

Literary Histories as an Aspect of Discursive Construction of National Identity

Stuart Hall has written in the article *The Questions of Cultural Identity* that one of the aspects of national identity is the narrative of a nation. The narrative of a nation exists in national narratives, in literature, in media and in everyday culture. It creates a connection between stories, landscapes, historical events, national symbols etc. Hall assigns literature a very important role in the creation process of national identity (Hall 1996: 613–615), as well as David Perkins does:

A function of many literary histories has been to support feelings of community and identity. [...] a history of literature, whether it be the literature of a nation, class, region, race, or gender, would help instruct us who we are individually and as a community. It displays the tradition in which we stand whether we will or no, for this tradition has formed us. [...] Literary histories explain allusions in text, establish the expectations associated with a genre in a given time and place, show how a work broke through a general crisis in aesthetic construction, demonstrate that it served or subverted a dominant ideology, and so forth. (Perkins 1992: 180–183).

Literary histories are stories about (national) literatures, i.e. literary histories are metatexts which are created by literary critics, translators and literary historians. Most of all theorists still believe that “literary historians ‘create’ literary history, with its power lines, centre and periphery”, according to Estonian researcher Aare Pilv (Pilv 2004: 70).

Literary historians and others interpret other literary works, and they are able to influence the cultural system and society. They may play an important role in constructing national identity too. The main

aim of national identity is to construct a large national unity which can exist as a discursive construct. So, it is reasonable to analyse literary histories as text(s) in contexts to explain how literary histories work in culture and society. If we compare different literary histories, we can see that they have been quite different in different times and they also represent different ideologies.

1. Early Estonian Literary Histories

Estonian literature is not very old and we have very few academic literary histories. The first histories of Estonian literature were written in the middle of the 19th century in German (Dietrich Heinrich Jürgenson, *Kurze Geschichte der ehstnischen Literatur*, 1843–1844), and in Finnish (August Engelbrekt Ahlqvist, *Viron nykyisemmästä kirjallisuudesta*, 1856). Both of them were written for the foreign readers not for the Estonians.

The first literary histories in Estonian and for the Estonian readers were compiled at the end of the 19th century. The first one was written by Juhan Kunder (*Eesti kirjandus koolile ja kodule* / Estonian Literature in School and at Home, 1890), who was a teacher at school and also a poet and playwright. The next history was compiled by a philologist, poet and composer Karl August Hermann (*Eesti kirjanduse ajalugu* / Estonian Literary History, 1898). The last literary history in the 19th century was written by the teacher and literary researcher Tõnu Sander (*Eesti kirjanduse ajalugu* / Estonian Literary History I–II, 1899–1901). Unfortunately, Sander's literary history ends at the end of the 17th century.

All these three literary histories were hastily written and unreliable up to a point, but the readers still accepted them (*q.v.* Annus *et al* 2007: 356).

The most important literary histories from the early 20th century wrote a teacher Mihkel Kampmaa: *Eesti vanem ilukirjandus* (Early Estonian Literature, 1908), *Eesti kirjanduse peajooned I–IV* (Main Features of Estonian Literature, published 1912–1936). Kampmaa's history was "Written in the spirit of Georg Brandes, they described the main literary currents, discussed the writers' personality, and

provided much contextual information. Kampmaa saw the writer's childhood and genealogy in a romantic light and he perceived literature and writers within a movement towards perfection. His subjective views, written in a colourful style, were delivered with a powerful, omniscient voice. He did make some attempt to present the writers, the process of writing, and the texts in a wider context, for instance by employing Romanticism, Realism and other transnational critical terms and naming their foreign representatives, but in discussing individual Estonian writers he avoided comparisons. While he took it for granted that Estonian literature reflected movements beyond the border, he looked upon particular Estonian writers in isolation. (Annus *et al* 2007: 356)

Consequently, Kampmaa's literary history was theoretically pretty adequate and exhaustive according to the contemporary researchers (Epp Annus, Luule Epner and Jüri Talvet).

