

History of Estonian Literature as a Kernel Structure of Estonian Culture

The history of literature is not only a summary of writers' biographies, their creative work and its reception but also about the change of literary consciousness (i.e. visions and conceptions of literature) in the history. During different periods different texts have been gathered under the term "literature", which means that the boundaries of literature have changed during history. The process has occurred on axes, one boundary of which is the objectivity of literature – the acknowledgment of its ever-valid value. The fundamental *Theory of Literature* by René Wellek and Austin Warren suggests the following wording: "The term 'literature' seems best if we limit it to the art of literature, that is, to imaginative literature" (Wellek&Warren 1977: 22). According to these authors it is better reflected in the German languages, in which a synonym to literature is *Wortkunst* – art of words. The approach, which focuses on the value means actually that in every piece of literature we should not seek for the literary reflection of imagery or the amplification of reality but rather for the "literariness" in the meaning of the Russian form school of the 1920s. At the other end of the process axis literature is comprehended contextually. Terry Eagleton has said in the introductory chapter "What is Literature?" of his *Literary Theory* that "There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition, which is valuable *in itself* (---) 'Value' is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes." (Eagleton 1983: 11).

It means that during any period literature has always comprised sub-literature (Hennoste 2003: 62). How do such "different sub-literatures" create a new literary canon in history, how is "a network of relationships within the literary situation" generated, which Tiit

Hennoste, an Estonian language and literature researcher, has considered inevitable for literature as an institution? (Hennoste 2003: 180, 188). Furthermore, how does this canon extend beyond its impact on the history of culture and society? Finding answers to these questions would be relevant in respect to understanding Estonian literature.

At this point two main aspects should be kept in mind. Firstly, history is the narrated and written past. It is rather difficult for people to distinguish between real historical events and the events they have read about in history books, studied at school or heard in the stories told by other people. Certain fictitiousness (estimated additional writing, overwriting) is inevitable in history, because real events and actions cannot be identical to their reconstructions. The outstanding contemporary German historical philosopher Jörn Rüsen has said: “Historical consciousness is a complex relationship comprising a recollection of the past, interpretation of the present and the anticipation of the future (---). The historical consciousness of a human being is always much more than just history.” (Rüsen 2000: 159). Such complex relationship may be observed in the history of literature, which centrepiece is the fusion of language and imagery of ethics, aesthetics, psychology, sociology and politics. From this point of view the history of literature is permanently opened for unceasing dialogue between different communities of readers.

At this point we should observe the characterisation of the literary field provided by Pierre Bourdieu: anyone acting upon the literary field or as he says the *actants* (writers, critics, publishers, editors, literary scientists) uses different capital (cultural capital as the knowledge of the game rules in the cultural space, symbolic capital as social recognition, prestige or reputation, *habitus* – a system directing/influencing individual activities, behaviour and thinking) (Bourdieu 1996: 179–181, 215–223.) for positioning themselves in the literary field. Or in other words – such a dialogue between subjects comprises a substantial amount of manipulations. Literary history like history is figuratively speaking rewritten as the history of the “winners”, i.e. as the history of writers and publication included in canons.

Secondly, it has to be kept in mind that according to my subjective opinion, despite the openness that enables manipulations and continually expanding nature, the history of literature is intrinsically a teleological process down to its depth. At least I want to make such a statement about the history of Estonian literature. The exterior (hidden, unconscious) objective of the history of literature may be literariness, which I understand differently from the “literariness” hidden in the structure inherent to formalists and perceived as absoluteness (essence) of the unison of all literary phenomena above (or even deeper)¹. Such kind of “literariness” is kept in mind if spirituality *per se* is seen in literature, a kind of philosophy, scattering ideas into images. “The mainstream historical process is summarised best in the national history of literature” (Talvet 2010: 127–128). In Estonian literature it is expressed for example in the ode “The Moon” (1819) by the first Estonian poet Kristian Jaak Peterson (1801–1822), putting forward the idea that the Estonian language should establish a position that would enable it to achieve the eternal status of the Estonian language via literary creations *resp* poetry. Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1801 – 1882) the author of the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg* (Kalev’s Son) (1857–1862) saw it as his main literary work, “which like Homer’s, shall be found 1,000 years later in any library of people, who have no understanding of the language whatsoever” (Kreutzwald 1976: 425–426). There is no doubt that the high and normative assessment of his individual work expresses the thirst for sacral absoluteness.

