

*Changing the Literary Canon at School:
Between an Authority to Be Challenged and
an Authority to Be Established*

When literary scholars discuss the issues of history of literature, the discussion is usually centred on the ways of moving the discipline forward. The task of historians is to introduce new interpretations of the past, and, to that end, constantly redefine what constitutes a meaningful past and what are the methods best suited to construct a new historical understanding of literature.

Somewhat less attention is paid to histories left behind, so to speak. Once a general agreement has been reached among scholars that one method of historiography is insufficient or outdated, attention is turned to developing new ones and to covering research fields so far left unattended. However, the “old” history does not disappear along with its credibility in the eyes of specialists, who sometimes happily forget that the history that has been constructed has not been constructed only for themselves, but for a larger public who is often reluctant to let go of familiar constructs. Thus, specialists may discover, should they find themselves confronted with the reality of the larger public, that they have a hard battle to fight against their own former beliefs they have considered already overcome.

The reasons for this reluctance to part with old concepts are many and may be amplified by a specific cultural context. In the post-soviet space several factors need to be taken into account. The Soviet period had a sort of desynchronizing or anachronizing influence on literary theory and methodology. While the 1960s were a crucial period for rethinking literary history, the arrival of new concepts was slow and sly in the Eastern block. The Soviet literary system perpetuated the earlier biohistoricist and teleological way of perceiving

the development of literature. Although the system was unable to stop new methods from enriching the field of research, it was much more effective in filtering them out of materials intended for the general public, including school textbooks.

Later, other considerations arose. Linda Hutcheon has noted that rewriting the history of literature is met with the most reluctance in the post-communist countries (Hutcheon, Valdés 2002: 5), where the recent social, political, economical and cultural upheavals have made people grasp for means of reconstructing their national identities. As Marko Juvan has pointed out, the history of world literature has had such a function in the context of Kulturation, just the same as the history of the nation's own literature (Juvan 2008: 117). In the following examples of historiography and canon formation concerning Estonian high school textbooks on world literature, these responsibilities attributed to and also interiorised by authors of those books should also be kept in mind.

The cases to be discussed concern teaching the 20th century world literature in Estonian schools. Before describing them in detail, one more methodological issue, more specifically related to the subject, must be called to mind. No matter what are considered to be the main objects of history of literature (authors' biographies, the aesthetic evolution of texts, social phenomena related to literary practices etc.), additional problems arise when dealing with the history of foreign literature. János Szávai very justly asks what *is* the literature we are teaching to foreigners, if it is not wholly – or at all – available for reading and if its canonical interpretations depend on cultural and textual references that are unfamiliar to the target group (Szávai 2008). Even though Szávai's point of view is that of somebody teaching his country's literature abroad, the basic issues are the same when teaching foreign literature in one's own country. The historical narrative describing the evolution of that literature contains unknown references and the canon of authors and texts is seldom completely covered by translations.

Writing the history of foreign literature is therefore a task with its own particular difficulties. Although the textbooks themselves look like those that teach literature written in the students' own language, they cannot function in quite the same way. Even in the best of

circumstances they are likely to contain many empty references due to the fact that textbook authors use histories written in foreign countries as source materials. By so doing they import a canon of texts and authors and a narrative concentrated on issues that are not necessarily represented or relevant in the target culture. On the other hand, if the authors of textbooks try to make the most of the resources available in the target culture, their history may construct an entirely different canon and a set of values from those acknowledged in the literary traditions they are trying to introduce.

The actual task of a textbook author consists of working out a compromise between these two positions: it is not possible to ignore either the “original” history of foreign literature or the local tradition of translating, reading and interpreting it. Therefore, a supranational literary canon is a rather abstract phenomenon with a generally acknowledged centre, at best, but with a lot of variable elements in the periphery. In other words, each history of foreign literature contributes to the construction of a local, national version of what is perceived as the supranational canon. These local variants of the virtual supranational canon create a ground for dialogue for readers within one culture and for readers from different cultures. It is the responsibility of textbook authors to provide future readers with tools that serve both purposes: ensure the continuity of the local tradition and enable local readers to understand other cultures.

