

*Beyond the Literary Canon:
Recontextualisation of Classical Texts
in the Digital Environment*

Literary history is one of the most important, but also the most mysterious carriers of cultural memory. It is a place where a thousand-year-old columns stand side by side with dark labyrinths full of still undiscovered treasures. Hans Robert Jauss attempted to cross a gulf between the monumental, canonical literary history and historical reception of literature, with his theory of reception-aesthetic literary history (see Jauss 1970). I try to take another step forward and find a bridge across the imaginary gulf between the previous tradition of writing books of literary history and the ways of representing literary history in our era of digital media.

Adapting the specific features of digital environment
to literary history

When we remediate literary history in the digital environment, we have to consider the specific properties of this new environment: first of all, the “nonlinear narrative” and “multimedia”. The newest term to be used is “participatory culture”, which means that we have to take into account the active participation of every reader in the creation of both the content and the meanings. Although the explanation of terms is not the subject of the present article, I would still wish to emphasise two new important aspects. First, source materials, which are held in archives and libraries and which had earlier been described and mediated by literary historians, can now be made digitally accessible over the Internet. Second, the digital

environment allows representing these materials through semantic relations, and to link any text with any other text to form new cultural units – semantic threads.

We have tested these possibilities in two projects on Estonian literary history. We started in 1997 with a rather small project on Estonian literary history titled *ERNI. Estonian Literary History in Texts 1924 to 1925* (in Estonian; see Laak 1997, 2001). This is a network-like model of literary history, based on the theoretical ideas of reception aesthetics and reception history by H. R. Jauss (see Laak, Viires 2004a). The conception of this model was mainly based on a hypertextual network of critical texts of one short period, and it opened literary history by highlighting a synchronous reception level – interpretation by the literary critic as a reader. Principally, *ERNI* does not strive to offer its users a ready-made linear narrative; it contains a number of small stories. Its reader/user is offered the opportunity to participate in the process of the reception history and to write his personal interpretation of literary history, using different genres (Laak 2010: 234). Already for a number of recent years we have worked with Estonian materials of the late 19th and early 20th centuries on the project “Kreutzwald’s Century: Estonian Cultural History Web”, where we present classical works of Estonian literary history in their cultural historical context against the backdrop of the works of European literary classics. Canonical Estonian and European writers were introduced into the context of Estonian social and cultural history on five parallel temporal axes. The aim of the project was to construct a cultural historical space based on the macro elements of cultural history narrative (ib. 234–235). The realisation of such large web projects involves the need to solve many specific and technological questions, but I want to stress the fact that in the digital representation, when rewriting or remediating literary history, we first have to face several general and theoretical problems, which I wish to address in more details below.

Contextualisation of the epic *Kalevipoeg*

In creating any literary historical web projects we are, in some way or other, dealing with the “(re)writing of literary history”, but in a new environment and with new tools. In order to find theoretical basis for such “new type of writing” we have, in my opinion, to keep in touch with literary theory, semiotics and the theory of new media, but also with the trends in modern historiography. Recently, I have found supporting ideas in new cultural history – understandably, literary history, as an important carrier of cultural memory, is a part of the wider cultural history. According to French theoretician Roger Chartier, this is not a singular methodological platform but, rather, “a space for common discussions and debates in defence of multidimensional and reflexive history” (Tamm 2004: 119; see also Chartier 2003, Hakapää 2000). Which of the main positions of new cultural history could be suitable and fruitful for studying and (re)writing of literary history? The first major common area is that both of them are based on reception aesthetics and history of reception. Both reception aesthetics and new cultural history emphasise the importance of discussing phenomena (works, events) in their historical situation, starting from the meaning of artistic and literary works in the moment of their creation up to the changing of the meaning of the texts in each new interpretational situation.

The Estonian national epic, Fr. R. Kreutzwald’s *Kalevipoeg*, is a telling example from Estonian cultural history. It is a classical text of Estonian literature; in Jauss’ sense, it is a cultural monument. In its reception, we can clearly see how the ruling ideologies of different periods of time pay increased attention to canonised works and firmly control the interpretation of such works, for example, in school textbooks. *Kalevipoeg* was published in 1857–1861, in the currents of late Romanticism and Estonian national awakening (Talvet 2003 a, b). The text of the epic allows several different interpretations. For example, we can find numerous intertextual relations with its contemporary romanticist literature and the mythical world of Estonians and other European nations. On the other hand, the epic can be examined as an intertextual basic text of many Estonian modernist and postmodernist texts (Laak, Viires 2004b). In the

context of my present subject, it is important to observe how the epic fits into the cultural context of the time of its publishing.