Another researcher Endel Nirk had bit different opinion in his book *Estonian Literature* (1970):

Kampmaa's history was essentially conservative and eclectic in character, and it could not keep abreast of the literary thought of the period. As a teacher, Kampmaa wrote his history mainly for secondary schools and it was first and foremost an extensive and systematised collection of material. [...] Nevertheless, no profound history of literature based on a systematic study of the literary heritage was written in bourgeois Estonia. (Nirk 1970: 275)

Nirk's *Estonian Literature* was written for the foreign readers in the Soviet period. At the end of the 20th century Nirk wrote that Kampmaa's literary history was very important and developed work in the context of its time (Kruus, Puhvel 2000: 172–173). It means that the meaning of a literary history may change in different times even for one and the same person.

2. Writers' Literary Histories

The eminent Estonian literary histories have been written still in the 20th and 21st centuries. It is notable that several Estonian literary histories have been written by writers, for example Friedebert Tuglas, Gustav Suits, Karl Ristikivi and Bernard Kangro. This means that our writers are not just research objects; rather, they take part in the creative process of literary history and the literary canon, as well as the national identity. Some writers also have the opportunity to decide what belongs in the canon and what is peripheral. (A similar situation also exists in Estonian criticism: it is not unusual that, when our writers publish books, the critics are other writers, sometimes friends.) It means that Estonian literary histories demonstrate a somewhat different situation, as Stuart Hall describes it: our literary histories are not always created by literary historians.

2.1. Friedebert Tuglas' Literary History

Friedebert Tuglas was one of the writers who created and also directed the canon and mainstream of Estonian literature. Endel Nirk has written:

Tuglas the critic has influenced Estonian literature no less profoundly than Tuglas the writer. With his imposing erudition and his formidable analytical and controversial talent he struggled persistently to rise the aesthetic standards of the national culture. When he made his debut as a critic in the days of the Noor-Eesti movement he was mainly an adherent of the school of Georg Brandes ... (Nirk 1970: 167)

Tuglas was a leading figure in Estonian literary and cultural life for several years:

Although largely self-educated, Tuglas became the chief speaker for the conscious approach to literary style in Estonian literature at the beginning of the 20th century. His critical studies cover a wide range

from folklore to modern literature and are distinguished by their power to synthesize: Tuglas not only retains a fine sense of local context while introducing modern European critical ideas, but also has as his stylistic ideal a kind of hermaphroditic combination of Realism with Romanticism, of male with female. Starting to write criticism already in the early years of exile that lasted from 1906 to 1917, his most spectacular critical period belongs to the 20s and 30s when he published four extensive monographs and eight volumes of his critical works. (Undusk 2005: 9)

Tuglas wrote in his short Estonian literary history (1934) that Estonian literature is literature which is written in the Estonian language. (It is interesting that Cornelius Hasselblatt's new Estonian literary history presents the same idea). Tuglas believed that other ethnic groups who have lived in Estonia have not created their own independent culture in this country, but they have represented the connection with the larger countries where they have their roots. (Tuglas 1936: 6). He was referring to Danes, Swedes, Poles and Russians. Even Germans created, in Estonia, only marginal and provincial literature. At the same time, the reason Estonian literature has developed so slowly is because of the exploitation of Estonians by the ethnic groups mentioned above: they did not establish their own great culture and inhibited the development of Estonians.

Tuglas began his literary history with Estonian folklore and the first publications in Estonian. He also described the works of Baltic-Germans, and national romanticism in the 19th century. Tuglas concentrated on such literary styles as realism, new romanticism and new realism. Tuglas, of course, expressed his own preferences. Realism, as well as new romanticism, is also a part of the canon in contemporary time; Tuglas' creative work was very successful.

2.2. Gustav Suits' Literary History

Another Estonian writer, Gustav Suits, wrote his literary history in exile (1953). Suits was a distinguished poet and the first professor of Estonian and general literature in the 1930s at Tartu University. He

was the leader of the Noor-Eesti movement. So, he did much to develop “Estonian literary research and criticism, and helped to bring into existence a whole new school of literary thought” (Nirk 1970: 164).

The style of his history is much more poetic and essayistic than Tuglas’ literary history. (Aarne Merilai’s and Õne Kepp’s treatment of Estonian exile poetry books, published in 1994 and 2008 respectively, continued in a similar style). Suits concentrated only on written culture and literature, and excluded folklore in the first part of the book. Suits began with religious texts written in Estonian in the 16th century, continued with Enlightenment tracts (works by Baltic German estophiles, and literature for peasants) and the national romantic movement in the 19th century. The second part of the book contains essays on selected Estonian writers: August Kitzberg, Juhan Liiv, Eduard Vilde, Anton Hansen Tammsaare, Marie Under, Villem Grünthal-Ridala, Friedebert Tuglas and Henrik Visnapuu.