When foreign literature is concerned, the local tradition itself is also a complex phenomenon: not only does it grow with time in its country or countries of origin, it also grows in its “adoptive” culture, as new translations appear. Thus, some former empty references in textbooks may be filled with actual referents. References that were avoided or minimized, so as not to produce superficial knowledge on texts unavailable for actual reading, can be further developed. Choices that were once made in favour of perhaps less important authors in the supranational canon, whose texts were more accessible, can be reconsidered. All these changes can result in a better, wider understanding of other literatures: as the field of translations opens up to include more authors and works, the school – the most powerful instrument of spreading reading skills and habits – should also broaden its horizons.

However, especially since school does not have unlimited time for teaching any given subject, such developments may be perceived as rather radical and traumatic by teachers. While the literary tradition expands, textbooks cannot do so, they will have to change, at least to some extent. And while for scholars it may be obvious that all history, including the history of literature, is always changing, it is not necessarily that obvious to those less acquainted with the discipline of literary studies. That, as Gottlieb Gaiser points, is unfortunately often also the case of teachers of literature: they often lose contact with research and criticism and keep transmitting to students knowledge they have gathered during their studies (Gaiser 1993: 137–138). That situation (or suspicion thereof) also influences the publishers of textbooks and thereby creates even more demands to define the task of textbook authors.

The two following brief case studies on Marcel Proust and Erich Maria Remarque show how these factors have been, and still are, at work in the creation of Estonian secondary school textbooks on 20th-century literature: how the history of translations and other historical circumstances have influenced canon formation and the histories written to support that canon. Proust and Remarque are chosen partly as random examples, partly for my personal experience with debates concerning their role in the textbook canon.

Proust was first mentioned in Estonia in 1920, by the critic Johannes Semper who announced in the literary magazine *Ilo* that Proust had won the Goncourt Prize for *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (Asm 1920). During the next decades Semper obviously took a great interest in Proust's works: he has published a remarkable essay on it in three different versions (1923, 1934 and 1969). However, the general interests ran a different course at the time: the First World War, followed by the Estonian War of Independence and the early days of independence woke the social responsibility in the Estonian writers who found ideological and aesthetical inspiration in German expressionism rather than Proust. Even Semper, otherwise a prolific translator, did not venture into translations of Proust's works, other than quoting a few paragraphs as examples in his essay.

The first translation, *Un amour de Swann* (Proust 1973), was published in 1973 by Leili-Maria Kask. Today, two more pieces of

Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* are available in Estonian: the first part and the first chapter of the second part of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* was published in 1995, translated by Tiina Indrikson (Proust 1995), and *Le Temps retrouvé* in 2004, translated by Tõnu Õnnepalu (Proust 2004).

Remarque's works, on the other hand, were already translated during the period of independence between the two World Wars (*Im Westen nichts Neues* in 1929 (Remarque 1929)), reprinted in 1935. After the war and the Stalinist period, the first new translation (*Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben*) was published in 1959 (Remarque 1959), after which each decade gave a new novel, until the 1990s brought about an enormous popularity. Today, there are about a dozen different novels available to Estonian readers, several of them reprinted more than once. The cinema, TV and theatre have also contributed to the popularity of Remarque's works.

In the only pre-war textbook that covered the relevant period (Aavik, Jänes et al. 1937), neither Proust nor Remarque is mentioned. The first post-war high school textbook covering the 20th century was published in 1965 (Leht, Ojamaa 1965). There is no mention of Proust in it, but Remarque is said to be one of the most important representatives of the German "critical realism" (along with Gottfried Keller, Gerhart Hauptmann, Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann, Bernhard Kellermann, Lion Feuchtwanger and Heinrich Böll), and later on as a representative of "progressive literature", more precisely as an anti-fascist author. In that, he is also likened to the Manns and Feuchtwanger, although Becher, Brecht and Seghers are mentioned as particularly important writers in that field. In this early version of the textbook, however, Remarque does not get any specific attention.