Both the author of the epic, F. R. Kreutzwald, and the modern reception of the epic present *Kalevipoeg* as an epic, gathered piece by piece from the mouths of the people (see Kreutzwald 1862). I have to stress the fact that as such, the epic has never existed! It is an artistic epic, created on the motifs of folklore, a work of fiction authored by F. R. Kreutzwald. But in the Estonia of the period of national awakening in the 19th century, the presentation of the epic as an ancient “people’s song treasure” resounded well in the cultural context of the time, because the Estonian original ingenious culture in its formal richness had persisted for centuries mainly as an oral tradition. Writing and presenting of the text of the epic as the people’s own “song treasure” by Kreutzwald in such an existential period of change had, for the Estonians, the meaning of regaining national spiritual richness and self-respect. The text became a “monument to the golden era of freedom”. This led to an enormous rise in national and cultural self-confidence, the culmination of which could be seen in the proclamation of the Estonian Republic in 1918.

I have studied the periodically changing reception of *Kalevipoeg*, and found confirmation to the views of theoreticians of new cultural history that we have to reject evaluations when writing cultural and literary histories. According to English theoretician Peter Burke each evaluation is unavoidably related with the historical situation of such evaluations (see Burke 2003). Instead of giving evaluations that are valid throughout different eras to classical masterpieces, it is necessary to study their cultural historical relations – the *raison d’être* of a cultural historian is to reveal connections between different activities, phenomena, events and texts.

If this task is impossible, one might as well leave architecture to historians of architecture, psychoanalysis to historians of psychoanalysis, and so on. The essential problem for cultural historians today, as I see it at any rate, is how [---] reveal an underlying unity (or at least the underlying connections) without denying the diversity of the past. (Ib. 201)

Theoreticians of new cultural history have been conservatively critical of the notion of tradition. For example, American anthropologist Roy Wagner called the discussion of the history of arts (and literature) that is based only on canonical works – the so-called history of great canons – the “opera-house” conception of culture:

The contemporary “opera-house” sense of the word arises from an elaborate metaphor, which draws upon the terminology of crop breeding and improvement to create an image of man’s control, refinement and “domestication” of himself. [...] The anthropological usage of “culture” constitutes a further metaphorization, if not a democratization, of this essentially elitist and aristocratic sense. (Wagner 1975: 21)

To counterweight this, Burke points out that when writing a cultural history and explaining the themes, phenomena etc., it is necessary to consider the social context of the time of their creation and to pay attention to aspects that have been neglected in the traditional approach. One of his favourite examples from the literature of the Italian Renaissance is the forceful appearance of the subject of death in art and literature and the epidemics of plague that swept over Europe at the same time, which had been neglected by the earlier literary histories.

Similar examples can be drawn from Estonian literature. For example, in *Kalevipoeg* we can sense many lyrical, tender, and strikingly sad and melancholic tones, and see the subjects of death and mourning:

Studying the fate of *Kalevipoeg* in the contemporary culture, however, one can say in advance, that its impact on its native culture rests still on the possibility to recognize in its deepest layers traces of tragedy or discern under its heroic plot the lyric and melancholy moods of its author that have frequently unleashed a peculiar linguistic madness, an inspiring power of the word that has kindled the inspiration of many later authors in different fields of art. (Laak 2008: 198)

However, the lyrical undercurrents of the epic have sensitively been interpreted in the later Estonian poetry, where we can find numerous new intertextually related threads, e.g. the Harp, Island Maiden, Sword, Father, Journey, Sleep, etc. (Ib. 203). None of the “official” receptions has ever pointed out this aspect. The lyricism and melancholy have never been mentioned in any literary history or school textbook written under official ideologies and the text of the epic *Kalevipoeg* has mainly been used only in the rhetoric of creating a state, freedom, fight or hopes for the future.