Kalevipoeg as a multi-vocal text creating myths and the nation like the *telos* (the definite goal having an impact on the direction of development and the interpretation of the development proceeding from it), which unites, according to Jaan Undusk, the openness of the text, “the cosmopolitan reflections and the deep rooting in the soil” (Undusk 1994: 150) has been recognised by different scholars in their presentations and articles (Talvet 2003: 888–890; Undusk 1994: 147–150; Veidemann 2006: 121–129). Or let us take one of the most

¹ I admit that such an approach proceeds from literary phenomenology that phenomena are elements perceived by us in our consciousness apart from elements that really exist irrespective of our experience (See Viik 2009: 216 jj)

outstanding representatives of Estonian poetry Juhan Liiv (1864–1913), who has been characterised as “a voice from the depth of Estonia” (Talvet 2007a: 296) and several of whose poems embody an existential interpretation of a nation, in which the responsibility and sense of guilt for the fate of the nation is assumed (Talvet 2007b: 27). The existentialist outlook (dealing with good and evil, the antinomies of the meaning of work and life) is observed in the creative work of the greatest Estonian prose writer Anton H. Tammsaare (1878–1940) in his 5-volume novel *Tõde ja õigus* (Truth and Justice) (1926–1933) and in his novel *Põrgupõhja uus vanapagan* (The New Old Pagan from Põrgupõhja) (1939) (Scholtz 2001: 136). “*Tõde ja õigus* /is / a dramatic chain of search for the meaning of life,” as the translator of Tammsaare in Czech language Vladimír Macura claims (Macura 2001: 155). The sequence of examples, which may be definitely complemented by the fact that the writer’s yearning for absoluteness, to cross the earthborn boundaries by means of literature, an effort to perceive something essential in life and in the fate of one nation, resound with literary-historical *telos*.

Thus, literary history (as stressed is the *n a r r a t e d* and *w r i t t e n* history) is the movement towards the one absolute core value. Such movement is measured by proceeding from such “literariness”. The literary canon may be considered the embodiment of the core value or example, specifying one or any other national literature. This takes us back to the source of the creation of the term of literature: the literature of ancient Greece followed by Rome (Kolk 2009: 45), in which the term *litteratura* was used to describe the aggregated whole of authors and books worth reading.

The internal functional objective of literary history is to have a reading community and besides that a power able to create a nation, idea as a form of creation. When I state that Estonian history of literature is the kernel structure of Estonian culture, I really mean that the **history of literature is both the idea of Estonian culture as well as its form of creation**. Or in other words: Estonian cultural history in its essence is derived from Estonian literary history. When handling *the (history of) culture* as a text, Estonian literary history influences it in the respect of code text and meta-text. Code text according to Lotman’s definition is a text, which exists only in the

head or the sub-conscious of the person retelling it, “organising the memory and defining the boundaries of the possible text variation” (Lotman 1990: 285) – literary history is the discourse of Estonian culture or the “membrane”, which measures the meaningfulness of literary events in the aspect of meaningfulness of the cultural history. On the other hand, literary history may be regarded also as the model or meta-text of Estonian culture. It may be observed especially at the beginning of the 20th century with the appearance of the literary group called Noor-Eesti (Young Estonia) (Gustav Suits, Friedebert Tuglas, Villem Grünthal-Ridala, Aino Kallas, Johannes Aavik, etc.) and their “project” and mission to modernise the entire Estonian culture. “Noor-Eesti has introduced (borrowed if you wish) the liberal understanding of art and elite aesthetics into the consciousness of Estonian culture”, a statement put forward by the literary critics Sirje Olesk and Marin Laak in the opening article of *Methis* – a special issue of the magazine dedicated to the 100th anniversary of Noor-Eesti (Olesk, Laak 2008: 12). The meta-textuality of literary history is revealed in respect to Estonian culture also in the observations of translated literature, the first decades of which may be regarded as the explosion of reception of the world literature in Estonia (Veidemann 2006: 294–304).