A slightly modified version published in 1970 (Leht, Ojamaa 1970) adds Leonhard Frank and Arnold Zweig to the first list, and also redefines the list as that of representatives of realists – it is not "critical" realism any more, but "realism that developed in very many different directions" (Leht, Ojamaa 1970: 248). In a realism defined in that manner, there already is room for Proust, now mentioned in the list of French authors, as Remarque is mentioned in that of German writers.

A more thoroughly updated version of the textbook was published in 1976 (Leht, Ojamaa 1976), by which time Remarque had died and, maybe partly for that reason, but undoubtedly for others as well, had moved up in the hierarchy and got already a whole passage, which could almost be qualified as a chapter: it is no longer than 23 lines, but has a separate title. The merits of his work are naturally still defined by his social and political views and actions.

However, by that time the restrictions of censorship had somewhat lessened and authors had also grown more skilful in manipulating the restrictions and in finding ways to include writers less suited for the Soviet canon. While Remarque (along with Barbusse, Hašek, Hemingway and Zweig) is presented as belonging to the mainstream of the contemporary literature¹ – a mainstream consisting of authors writing about, and against, the war –, another development in the modern prose is also discreetly introduced. The authors of the textbook point out that some writers reacted to the war by withdrawing into their own inner world, exploring the mechanisms of the human mind and subjective experience, and thus creating the psychological novel. This genre is here described mostly by the notions of the flow of consciousness and of a subjective perception of time. As “one of the first and most famous works in this genre”, Proust’s novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is mentioned, and it is also carefully noted that it is not only a psychological self-analysis, but gives a critical and ironical image of the ways of life and thinking of the late 19th-century Paris society (Leht, Ojamaa 1976: 238).

It is obvious that so far the aim of the textbooks is to be as thorough as possible and to provide the students with information about a wide range of authors and aesthetical developments, within the limits of the authorised discourse. The first textbook to be published after the end of the Soviet occupation (Talvet *et al.* 1999) continues with that same objective and, having no more official restrictions to conform with, gives a thorough overview of the 20th

¹ The chapter is titled “Uusim kirjandus” (‘the newest, most recent literature’), and the beginning of this recent period is dated with the October Revolution (Leht, Ojamaa 1976: 232).

century prose. Here, we see the earlier proportions reversed: Proust's role in the evolution of modern prose is discussed at some length (Talvet 1999: 231–232, 235–239), and Remarque is briefly mentioned among the writers influenced by the war (Talvet 1999: 276).

In more recent textbooks, however, the whole purpose obviously changes: those that have been published since 1999 clearly aim for only brief and concise information about a few main characteristics and authors of each period or genre. As far as Proust and Remarque are concerned, all four textbooks covering the 20th century world literature (three for high school, one for vocational schools) return to the earlier canon. Each pays a lot of attention to Remarque, in three cases there is a whole chapter on his life and works (Lunter 2003: 88–93; Kaur 2003; Nahkur 2007: 144–147), in one he is considered as one of the representatives of the “lost generation”, along with Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway (Rebane 2003: 92). Also, in three textbooks (Lunter 2003, Rebane 2003, Nahkur 2007) Proust is not mentioned at all.

Having participated in writing of one (*XX sajandi kirjanikke* 2003) and in preparation of a new one, a work still in preliminary stages, I have had reason to reflect upon the influence the circumstances and contingencies in the history of literature have upon the canon. On the first occasion there was a debate between authors and the publisher about referring to Proust in a chapter about Beckett: the publisher's argument against it being that an author unknown to teachers and pupils should not be mentioned in the text². On the second occasion, the debate was about leaving Remarque out of the textbook in order to leave more room for other, more recent authors. The argument against this was similar: an author long familiar to the teachers should not be absent from a textbook.

