

Textual Editions, Gender and Literary History: The Case of Ilmi Kolla¹

Writing literary history is based on different factors that all influence its formation.

It is also inseparable from the process of canon formation which is by nature an ideological construction, i.e. it is connected with decision-making on which authors to include and which authors to leave out, based on both conscious and unconscious attitudes evaluating authors and their production. It is also connected with judgements of how to represent authors and their production and from which ideological positions. The canon formation is influenced also by gendered meanings that have been attached to authors and to their production, and these can also define their place in literary history.

One important although often neglected aspect of canon formation is also the availability of the authors' works, i. e. the availability of printed text editions. Generally, the printed editions create the idea of the production of the author for the reading public and through this also for literary history. On the other hand, the process behind printed editions – editing – is largely invisible although its role is sometimes remarkable. Editing is rarely an activity without interpretation. On the contrary, editing a selection of an author's work involves necessarily the interpretation of those works. One may claim that the entire editorial practice is inseparable from interpretation. In this sense, editing becomes the critical activity contingent on different factors such as the critic's academic training, the intended readers of the text, its previous editions and studies, and even national upheavals, etc. (Spadaccini 1992: xvi). Editing involves also "the editor's own presuppositions and biases, i.e., his or her own agenda or project" (ib. xix).

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There have always been authors who have not succeeded, for different reasons (such as censorship, the author's early death etc.), in publishing their work during their lifetime. Hence the role of literary researchers and editors will arise in publishing their works posthumously. In those cases the editors will have the decisive role in shaping the creative process and the production of a writer. The role of editing as interpretation will have more importance in this context: the editor(s) will shape the image of a writer's production influencing through this also the later reception of an author. I will discuss in this article the problem how the posthumous editions of an author's works have shaped the reception of the author's production and through this her place in (gendered) literary history. I will also deal with the relationship between the author's published texts and unpublished manuscripts in the context of constructing (gendered) literary history.

Textual editions are based either on the first printed editions which have been published during the author's lifetime, or on the author's manuscripts if these have been preserved. Manuscripts represent the whole body of an author's production. They include not only finished works (which generally have been published) but also unfinished texts, drafts, notes and so on. They include also texts in other genres which are side products of the author's creativity (as prose texts for a poetry writer) and also the so-called ego-documents² – autobiographical texts, like diaries, letters, memoirs. Usually, all those texts have not been published (except when the author is very outstanding) but the author has been represented by a selection of her/his work. In the usual case, the author has done this selection in his/her lifetime but in some cases the editors or critics have to do this posthumously. This is the case with the Estonian poetess Ilmi Kolla (1933–1954) who has left hundreds of poems in the manuscript form.

Kolla began publishing poetry at an early age: her first poems were published in newspapers when she was 15 years old. Although

² The term 'egodocument' was coined by the Dutch historian Jacques Presser in the mid-1950s to indicate texts such as autobiographies, diaries, personal letters and other texts in which the author writes explicitly about his or her affairs and feelings (Dekker 2002: 13).

during her lifetime she published a lot of poems she did not succeed in publishing a collection of her poems due to her early death from tuberculosis at the age of twenty one. The second reason for not succeeding in publishing a collection was the dominant aesthetics of socialist realism with the rules with which the greater part of Kolla's poetry did not comply. Also, censorship has left its mark since during the Stalinist years it was very strict and the authors had to conform to its norms.

Since the poetry of Kolla has been preserved in manuscripts in the Estonian Cultural History Archives, it has been possible to get an overview of her whole production considering both published and unpublished poems.

One part of Kollas's poetry of has been influenced by the discourses of her time: by Stalinism and its ideological premises. Those were the poems she wrote for publishing in newspapers and magazines. Like every author, she, too, wanted to be published, to find recognition as an author by a larger public. The only way to get published during the Stalinist period in Estonia, from the end of 1940s until the mid-1950s, was writing conformist poetry. Besides, Kolla needed money because she had to support herself financially (her parents were not able to do so). Since the royalties were high in the Stalinist and in the Soviet period in general (literature was among the most important textual forms for the Soviet ideology), it was a powerful motivator for publishing conformist poetry. The royalties that Kolla received prove that authors were well paid indeed. Kolla's letters confirm this and she also kept a record of the royalties she received. There existed even laws concerning royalties which classified different kinds of texts according to their ideological importance: the more important (i.e. ideological) a text was, the more money the author got for it (e.g. ENSV Teataja 1952: 191–194).