How should such discords in the texture of the epic as a “nation-building text” be explained? What could have been the reason for such an internal antagonism in the text? If we examine the author’s biography, we can see that the writing of the first version of the text was preceded by the death of Kreutzwald’s most beloved daughter Marie Otilie in 1851. Before that, Kreutzwald’s best friend F. R. Faehlmann had passed away in 1850, and Kreutzwald continued the work of writing the epic that Faehlmann had started. The epic opens with the theme of death and it becomes one of the central intertextual thematic threads of relations. For example, in the first song of the epic, Kalevipoeg’s mother Linda mourns her husband, king Kalev; in the following songs, the central theme and axis of events is the mourning of his mother Linda by Kalevipoeg. The theme of mourning is intensified by cyclically repeated archetypal scenes of young Kalevipoeg visiting his father’s grave. This strange thread of mourning in the text of the epic is completed by the protagonist’s tragic death caused by his own sword at the end of the epic, when Kalevipoeg was deeply mourning the deaths of his friends, who had been killed in a battle. Thus, mourning becomes one of the central semiotic signs in the text of the epic.

Another telling example of the ideological and political use of canonical texts is a school textbook, *A Reader of Literature for Secondary School*, published in Moscow during WWII, in 1943. The reader opens with “Comrade Stalin’s radio speech of 3 July 1941”, urging the population to subject everything to the interests of the front line, to send the harvest and the cattle to the rear, and to model one’s life after Bolsheviks’ example. This is followed by an address to Estonian readers according to their social class:

Estonian intellectuals! Teachers, workers in the fields of sciences, literature and arts! [---]/ Fight side by side with workers and farmers [---] for the liberation of our homeland! (Seilenthal, Andresen 1943: 13)

This reader contains a selection of texts from Soviet Russian literature (M. Gorki, A. Tolstoi, N. Ostrovski, A. Fadejev), earlier classic works of Estonian literature (C. R. Jakobson, E. Bornhöhe, A. H. Tammsaare, F. Tuglas, A. Kirzberg, E. Vilde, O. Luts, A. Jakobson, L. Koidula, A. Reinvald”, J. Liiv, G. Suits, M. Under) and contemporary Soviet Estonian literature (P. Keerdo, J. Madarik, J. Barbarus, J. Semper, J. Kärner, M. Raud, H. Angervaks, K. Merilaas) – made on the basis of the subjects of bravery, enmity, fighting, war and battles, blood, death, graves, etc.

Among others, the reader contains the songs from *Kalevipoeg* that call people to fight the invading enemy, e. g. 17th tale (“The battle at Assamalla”)

Kallis Kalevide poega
 Sõateeda sõitenessa
 Jätis jälgi murudele,
 Kabja tähti kaljudele
 (Kreutzwald 1862: 205–206)

Dear good son of the Kalev Heroes
 Riding on the paths of war
 Left his traces in the grass,
 Hoof marks on the rocky cliffs.
 (Trans. Triinu Kartus, manuscript)

We can confirm that in each new cultural and social situation, just such specific meanings are pointed out in the text of the epic that respond to the ideologies, and the environments of representation and interpretation of certain historical situations. But as the previous drastic example showed, a number of new international contexts can be added to national interpretations, and the text may be opened from an entirely new aspect.

Towards a new cultural history?

New cultural history asks the question about the age and origin of traditions. It is realised that many customs that are thought to be old (classical), have been born much later, for example, to counter-balance social changes and the needs of national states (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983: 163–307). Thus the origin of “classic works” depends on the needs that have arisen at certain historical periods and only such texts survive that can adapt to new situations. In his article “Unity and Variety in Cultural History” Peter Burke asks “whether historians would not be better off if they abandoned the idea of tradition altogether” (Burke 1997: 189). In his opinion, it would still be impossible to write cultural history without this notion. At the same time, we should not believe that the meaning of classic works is universal and that everything that is passed on from generation to generation would preserve its unchanging meanings. Burke proposes that the traditional understanding of “tradition” should be rejected and that this notion should incorporate also the terms “adaptation” and “reception”. Taking into account reception as well, would help to overcome the conflict between the selections of classic works and the changing interpretational situations (Heestermann 1985: 10–25).

Second, new historiography attempts to re-evaluate the notion of “classics” in its criticism of the classic, “old” cultural history. The use of the latter in the modern multicultural world creates uncomfortable moments: “Classic cultural history emphasized a canon of great works within European tradition, but the cultural historians of the late twentieth century are working in an age of decanonization” (Burke 1997: 190). A paradoxical situation has developed, where the power and unavoidability of traditions and classic works are seen, but at the same time, it is denied in the global context. I believe that the solution to this paradox, offered by new cultural history, would prove to be fruitful. Discussions of new cultural history have changed the focus of research, and they are more centred on shedding light to the ideas of those who make canons than to the ideas of those who have been canonised (ib. 190–191). The process of canonising and its social and political backgrounds have become the subject of new cultural history. Or, to put it in other words – the

new cultural historical literary history examines temporal changing of the meanings of classic texts.

