

Introductory Note

Since the break-through of postmodernism, the value of “grand narratives” has been seriously questioned. They include histories of literature that at least since the nineteenth century have embodied for bigger as well as smaller nations one of the main tasks and challenges. The canon of literature of any nation greatly relies on histories of literature. Its “peaks” in their turn have been assembled in the histories and the canon of world literature.

The topic of national histories of literature continues to be in the focus of literary scholarship. Especially in smaller nations whose independent political history has been shorter, as compared with bigger nations, there is a lot of vulnerability regarding literature and its history. Maybe there is statue of Walt Whitman in New York, but I confess that – even though I consider Whitman one of the greatest poets of Western history – during my half a year’s stay in the North-American metropolis, in 2004/2005, I never came across it. At least it was not mentioned in New York tourist guides as a sight worth seeing. Quite to the contrary, in any capital city of Eastern or Central Europe a visitor meets immediately statues of the founders and greatest representatives of national literatures. In the central square of Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, there is an impressive monument of the romantic poet France Prešeren. In the central park area of Riga, the capital of Latvia, not far from the Monument of Liberty, a visitor notices the monumental statue of the symbolist poet Jānis Rainis.

In Estonia where prose writers especially in their lifetime have been more appreciated than poets, the monuments of Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, the poet who created what is now considered to be the Estonian national epic, *Kalevipoeg*, appear rather dispersed: Kreutzwald is fully visible in the small provincial town Võru (where the poet worked as a medical doctor for forty years), but both in Tartu and Tallinn his statue is located at some distance from the town centre: in the former case, it is on the riverbank of Emajõgi

and, in the latter, in the park of Kadriorg. A memorial stone of Juhan Liiv – perhaps our greatest lyrical-philosophic poet of all times – is not missing in Tartu (where the mentally ill Liiv wrote some of his finest poems and prose pieces). However, as the poet spent his lifetime in humble invisibility, even a part of Tartu's own citizens may not be aware at all that one should look for Liiv's memorial stone in a modest place in the shadow of the National Archive of History. Beside the ancient 14th-century cathedral (now the university's museum of history) one can see the statue (erected in the late Soviet period) of Kristian Jaak Peterson, the first significant poet who wrote in the Estonian language, while from older times, the statue of Lydia Koidula, the great patriotic woman poet of our “national awakening”, adorns a square bearing her name, in her native town Pärnu.

In any case, all the main pillars of Estonian national literature have been visually and artistically reproduced in the hope that they can thus better last in the national consciousness.

Why have different nations considered literature so important? It is probably because literature covers most widely the phenomenon that we call spirituality. In the field of creative arts, literature is interiorly its most varied manifestation. Especially in smaller nations whose philosophic tradition is scarce, writers take the place of philosophers. In fact, literature is philosophy *sui generis*, but just the thinking dispersed in images which reaches the receiver through senses even sooner than thought, and also for the same reason settles in the receiver more permanently. Also because what we in Estonian call *vaimsus* (spirituality) can hardly be restricted to the exclusive product of thinking, or intellect.

What about the present day? Have national histories of literature become irreversibly a historical relict? Have we entered such an epoch in which nations do not need any stories besides the life-stories of politicians, actors and TV stars? I do not think that the rich experience of the 8th international conference of the Estonian Association of Comparative Literature, “History of Literature as a Factor of a National and Supranational Literary Canon” would confirm such a suspicion. Its multilayered conclusions, gathered in the present two-volume issue of *Interlitteraria*, would rather certify that in the field of histories of literature there are no universal “norms”

applicable in equal rights to the “centres” and “peripheries”. They also assure us that, whatever the deficiencies of earlier histories of literature, the search for new forms of writing, reflecting both national and supranational history of spirituality – with literature ever in its centre – continues in different parts of the world.

Starting from the present issue of *Interlitteraria* we will publish besides full-length articles also reviews. The only condition for their inclusion is that they should be recognizably centred on the issues of comparative literature.

As *Interlitteraria*’s international prestige and responsibility are growing, starting from the present issue we have restructured our journal’s boards. The editorial board takes care of the practical aspects of preparing MSS for publication, while the international academic advisory board secures peer-reviewing of contributions and specialized advice in all cases of doubt.

The next issue of *Interlitteraria* (16/2011) will be once again a thematic *miscellanea*. We certainly will welcome among other articles those in which the ample topic of histories of literature and literary canons is further expanded. The manuscripts should arrive by January 31, 2011.

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Editor