That is why Kolla wrote also conformist poetry: poems on the Soviet themes, e.g. about life in the collective farms, about the happy Soviet people, about Stalin etc. For herself she wrote very different kinds of poems knowing the impossibility of publishing them due to ideological reasons: she wrote about love and intimate relationships, about nature, about sadness of leaving her life because of illness. Such poetry was not in accordance with the dominating discourse of

socialist realism and it was not possible to publish it. For critics and editors of periodicals it represented the decadent worldview unsuitable for the Soviet people. This is evident from the letters of editors to Kolla where they give direct and detailed instructions about the themes of her poems and how (in which manner) to write them. For example, in a letter by the editor of the cultural weekly *Sirp ja Vasar* (Hammer and Sickle) from May 5, 1953 the editor wrote: “Dear comrade I. Kolla, we have already had a discussion about your poems that constantly indulge in beautiful fancies. If this happens in poems dedicated to the May Day then this is still all right, but our working-day does not consist in weaving wreaths but in straining, heroic work. It is time for you to find other themes and generally to take a more serious stand toward the poet’s work. It is not possible to remain “a promising beginner” forever, but your poetry does not show any development or deepening. But stagnation means going backwards.” (EKLA f 220, m 5: 16)

During the Stalinist years poetry (and literature in general) had the ideological function of creating a desirable image of the society and shape through this the new type of human being, the Soviet one. Also, the existence of censorship has left its mark since during the Stalinist years it was very strict and the authors had to conform to its norms and develop a kind of self-censorship. There were few authors who had a chance to publish their work during the period from the end of the 1940s to the mid-1950s: they were the authors approved by the authorities. The most important authors were the laureates of the Stalin’s Prize: August Jakobson, Hans Leberecht and Juhan Smuul but there were also others, like Debora Vaarandi, Aira Kaal, Manivald Kesamaa, Jaan Kärner, Mart Raud et al, all in all 35 authors from whose 9 were already dead. (Olesk 2003: 466–467) The only approved method of creating literature was the method of socialist realism which meant the representation of the class struggle led by the proletariat, and using the method of realism.

The collections of poems which were published during this period reflect this ideological bias also in their titles: *Oktoobrivõit* (The Victory of October, Raud 1947), *Mina – kommunistlik noor* (Me, a Member of the Young Communist League, Smuul 1953), *Poeem Stalinile* (A Poem to Stalin, Smuul 1949), *Rahu rahvastele*

(Peace for Nations, Smuul 1952), *Võitluspostil* (In the Forefront, Parve 1950), etc.

The private and romantic themes in Kolla's poetry (in the poems she wrote for herself) make her poetry strongly autobiographical but also very intimate and personal which is in sharp contrast with the aesthetics of socialist realism. Even in poems meant for publishing she could not sometimes avoid intimate tonality because the romantic manner of representation was the essential feature of her poetry. Her poetry reflects her love relationships and some poems have as their titles the names of her lovers. The representation of illness in her poems is also based on her real experiences with tuberculosis and her life in health resorts where she spent long periods. Her contemporary critics were critical of her poetry since they had to follow the ideological demands of the era. There was a custom to criticize the work of young poets who published their poems in newspapers and magazines but had not yet published a book of poems. The role of critics in those cases was ideological: to teach young authors "the Soviet values" and how to write poems based on socialist-realist aesthetics, guiding young authors toward the "proper" writing.

For example, the poetess Debora Vaarandi wrote about the poetry of Kolla that there was self-repetition and routine in it although she was talented. Among the shortcomings of her poetry was also her indifference "to social life" and "to the joys of a worker" and for that reason there was "the gap between the public and the private" in her poems. (Vaarandi 1953) The harshest critical article was written by the young writer Vladimir Beekman in 1952 in the daily *Noorte Hää* (The Voice of the Young). Beekman blamed Kolla for superficiality, for the lack of "inner conviction" and "the passionate Party spirit", for her passing over the important problems of the society and for the lack of a real Soviet hero. He concluded that the development of Kolla as a poet had come to a standstill and for overcoming that situation she had "to give up the role of a spectator" and participate actively in social life by "being a convinced, passionately high-principled fighter for the hope of the whole world – communism." (Beekman 1952)

That kind of criticism was, of course, unjust toward Kolla as an author. Besides, it was dangerous considering the political context of the era. There was a possibility of repressions: for example, in 1950 many authors were expelled from the Estonian Writer's Union for ideological reasons, being accused of bourgeois nationalism. After that they could not publish their work until 1955. Vladimir Beekman's harsh criticism affected the publishing possibilities of Kolla too: in a letter to her female friend from 1952 she wrote that her literary position was not good and she referred to the fate of the authors who were expelled from the Writer's Union. (An undated letter of I. Kolla to I. Jürna. EKLA f 220, m 11:5). During the year 1952 Kolla published only 10 poems and some lyrics for songs (Osjamets 1983: 34–40).