One may wonder at once if the openness for dialogue of the history of literature, for continuous re-reading and writing shall not contradict the subordination of the goal, figuratively speaking, to be the midwife and advocate of Estonian culture. This cannot be said about the history of Estonian literature. Until today, thirteen different treatments of the history of Estonian literature or some of its periods have been published (the first one was written by D. H. Jürgenson under the title *Kurze Geschichte der ehstnischen Literatur* (1843–1844), and the last one was published in 2008 as *Eesti kirjandus paguluses XX sajandil* (20th Century Estonian Literature in Exile), and it may be observed in the topic treatment since the end of the 19th century that it has influenced the formation of the Estonian literary canon (classical works and main authors), creating the axis of the history of literature and having an impact on the entire Estonian culture.

As a matter of fact, the 5-volume *History of Estonian Literature* (1965–1991) written during the Soviet doctrine did not include Estonian literature written in exile by a number of Estonian modern classics who had to flee Estonia during the war (like Gustav Suits, Marie Under, Henrik Visnapuu, August Gailit, Albert Kivikas, Karl Ristikivi and others), or its value has been overlooked or minimised. However, the history of literature as the kernel structure of national culture is still transparent in the above-mentioned literary work.

What is it then that was important in the history of Estonian literature and is also the creative form of Estonian culture?

Primarily it is the folklore (myths, legends) and especially folk songs. The main principle of the structure of folk songs in Estonia and the Balto-Finnic region is the runic verse (*runo*) and parallelism. The folk song, comprising runic verse, may be regarded the genuine feature of the entire Estonian culture. The writer Jaan Kaplinski has called it the ancient grammar of the Estonian culture. Unfortunately, this grammar was fractured in the 19th century, when the old folk songs, as paradoxical as it may seem, perished (they could not be written down as there was no knowledge as to how to write them down) during the period of national awakening and were replaced by a kind of imitation of a simple-structured German folk song – *Volkslied*. Thus, the reference culture established was the German culture. This denoted acculturation. The folk culture had a totally different structure. It could not be placed into one-to-one relationship with the German culture dominant in towns and estates. Until the middle of the 19th century Estonia had nothing the literate Germans had had for a very long time (writers, science, history), and due to that, as Kaplinski explains it, the new Estonian culture had to be definitely defined as something that the Germans considered culture, but appearing as “national” for the Estonians. This “national” feature for Estonians, the free and cultured nation, was the ancient history before the German colonisation. This kind of history was constructed in the Estonian literature of the 19th century starting with Kristian Jaak Peterson, Friedrich Robert Faehlmann, Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald up to Carl Robert Jakobson, Jakob Hurt, Eduard Bornhöhe and Andres Saal. Whereby, this ancient history was characterised as high culture.

Kalevipoeg (Kalev's son) was the first literary hero – literary and fictional because its origin in the folklore was known in a rather limited area of Estonia, but the protagonist was not confined only to literature, it became the symbol of the entire culture. Furthermore, as mentioned by academic Jaan Undusk, Kalevipoeg was a political challenge to the Baltic-German rulers. “He was the first free person in the literary space of the Baltic countries, the first artist and anarchist, who participated in the fight of good and evil with typical human eagerness,” wrote Undusk (2009: 3).

We may observe that such kind of folk and literary heroes organise and influence Estonian culture in the 20th century, which impact, however, is not necessarily positive. Even the best-known protagonist, Andres of Vargamäe in Anton H. Tammsaare's novel *Tõde ja õigus* (Truth and Justice) was very ambivalent. Or let us take Joosep Toots, Arno Tali or Tõnisson in *Kevade* (Spring) by Oskar Luts – all of them and many other characters created by Oskar Luts constitute a generalisation of typical people, who lived in the Estonian village community at the end of the 19th century. Their presence is vital in the Estonian culture today because they symbolise typical human features on one hand, and on the other hand generate childhood nostalgia. *Rehepapp* (The Old Barney) written by one of the most popular Estonian writers Andrus Kivirähk and published in 2000, illustrates the process how a central figure – the Old Barney (*rehepapp*) – in the ancient Estonian village community acquires a symbolic status in the literary approach and becomes a proper name for denoting a certain type of behaviour.