Suits’ selection is impressive but also extremely selective. At the same time, Suits tried to place Estonian writers in the European context: he compared them with different writers from other countries, drew parallels and created the impression that all European literature is connected in some way. That is a really valuable aspect of Suits’ literary history.

3. Literary histories in the Soviet period

During the Soviet period, a large five-volume *Eesti kirjanduse ajalugu* (*Estonian literary history*, 1965–1991) was published (edited by Endel Sõgel) for Estonian readers, as was Endel Nirk’s *Estonian Literature* (1970) for foreign readers. It was a totally different time and both of the books are strongly ideological, especially the history compiled by Sõgel. It was

The Estonian version of the team-produced communist literary histories... Compiled according to Soviet ideology, it was methodologically a mixture of author-centered positivism and text-centered new criticism. In accordance with the critical discourse of

this era, Estonian literature's relation to foreign literatures was considered in two parts: the first one dealt with the friendly and fruitful collaborations between Soviet regimes, the second with the unworthy Other, the capitalist world. Once again, Estonian exile literature was excluded. (Annus et al 2007: 357)

But at the same time these books include much more information than Estonian literary histories written before and after.

It was also a time when Estonian literature was divided into two parts: literature in the homeland and literature in exile. Jaan Puhvel, a professor at the University of California, is very critical of Nirk's short literary history, although he has a positive reaction to some parts of the book. Puhvel approved of the treatment of Karl August Hindrey and Karl Rumor, but he resented the influence of political doctrine which changed the picture of the literature and paid more attention to the class war between the bourgeoisie and working class (Puhvel 2007: 65–68). By the way, Nirk's literary history adopted the principles of the five-volume Sõgel's literary history (q.v. Annus et al 2007: 357).

Thus we can read from Nirk's literary history about Estonian writers abroad:

The events of the Second World War contributed to a dispersal of thousands of Estonians all over the world. The reason that compelled them to abandon their home-country, at that time occupied by fascist Germany, were rather complicated. Some of them had compromised themselves by their relations to fascists, others had fallen victim to panic-engendering fascist propaganda. [...] Continuing their activities abroad, the Estonian writers assumed the role of political refugees and, despite their previous dissensions, provisionally found a language in common on the outdated bourgeois nationalist platform. The mission the Estonian refugees took upon themselves was to "maintain Estonian culture", since they assumed that national culture could not be preserved under Soviet rule. A prominent role in promoting that standpoint was enacted by the Estonian émigré press, which had adopted a blind anti-Soviet attitude since the very beginning, getting further support in the atmosphere of intensifying "cold war" (Nirk 1970: 362).

Such books are paradoxical and contradictory: on the one hand, they contain very important information but on the other hand, all the information is buried under ideology and the reader must read between the lines. Actually this ideology is the rhetoric of old Byzantium, of a totalitarian empire, and the main idea is to subject people to power. Paradoxically, it is still possible to save the national identity in this situation if you can read between the lines, and mentally resist the ideological doctrine.

3.1. Literary Histories in Exile

Gustav Suits was not the only author who published literary histories in exile. Arvo Mägi published, in exile, two-volume *Lühike eesti kirjanduslugu* (A Short History of Estonian Literature, 1965), which dealt with folklore and literature till 1940. Actually Mägi continued Tuglas' tradition: the main topics are realism, new realism and new romanticism.

Another writer Karl Ristikivi published his book *Eesti kirjanduse lugu* (*History of Estonian Literature*, 1954) also in Swedish exile. Both the literary histories by Mägi and Ristikivi were not innovative:

They escaped Marxist simplifications, but their exilic perspective, tinged with nostalgia, were attached to a pre-war tradition. Due to the authors' isolation, these works could not, for instance, trace Estonian literature's complex connections with the modernist currents, nor could they introduce new theoretical perspective. (Annus et al 2007: 357–358)

At the same time it is still paradoxical and interesting that both poetic and ideological innovations were initiated by exile literature. The first innovative exile poet was Ilmar Laaban. His collection *Ankruketi lõpp on laulu algus* (The End of the Anchor Chain is the Beginning of Song, 1946) is one of the most innovative poetry books in Estonian literature, which had a very strong influence, since its surrealist freedom liberated our poetic language and metaphor, and

it is also paradoxical, and very significant, that the new innovations began with surrealism.

