2011) as an example. When the literary panel of the annual awards of the Cultural Endowment did not nominate Ivanov’s novel, literary debate erupted over the question how to define Estonian literature and whether it included literature written in Russian. Using the branch of comparative literature, image studies, the second part of the article analyses the depiction of Estonian Russians in Ivanov’s novel *A Handful of Dust*. The Estonian Russian background proves to be a useful tool for creating a character who is alienated, who is an existential outsider, thus giving a piercing look into the modern world. The author deals with existential questions and depicts tendencies in the 21st century society where globalization, alienation, depression and loneliness are the keywords and the main character of the novel can be seen as the example of an existential outsider.

Keywords: Estonian Russian literature, Andrei Ivanov, image studies, the depiction of Estonian Russians

How to Define Estonian Literature and the Case of Estonian Russian Literature

We live in the era of hyphenated identities (e.g. British-Asian, African-American); “distinctions between ‘them’ and ‘us’, ‘home’ and ‘abroad’, seem less sharp than they used to be” (Thompson 2011: 5). People travel more and live in different countries, one’s identity may not be as clear as decades ago. The same applies to literature, for example in the last few years there have been discussions about the exact definition of Estonian literature. Is it a literature written in Estonian or is it a literature written in Estonia? An interesting literary

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debate erupted when the literary panel of the annual awards of the Cultural Endowment did not nominate Estonian-Russian author Andrei Ivanov's² novel *Peotäis põrmu* (*A Handful of Dust*). The novel is written in Russian, but has not been published in Russian; it was published in Estonian in 2011.

The chairman of the literary panel of the annual awards of the Cultural Endowment stated: *Peotäis põrmu* is not written in Estonian and was published solely as a translation from Russian into Estonian. That was the one and only reason why the jury did not even consider nominating the novel. Original writing and writing in translation are seen as principally different kinds of text (Lotman 2012). The participants of the debate had different views on how to define Estonian literature. The chairman of the literary panel of the annual awards of the Cultural Endowment added:

Estonian literature with a capital 'E' falls into Estonian literature and Estonian Russian literature. The first is written in Estonian and the second in Russian, for the first the Cultural Endowment has Estonian literature awards and for the second the award for the author writing in Russian. That is also the way the Institute of the Estonian Language and Estonian Literary Studies deals with the difference. (Lotman 2012)

The head of the cultural office of the Estonian newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht*, Mari Peegel, on the other hand suggested that maybe the definition of Estonian literature could be also 'literature written in Estonia' (Peegel 2012), so instead of strict divisions the definition should be broader. Estonian literary researcher Eneken Laanes stated that with strict divisions some parts of literature might be left invisible, they fall between two stools (Laanes 2012). One of the main researchers of Estonian Russian literature Igor Kotjuh has asked:

² Andrei Ivanov, born in 1971 in Estonia, spent many years in Scandinavia. His prose has been published in book form and in literary magazines in Russia and New York. He is best known as the author of the novel *Путешествие Ханумана на Лолланд* (*A Journey of Hanuman on Lolland*) which was nominated for the Russian Booker Prize in 2010 and won the Estonian Cultural Endowment literary price for the Russian language author in 2009. *Копенгага* (*Copenhagen*) won the same price in 2011 and *Харбинские мотыльки* (*Harbin Moths*) in 2013. *A Journey of Hanuman on Lolland*, *Зола* (*Ashes*), *Мой датский дядюшка* (*My Danish Uncle*), *Горсть праха* (*A Handful of Dust*) and *Harbin Moths* have been translated into Estonian.

To whom belongs the Estonian Russian-language literature? It does not suit Estonian culture because of the language, nor does it suit Russian literature and culture because it is a local Estonian matter. (Kotjuh 2013b)

A parallel for this situation can be found in the case of Baltic German literature. The inclusion of Baltic German literature into Estonian literature is just taking place and it is not yet self-evident for Estonians to take works written in German as being part of Estonian literature (Helme 2010).

Only at the beginning of the 21st century has the Estonian literary criticism started to deal with the Russian-language literature as part of Estonian literature (Kotjuh 2010: 134). The authors of the younger generation of Russian-Estonian writers who emerged after the turn of the century are the first generation of such writers seen as intrinsically part of Estonian literature (Kotjuh 2013a: 68). The generation consists of authors born in the 1970s and 1980s who made their debut in literature in the 2000s, e.g. P. I. Filimonov (born in 1975), Deniss Kuzmin (born in 1981), Igor Kotjuh (born in 1978) and Andrei Ivanov (born in 1971) (Kotjuh 2013a: 67). The Russian-speaking authors of Estonia have always defined themselves as multi-cultural (Kotjuh 2013a: 74), but critics often do not notice that fact because “the reigning social-historical paradigm defines a person according to a single national-cultural identity” (Kotjuh 2013a: 79).