Since the most important part of her poetry was not published during her lifetime it did not have a chance to influence the poetic discourse of the period in question. Only after her death some hand-copied manuscripts of her poems began to spread among readers before they got published in the middle of the 1950s. Although she was well-known as an author already in her lifetime, greater recognition came only afterwards, posthumously. For some literary critics her poetry and also her fate (early death because of illness) began to represent the resistance to the Stalinist ideology giving her poetry an existentialist dimension. Her poetry was understood as outstanding in the context of the Stalinist discourse in the centre of which was the positive hero and where the human weakness was foreign: "Therefore the existentialist cry of Kolla is at the same time a deep act of humanity in the Stalinist one-dimensionality and marks also a breaking point in the former practice of poetry." (Veidemann 2000: 44) Another critic, Pärt Lias, has attributed to Kolla's poetry a certain prophetic quality, seeing her "credo of poetry born from tragedy" as the symbol of the post-war generation with "clipped wings" and this attitude has reached also our school textbooks (Lias 1996: 20).

The place of Kolla in literary history has been varied. In 1966 Helene Siimisker published an article about the life and poetry of Kolla (Siimisker 1966) where she emphasized her creative path as having been disrupted. In the official literary history written during

the Soviet period but published in 1991 she was represented as a marginal author (Kalda 1991). In the new Estonian literary history published in 2001 and written from the post-socialist perspective, she is absent (Annus et al. 2001). In Cornelius Hasselblatt's German language literary history (2006) meant for foreign readers, her poetry is presented as a new, independent lyric poetry incompatible with the dominant ideology.

The first collection of poems by Kolla was published in 1957, three years after her death, and the editor was also a writer (poetess), Heljo Mänd. The book has also a preface by Lehti Metsaalt – a friend of Kolla. This slim book (with only 41 poems, including 14 previously unpublished poems) with a simple title *Luuletused* (Poems) represents her poetry according to the demands of the era: as the (post)stalinist discourse favoured social themes (for example the representation of work in collective farms and factories, the victories of the Soviet youth in creating a communist society etc.), the selection of Kolla's poems was shaped in accordance with this. Thus, there were poems Kolla had written to earn money, but which she herself did not value, as she had written to her female friend in her letters. She wrote frankly: "I have to write, so as to make travelling possible once again. It means that I am making money" (Ilmi Kolla to Lehti Metsaalt 6 September 1952. EKLA f 220, m 1: 4). The titles of such poems are characteristic: "I Joined the Young Communist League", "Men from the Army" etc. However, the most ideological poems were left out of this collection, for example poems glorifying Jossif Stalin which actually had not been published as weak during her lifetime. Regardless of the somewhat ideological emphasis this first collection includes also some poems that had not been published earlier (14 poems), such as "Pean minema jälle" (I Have to Go), "Rahutus" (Disquiet), "Raske on sinuta olla" (It is Hard to Be Without You), "Vennale" (To My Brother), "Öine valu" (Night Pain), "Kevadunelm" (A Spring Dream)

One factor which certainly affected the choice of poems was the fact that the editor did not have Kolla's original manuscripts. The manuscripts were in the hands of Kolla's mother and they were donated to the Estonian Cultural History Archives not until 1963. For that reason the editor did not have the overview of Kolla's poetry as

a whole. The editor had to rely mostly on the published versions of Kolla's poems (and also on some typewritten versions that had spread from hand to hand after Kolla's death) and she had no chance to compare those to the manuscript versions. Therefore, the published versions of the poems differ in some cases from those in the original manuscripts.

In general, this small collection of poems leaves the impression of Kolla's poetry as scarce and in part conforming to the norms of the socialist-realist aesthetics. Also, the fact that the editor did not have Kolla's original manuscripts has limited the choice of her poems to be published and their printed form.

This book had in general a good reception by critics who appreciated the sincerity of Kolla's poetry although sometimes they blamed her poems on the Soviet themes for their superficiality (Viiding 1958; Tamm 1957; Treier 1957).

The second collection of Kolla's poems was published in 1983 under the title of *Minu kevad* (My Spring) and it is more voluminous (there are 78 poems). In this new collection there are more previously unpublished poems (although in comparison with manuscripts their number is not great) and the book has an afterword about Kolla's poetry written by the editor Silvia Nagelmaa.