I do not intend to discuss here whether these demands are reasonable or not. Legitimate arguments could be found for both sides. Suffice it to say, and this probably goes without any arguing, that a version of the canon of European literature where Remarque weighs

² Proust is still mentioned in the book (Talviste 2003: 16–20, Lepsoo 2003: 153) and his influence on Beckett is briefly explained (Lepsoo 2003: 155–156).

so strongly over Proust somewhat deviates from the academic canon of European literature. The creation of a new textbook confronts two understandings of the canon: the authors of the textbook, specialists of literature, have their eye on the ever-changing landscape of literary history; the target group's expectations originate more likely from the local tradition. In the case of Proust and Remarque, the local tradition is largely founded on the preferences and abilities of the translators between the two World Wars, and later strongly influenced by the Soviet standards of literary criticism and didactics. It is a result of old contingencies and circumstances slowly transformed into solid tradition, forming a canon in which Proust is not necessarily a name an average reader should have heard, and Remarque is an author an average reader should certainly have read.

Dirk de Geest has drawn the following semiotic square that could be used in describing this process:

what has to be said
what may be said

what must not be said
what does not have to be said

(De Geest 2003: 208)

As he points out, the changes in the canon occur in the lower zone of the square (ib. 209), that is, in the what-may-be-said and what-does-not-have-to-be-said fields: what is tolerated, can become accepted and desired, then obligatory, what can be absent, can become preferably absent, irrelevant, then prohibited. In our current examples, an author of whom it has been possible to speak has moved up one field and become an author of whom it is absolutely necessary to speak; an author of whom it has long been difficult to speak has come to be considered prohibited. Partly, the non-prohibited and non-obligatory nature of Remarque and Proust, respectively, has risen from extra-literary circumstances, from the function attributed to literature, from the actuality of the content of their work in the Estonian context etc. Partly, it has arisen from the accessibility of texts to translators and, thus, from their availability to readers.

We can thus conclude that, for the general public in Estonia, the canonical foreign literature is largely the literature that the Estonian translators wanted to, were able to or were allowed to translate by

mid-century and that found sufficient approval by the Soviet regime to be included in the earliest post-war textbooks. Since then, new books have been written in the world, new translations have been published and the Soviet criteria for canon-building have lost their relevance. But as the examples chosen in this article show, the old canon stands on its own authority.

This is, of course, to be expected from a canon. The authority it carries allows it to fulfil its function as a provider of cultural continuity and dialogue, and the resistance it offers to attempts of changing it is a natural and undoubtedly necessary reaction that prevents an excess of arbitrary changes. However, the historians of literature know that, to a certain extent, a canon is always arbitrary, especially in its most basic, textbook version. Everything important and interesting in world literature will never fit into a textbook intended for 35 hours of work in class. Since this format cannot change considerably, the contents will have to, at least gradually, as the literature grows and the ways of interpreting it evolve. Acting upon this realisation confronts the authority of scholars with the authority of the canon. Not even necessarily on the scholars' own initiative: the demand for revaluation and renewal of literary history can (and in the cases that served as examples did) actually originate from the public, or at least from the publisher. In the actual work, however, we often encounter the paradox described by Dirk de Geest: people ask specialists for advice and expertise, but as soon as a specialist voices an opinion not confirmed by the obligations and prohibitions of the standing canon, this opinion does not count as valid (ib. 202–203).

Changing the literary canon at school thus means walking a fine line between the respect for tradition and the need for keeping up with the developments in literature and criticism. As the textbook authors of the Soviet time learned to slip canon-renewing information past the official restrictions and demands, we still need to refine the same skills in order to get past the canon's own resistance and to negotiate a place for new authors, problems and values among those already established by the authority of the tradition.

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