Eneken Laanes has seen Ivanov’s novel *Peotäis põrmu* as an example of transnational literature. The demographic developments in the last half century have turned not only the western but all world metropolises into places where people of different national origins live. These people have started to write about their life experiences of living on the cultural borders. They often write in the local language, but not always; bilingualism or multilingualism are not rare. The characters of Andrei Ivanov’s novel *Peotäis põrmu* also live on cultural borders and as such they have attracted the attention and approval of Estonian readers (Laanes 2012).

The novel has a motto from T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, “I will show you fear in a handful of dust”; Ivanov examines the possibility of living in the wasteland during the low tide of the European Union through the eyes of local Russians (Oja 2012). The author uses many stereotypical images of Estonian Russians, different characters are depicted and topics considered typical of Estonian Russians are discussed. The article analyses the depiction of Estonian Russians in Ivanov’s *Peotäis põrmu* by using the branch of comparative literature called imagology or image studies, which deals with the research of national images and stereotypes and their manifestation in literature. Imagology

provides a helpful tool when studying various images and constructions of identity.³

The Case of Russians Living in Estonia

The author of the novel depicts Russians living in Estonia in the 21st century, providing a wide gallery of characters and showing how Russians have adapted to life under new circumstances. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russians living in Estonia found themselves in a situation where they were just a Russian minority in the independent Republic of Estonia. Historically Estonia had always had a Russian minority, but never before had it been as large as after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russians living in Estonia had three choices: to become a citizen of the Russian Federation or a citizen of the Republic of Estonia or to leave one's citizenship unidentified and take the alien's passport or the so-called grey passport (named after the colour of the latter).⁴ Therefore, for speaking about Russians living in Estonia there are three categories.

The changes in the society and their influence on people are under observation in Ivanov's works, for example in *Ashes* the main character clearly senses the change: "The town ceased to be ours. The most expressive evidence of the alienation of one's hometown became the alien's passport, which was given to me among the other "foreigners" like me." (Ivanov 2010: 98)⁵ Being or not being a citizen is one important component in one's identity construction and it is an important topic among the Russian characters, Russians in Estonia being not merely Russians but also citizens or aliens. Therefore, Russian persons may be seen as doubly strange from the Estonians' viewpoint: they belong to the other group by speaking a different language, having different customs and having a different nationality. In Ivanov's novel, the Russian characters

³ There are two main terms: auto-image (or self-image) and hetero-image: the first refers to "a characterological reputation current within and shared by a group, the latter to the opinion that others have about a group's purported character. Thomas Mann writing, as a German, about German culture expresses a German auto-image; Madame de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* expresses an outside view or hetero-image" (Leerssen 2007: 342–343). For more about imagology see *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters* (2007).

⁴ Andrei Ivanov, who also has that "grey passport", has said, "Citizenship – unidentified. Where else could you find such a fantastic document? It corresponds superbly to my state of mind" (Afanasjev 2012).

⁵ All translations are the author's.

sense that differentiation clearly. There is a clear distinction between who is a stranger and who is one's own.

One of the characteristics considered typical of Estonian Russians is a certain attitude towards native Estonians. Russians in Estonia feel the pressure to learn Estonian, to get the Estonian citizenship. They feel that they have been brushed aside. This same attitude is dealt with in the novel. For example Perepelkin, an acquaintance from the main character's past, who seems to have succeeded in blending in with the new world: he works in the police, speaks and writes good Estonian, has some ideas how to do business etc. However, he still does not feel that he belongs to this new world, sensing his inferior position. Perepelkin (in Russian 'perepel' means quail) states that Russians in Estonia are nothing but aliens:

We will never be part of the elite! We will not be accepted into their circle, no matter how well we speak their language! We will always be second-rate people only because of our national identity. There is no discrimination, just indifference. Look how they, carefree, sit and sip their cocktails, celebrate something, while we complain of our hard life, we – strangers in this life's revelry. (Ivanov 2011: 22).

Although Perepelkin has more or less adapted to the new society, he has remained the same. "He has remained entirely true to himself. He has preserved, like some candies by Kalev⁶, not only the same taste but also the same cover." (Ivanov 2011: 16) Perepelkin is seen through the main character's eyes, who does not go along with Perepelkin's ideas and view of the world but keeps his distance.

The main character of the novel feels alienated and views everything as an outsider, even when depicting Russians who have found their place in the new society. The new world has given birth to new kinds of characters and Valeri Ivanovitch is the best example here. Valeri Ivanovitch, a colleague of the main character, is an example of a successful Russian. He has fully adapted to the new society, has learned the language, has a good education, or as the main character concludes: "He was from top to toe equipped to live in our state." (Ivanov 2011: 77) The main character views his fellow countrymen ironically.