Transferring the viewpoints of new historiography to literary history, we should pay attention to the reception of classic works and take into account the fact that the interpretation of classic works, like the whole literary historical writing, each time needs to adapt to new situations of reception. It is important to realise that traditions do not continue by themselves, the passing on of traditions takes much trouble. Thus, “reproduction” forms the second half of the notion of tradition (see Bourdieu, Passeron 1977). Paraphrasing the words of French new historian Michel de Certeau, the traditional, passive reception should be replaced by “creative adaptation” of the tradition of literary classics (see Certeau 1984).

In conclusion we could say that, regarding reception, the tradition and classics are not unchanging. A cultural transferral occurs in the alternation of sociocultural contexts, where the meaning of the transferred classic work changes, just like in the process of translation: whenever something is received, the process occurs by the customs of the receiver and it is impossible to transfer unchanging meanings (see Jauss 1974; Ricœur 1998). Although the past does not change, history needs to be rewritten from generation to generation in order for that past to continue to be intelligible to a changing present” (Burke 1997: 190). It has been valid for literary history as the history of written literature. Each new rewriting is connected with the time the writer lives in.

The environment of new media brings along exciting paradoxes. In the fundamentally new cultural situation of the digital environment and the Internet, much has been talked about the disappearance of centres and marginal areas and even about the levelling of culture, art and literature. Relations between the works presented in the digital environment are not hierarchical any more but, due to the specifics of the environment, levelled – everything is equally accessible. How does the spread of the Internet affect literary history and the canon of classical works?

When examining the processes accompanying the Internet, we arrive at surprising results – the general rules or phenomena are not valid for literary history. There is a simple reason – classical works

are taught at different academic centres all over the world, and at almost all of them, web pages and small libraries have been created introducing biographies of these writers and discussions of their works. When a “reader” is searching for web pages on some classic author, he or she may find hundreds of them devoted to Goethe or Shakespeare, but only very few on the authors outside the canon. I call such phenomenon, accompanying the Internet, “hypercanonisation”. Here, the Internet has become an opposite to itself and recorded the Great Western Literary Canon into the globally circulating digital literary history “book” more firmly than it had been in the most respected printed books of literary history (Browner at al. 2000: 34–114) . Literary canons have become the highlights of theoretical discussions for various reasons. These long-time traditions contain power that cannot be ignored and in order to preserve cultural memory and mentality, they have to be constantly rewritten (see also Talvet 2010).

The case of Kreutzwald’s Century

The idea to rewrite the new cultural history has had a great influence on our project *Kreutzwald’s Century: Estonian Cultural History Web* started in 2004 (see Laak 2004). The project was intended as an interactive environment joining a new user-friendly interface and the content-based selections of cultural sources. For this project, we digitised the sources held at the archives and library of the Estonian Literary Museum and also added a lot of supplementary information. The digital environment *Kreutzwald’s Century* presented the 19th century of the Estonian literary canon in the context of cultural history. Cultural historical persons and writers were introduced in the context of Estonian history and European literature on parallel temporal axes. Biographies of cultural historical persons are related with their photos in the Estonian Cultural History Archives, literary texts and books. The project used unique software tools which enable to construct the historical content environment with internal semantic relations (Laak, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2010; Laak 2010: 234–235).

Conclusion

The question of the historiography of literary history with its new possibilities and theoretical questions is in focus again. I attempted to offer a possibility, in the vein of new cultural history, for studying literary history through the interrelations of different types of texts. In the digital environment we can visualise and, via semantic relations, display archival sources of cultural heritage (e.g. documents, manuscripts, literary texts) which could play a meaningful role in the creation of literary memories in different periods. We can pose the question: will the computational media become the new basis of the 21st century historiography? We can conclude that rewriting the literary past and reinterpretation literary canon in the digital era requires deconstruction of the “traditional” image of the classics in order to show smaller units (such as events, objects, persons, texts), and by using these units, represent the past in a new way, integrating the possibilities of the computational media and also the general idea offered by new cultural history.

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