One of the most innovative prose books in Estonian literature is Karl Ristikivi's novel *Hingede õö* (All Souls' Night, 1953) which expressed the homeless nation's spirit, and, according to Rein Veidemann, "Karl Ristikivi's novel *Hingede õö* can be considered a manifesto of existentialism in the Estonian literature of the 1950s (Veidemann 2000: 50).

It seems that Karl Ristikivi has influenced Estonian literature more as a writer, and not so much as a critic.

4. Literary histories from recent years

Epp Annus, Luule Epner, Ants Järv, Sirje Olesk, Ele Süvalep and Mart Velsker published our most recent literary history in Estonian in 2001. It continues Sõgel's grand literary history tradition, but in a different way. It concentrates on the literary process and connects it with the social context. Each of the five authors has his/her own style and the text changes the focus from the process to the authors, and from the authors to literary texts. It is also a very selective book and subjective. Essays are mixed with more academic treatment.

Cornelius Hasselblatt, a professor at Groningen University published a great Estonian literary history in German, *Geschichte der estnischen Literatur. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, in 2006. That book was published by the prominent German publisher Walter Gruyter. It is the first "modern treatise of Estonian literature in a world language" that is not translated from Estonian, and it is a view from the outside (Hasselblatt, Kesküla 2007: 28).

Hasselblatt's literary history focuses on texts in Estonian and it is written for foreign readers. At the same time, he used Soviet sources when he wrote his literary history: "I'm not so stupid as to be totally unable to read Soviet texts and understand their meaning. Any text must be critically read, analysed and interpreted. It is sometimes assumed here that no foreigner can possibly understand anything that has happened or is going on. This is not true." (Ib.)

It is significant that Hasselblatt believes that

...the difference between east and west is smaller than I thought, i.e. the problems tackled by Estonian writers are more or less the same as in other countries. So the Estonian culture is less exotic than expected (or occasionally perhaps hoped for) – we all come from the same planet. (Ib. 29)

At the same time Hasselblatt's literary history relates with Tuglas' literary history from 1930s very well.

What we need in the 21st century? Conclusion

Linda Hutcheon has written in her article "Rethinking the National Model" that the world is globalized, multinational, and diasporic in the 21st century, and we need not only single-nation focus of literary histories, but also new literary histories based on race, gender etc. (Hutcheon 2002: 3); c.f. with Hasselblatt's words "we all come from the same planet" mentioned above. It still seems that one idea of what kind of literary histories we need in the 21st century is the comparative literary history, which would compare literatures of neighbouring countries or even literatures which are not from neighbouring countries but exist in the same area or continent (European literatures, for example). One of them was published last year in Riga, *Latvieši, gauņi un lietuvieši: literārie un kultūras kontakti* (Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians: Literary and Cultural Contacts, 2008), edited by Benedikts Kalnačs et al. Although it is in Latvian with English summaries and, as Kalnačs writes, "The intended audience for this book is the Latvian reader. For this reason we have paid attention to the attitudes regarding Latvian–Estonian and Latvian–Lithuanian connections. The authors have provided a detailed overview of the literary and cultural presence of Estonians and Lithuanians in Latvia" (Kalnačs 2008: 1084), Estonians have the opportunity to read about literary contacts and translations from other Baltic countries. And it is also important that it is possible to read about the reception of our neighbouring countries' literature. Thinking about the future, Kalnačs writes: "...we have attempted to provide a factual base that can be used as a foundation for further

research into various types of literary development in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania” (ib.).

At the same time, we still need literary histories which give overviews of literature written in one country or in one language. This would provide a basis for possible comparative literary histories. It seems that if we have many different literary histories, or histories about texts, the readers (the members of different nations, classes, regions, races or genders) not only read the texts differently, but also create new histories – the grand narratives does not hold, more exactly, it holds only partly, because the horizon of the past and the horizon of the present converge in the process of reading. The reality and the fictional world are mixed in literary texts and also in meta-texts, the texts of literary histories.

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