⁶ Kalev is the biggest and oldest confectionery company in Estonia.

The Case of Existential Outsiderness

There is an extensive gallery of Russian characters in post-Soviet Estonia who struggle socially and within themselves. The main character of the novel *Peotäis põrmu* never really finds his place after returning to his hometown Tallinn after living in Scandinavia. The main character returns to his hometown and from the beginning feels out of place, he does not recognize Tallinn, everything seems to be out of place like in a distorting mirror. “All the time I had the feeling that I had got off at the wrong stop.” (Ivanov 2011: 7) The city and his identity are both dislocated. “Everything seemed to have dislocated, as if during these seven years when I was ambling from country to country, some crafty illusionists had hanged distorting mirrors everywhere in the town.” (Ivanov 2011: 7) He walks the streets and goes to places, meets various people, even marries but he never really connects. He keeps his outsider’s look and is always somehow alienated. He is the anti-hero of our time (Jüristo 2013).

He is a Russian living in Estonia, his social circle consists of mainly Russians, but he feels he does not want to act as a Russian living in Estonia is supposed to act.

They [the Russians] have to go everywhere, to the theatre, the church and the stadium... Maybe it is one of the attributes of the Estonian Russians. To turn up. To visit. To belong. To express oneself. To nod. To read. To look. To hate. To observe. To celebrate. To express indignation etc etc. It is easier to be a Muslim than a Russian in Estonia! There is so much to do! There are so many things to believe in! And there are so many things to give up! (Ivanov 2011: 153)

The Estonian Russians have a certain image, the way they look, act, where they work and live, they fit a certain mould. One important component of the self-image of the Estonian Russian is that “You have to notice that Russians are being oppressed. If you do not notice it, you are no longer a Russian, because Russians are being oppressed and if you no longer feel being oppressed then you have quietly ceased to be a Russian” (Ivanov 2011: 154). One important component of the Estonian Russian identity is opposition. Being an Estonian Russian means that it is obligatory to curse the Estonian government and the way it treats its people. Volodja, an acquaintance of the main character, illustrates this aspect. He is an example of those Russians who have not adapted to the new society but seem to be stuck in the old times. “Volodja allowed too many things to slip away. Not only his wife, but also the time, he did not learn the language, did not educate himself, he had nothing to take with him when

jumping onto the new bandwagon. He had been crushed by the social Darwinism press.” (Ivanov 2011: 49) The Russians are brought together by the Bronze Soldier, a Soviet World War II Memorial in Tallinn, one of the leitmotifs in the novel. The disputes surrounding the relocation of the monument peaked with two nights of street rioting in Tallinn in April 2007 known as the Bronze Night. Most of the Russians living in Estonia see it as an act directed against them, but the main character remains indifferent. Noticeably, the main character’s wife gives birth to a stillborn baby (Ivanov 2011: 284) during the Bronze Night when local Russians expect something to happen but in the end nothing important happens and as a symbol the dead child, a handful on dust, is buried along with the memories. The main character holds on to his outsider’s stance even then.

The world of Estonian Russians is a world where people are practically identical, even before birth their roles seem to have been assigned to them: one is to become a teller in a bank, another a policeman, another a bureaucrat. In the end it even makes no difference with whom one sleeps (Tigasson 2012). “What’s the difference, whether I am in bed with my own wife or Leonid’s wife?” [Asks the main character.] “Anyway, what’s the difference, is it me or Leonid? [...] We are almost the same!” (Ivanov 2011: 212)

It has been said that *Peotäis põrmu* is a book about men without citizenship in post-Soviet Estonia, men who do not want to identify with the identity categories offered to them: Estonian, Russian, Estonian-Russian. That is why they tend to become invisible (Laanes 2012). The main character can be seen as an existential outsider: he does not feel at home anywhere. Being a Russian living in Estonia as an alien only intensifies the feeling. He states, “The fact that I am standing amidst familiar decorations does not change a thing. I have not been here for a long time, I am not local.” (Ivanov 2011: 100)⁷ The Estonian Russian background proves to be a helpful tool for creating a character who is alienated, who is an existential outsider thus offering a piercing look at the modern society. *Peotäis põrmu* reflects the 21st century society: globalization, alienation, loneliness, depression and inability to truly connect with life.

⁷ Let it be marked here that in some aspects Ivanov’s novel reminds one of Estonian exile writer Karl Ristikivi’s (1912–1977) modernist novel *Hingede öö* (*All Souls Night*, 1953). In Ristikivi’s novel the main character is an Estonian living in Sweden and in Ivanov’s novel the main character is an Estonian Russian living in Estonia but they both would feel strangers anywhere, they are existential outsiders. The comparison of these two novels will be more broadly discussed in following articles.

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