The function of history of Estonian literature in culture as a creator of form may be observed in the fact that throughout history Estonian writers have made up an influential part of the intellectual elite in Estonia. In the 19th century they were the enlighteners of the nation (Johann Voldemar Jannsen, Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald). But we can also see ideologists and politicians among them (Carl Robert Jakobson in the 19th century, Eduard Vilde and Gustav Suits at the beginning of the 20th century, Lennart Meri at the end of the 20th century) or critical thinkers who have given meaning to social and cultural life (Friedebert Tuglas, Anton H. Tammsaare, Jaan Kaplinski, Jaan Kross, Hando Runnel and many others). At the end

of the 20th century, especially since the end of the 1960s Estonian writers acquired the position of the spiritual authority in the society and retained it until the re-establishment of the independent Estonia in 1991.

Mythology, a discussion about the method of describing life in Estonian literature acquires a cultural meaning beside fictional heroes and writers. Discussion about critical realism at the end of the 19th century brought out the idea that nationalism remains only a rhetoric image (or as it was said "patriotic sighing") if not bound to the changes in the society and an explicit education program. Realism was no more restricted only to literature, but became a choice of cultural orientation. The expansion of such literary-historical problems is expressed more vividly in culture in relation to the movement of Noor-Eesti. After its literary manifesto and the collection of poems *Elu tuli* (Fire of Life) (1905) by Gustav Suits, the Noor-Eesti albums became influential. The movement Noor-Eesti acquired the status of a revolutionary cultural movement, because it combined the ambition of modernising literature, applied art and the language.

Writers' discussions at the end of 1920s expanded to the entire Estonian culture, known as the down-to-earth movement, which stimulated aesthetic and socio-ethical thought. When the literary critic and translator Ants Oras gathered a selection of poetry by the new generation of poets into an anthology *Arbujad* (Soothsayers) in 1936, it denoted also a change in the discourse of culture (spirit *versus* power).

At the turn of the 1950s–60s there was a breakthrough of free verse in Estonian poetry (Jaan Kross, Ain Kaalep, Ellen Niit), which expanded into a cultural upheaval in the 1960s (in poetry, Paul-Eerik Rummo, Jaan Kaplinski, Mats Traat, Viivi Luik, Hando Runnel; in prose, Mati Unt, Arvo Valton, Enn Vetemaa; in music, Arvo Pärt, Veljo Tormis, Jaan Rääts; in visual arts, Jüri Arrak, Peeter Mudist, Enn Põldroos, Tiit Pääsuke; in theatre, Voldemar Panso, Mikk Mikiver, Jaan Tooming, Evalt Hermaküla). Paul-Eerik Rummo published his play *Tuhkatriinumäng* (The Cinderella Game) in 1968, of which the stage version in Vanemuine Theatre in Tartu a year later (in 1969) triggered political repression (the performance of the play was banned, Paul-Eerik Rummo became an internal exile after

suspension of the publication of his collection of poetry “Saatja aadress” (The Return Address) and the discussion of the possibility of alienation in the socialist system.

Everything that afterwards developed into a literary event of historical importance (active reception, inclusion in the literary canon), like Hando Runnel’s collection of poetry *Punaste õhtute purpur* (The Purple of Red Nights) in 1982 and Viivi Luik’s novel *Seitsmes rahukevad* (The Seventh Spring of Peace) in 1985, becomes also the element of the kernel structure of Estonian culture.

The entire literary intertextuality (interaction of texts with each other, translations from other languages into Estonian) and inter-semioticism (staging of literary texts, their transformation into films, and even into a ballet, not to mention the literary subject matter being recorded in figurative art) forms a network, of which the Estonian culture creates its identity. Hence, it may be declared that the identity of Estonian culture is primarily constituted in Estonian literature and its history.

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