

Editorial

In 1905, young Gustav Suits, who later became a leading figure in Estonian literary society, formulated the slogan: “Let us remain Estonians, but let us become Europeans too”. This was printed in the programmatic opening album of the first Estonian modernist literary group Noor-Eesti (Young Estonia). In deed, it was then that Noor-Eesti introduced the decadent European and Russian literature to new Estonian readers. Ants Oras belonged to the next generation of authors, but the ideas of Noor-Eesti were close to him. Oras himself was not a member of any literary group, but he was an intellectual leader of the main literary group of his time, Arbujaad (Sorcerers).

Ants Oras played an essential role in the development of Estonian literary studies, critique, both theory and practice of translation and in the transformation of poetic culture. He was a dazzling personality, who was afraid of neither paradoxes nor of bold hypotheses and trials. He was a known language reformer, following in the traditions of both Villem Grünthal-Ridala and specifically Johannes Aavik. Such activities sometimes met with harsh criticism, even taunting, but these neologisms, which flew in the face of conventional Estonian literary thinking of the time, have since become rooted in the language’s neutral lexicon. Yet not all of these, and there are passages in both Aavik’s and Oras’s texts which may seem estranging even today. That said, Oras understood how language develops through poetry, and took seriously his role in the mission and responsibility of the innovative poet.

One of the main means for the evolution and broadening of culture is translation, and to Oras’s mind, first of all, poetry translation. Oras significantly widened the horizons of the Estonian literature by translating from Greek, Latin, French, Russian, English, and German, as well as other languages. Thereby, he held it important to convey not only the content of the literary works, but also the structure of verse, and not only the metre, but also the system of versification. The Estonian language, where both accent and quantity are phonologically relevant, and where the reduction of syllables is absent, offered possibilities to create verses not only in syllabic-accentual versification, which was at the time the prevailing Estonian system of versification, but also in quantitative and syllabic versification. Oras created the tradition of translating French alexandrines into Estonian syllabic verse. As regards the ancient verse, he translated these in quantitative versification. Although there

are presently syllabic-accentual translations of French and ancient verse, now it is mainstream in Estonian verse practice is to translate these in syllabic and quantitative versification, respectively.

The Oras phenomenon cannot be discussed without mention of his brilliant, and often astounding, personality. He could be regarded as the first Estonian Anglomaniac, as he tried to represent not just English spirit, but also appearance, while at the time, elegant Estonian men copied either orderly Germans or bohemian French. Oras, however, had unmistakable English gentleman and even dandyish tendencies. When in 1920s he was with scholarship at Oxford, he was materially hard-pressed, but when made to choose between dinner or elegant garb, Oras would pick the latter.

In the second half of the 1930s and the beginning of 1940s, Oras was a Professor at the University of Tartu, while in 1943 he emigrated first to Sweden, later to England and then to the USA.

Oras opposed both Soviet power, which was established in Estonia in 1940, and German occupation. In fact, Oras had decided to leave Estonia in 1943, not in 1944, when the Red Army was approaching the borders and the dramatic mass flight from Estonia began.

During the re-established Soviet occupation, most of the emigrated Estonian authors were banned, and even leftist writers were considered ideological enemies. Oras's status was different. Like several other authors, he was written out, excluded from the history of Estonian culture. He was never mentioned, not even in a negative context. In the Soviet history of the time, it was though he had never existed. Perhaps the saddest thing was that some of his poetic disciples from the former Arbujad started to use the Oras heritage of translations. Soviet culture, in the so-called people's republics, was primarily Russian culture, with the names of Russian writers given not just to cultural centres, but also to streets. In 1949, Pushkin's 150th anniversary was grandly celebrated in the Soviet Union. On this occasion, many of his works were translated to Estonian. The best translators of Pushkin were former members of Arbujad, Betti Alver and August Sang. Yet it was completely suppressed that in 1937, the 100th commemorated year of Pushkin's death, Ants Oras had already published the first collection of Pushkin's poetry, which included a number of Oras's own translation. Several of the new translations in the volume of 1949 rather reminded more of revised Oras's texts than of new productions, but Oras was never mentioned.

After Estonian independence was regained, Oras was rehabilitated and collections of his papers were edited, his translations were published and a substantial biography (2004) by a contributor to this issue, Anne Lange, was compiled. At least a part of his language innovations and translation methods

have been “rehabilitated”. This current issue, which is to celebrate Oras’s 115th anniversary, is yet one more step on the journey to put Ants Oras in his rightful place, and recognize him as a founding father of Estonian literary culture.

The idea to dedicate a special issue in honour of Ants Oras came from the USA and belongs to Professor Emerita Marina Tarlinskaja, who used her contacts to find authors and was a constant advisor to the project. Without her vision and energy, this issue would not have come into existence. The editors are also grateful to Dr. Anne Lange, who deserves special thanks for her assistance and contributions.

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