The principles of the selection of poems in this new collection were shaped by the editor's view of an author and her poetry but also by the time period in question. Although in the 1980s the ideological control was not as strong as during the Stalinist years there were some aspects which had to be handled with care. Thus, poems which were not included were poems about intimate relationships, a kind of very personal poetry – for example poems written to real persons (lovers) and titled in such a way (for example the title of one poem included the name of the lover – “To Kaljo Reimand”). Likewise, erotic poetry did not belong to the public discourse during the Soviet years, thus, those poems also had to be left out since Kolla wrote about her erotic experiences quite frankly. Those poems represent sincere female desire which had no place in the Soviet ideology and aesthetic that was in general very puritan toward the representation of sexuality. Thus, the poems which did not suit the image of Kolla as a young and innocent girl giving, instead, a more mature picture

of her as a young, sexually mature woman, were not included. As a woman writer, Kolla and her poetry have been represented one-sidedly, construing her personality and her poetry as somewhat childish or girlish. This is reflected also in the title of this collection *Minu kevad* which is the title of one of her poems written at the age of 15. The entire structure of the collection follows this path creating the girlish image through the arrangement of poems.

Some good poems in manuscript containing clear allusions to Soviet national politics were also not included: for example the poem without a title where the author describes the fate of her male friend who is far away in the Soviet army among foreign people where he will be a stranger forever. However, considering the late Socialist period with its newly strengthening ideological control at the beginning of the 1980s this choice – not to publish poems with ideological allusions – is understandable.

Although it is clear that the editor's selection was based on the aesthetic grounds – she chose first of all the best poems according to her taste – it is hard to overestimate the underlying ideological assumptions because many of the poems which were left out are actually good also by aesthetic standards. On the other hand, many published poems in this collection were the ones which Kolla wrote for earning money thus conforming to the ideological demand of her era. Those were poems which she herself probably did not want to publish in her collection. In letters she had written to her friend about this issue that she did not like those poems but valued more the ones which she wrote for herself. Among her manuscripts there is also an incomplete table of contents of her collection and it does not contain the poems written for publishing.

Some changes were introduced also in published poems: some of them could be called minor, but there were also some more significant corrections. In some cases the so-called minor changes could seriously change the meaning of some stanzas or verses. For example, in Kolla's best-known poem "Nukrad hetked" (Sad Moments, 1953) there is a line in manuscript "Ma ütlen laulus – ma ei taha surra" (I will say in song that I do not want to die), but in the published version the comma is placed so that the line reads as "Ma

ütlen, laulus ma ei taha surra” (I will say that I do not want to die in song.)

In some cases, some stanzas were left out in the published version of the poem. For example in the poem “Pean minema jälle” (I Have to Go Again) the three middle stanzas were left out, probably because they were considered too personal, since the author wrote there about concrete matters of her life. In some cases, the poem was published partly: the poem with title “To Kaljo Reimand”, consisting of two separate parts, was published without a title, and the first part which openly describes the author’s erotic encounters, was left out. Thus, the published poems were not always authorial versions, especially considering the fact that their original manuscripts were preserved in the Estonian Cultural History Archives.

When I asked the editor Silvia Nagelmaa about her choices and the principles of compiling the collection, she confirmed that she relied on the author’s manuscripts and that all the changes in the texts were done by the editorial board of the publishing house. If that is the case, it indicates well the ideological nature of the Soviet publishing and through this also the reliability or unreliability of the published texts of the Soviet era.

The last collection with the title *Kõik mu laulud* (All My Songs) was published in 2009 and I was the editor. I have researched Kolla’s life and poetry for a long time so I found it necessary to edit a new collection of poems based on the authorial versions of her texts. I tried to include as many poems as possible, relying also on the table of contents found among the manuscripts. Since it is not a textual-critical edition including all poems, I had to make my own decisions about the principles of selection of the poems. As such, this selection is of course as subjective as any selection done by others instead of the author. My goal was to represent Kolla’s poetry – using the words of one critic: to present the ‘true’ Kolla – and to publish texts which rely on manuscripts as authorised texts. It had to be also a beautiful book since the Soviet-period editions were, as a printed work, poor in their quality (bad paper, ugly book-design). I included more early poems written when the author was about fifteen-sixteen years old because they represent many of the later themes of her poetry, and also those beautiful love poems which had been left out

from earlier editions because of their erotic and sexual sincerity. Since Kolla's poems are very autobiographical – it is even possible to read some of her poems as resembling diary entries – the tonality of this new collection acquired a more personal character. The feminine subject who is speaking through those poems is very vulnerable in her openness and feminine fragility. In the period when those poems were written – in the context of the Stalinist aesthetics – expressing this kind of identity was almost impossible. But even today when the freedom of expression is one of the preconditions of poetry and poetry itself has fallen prey to postmodernist games it is something very rare.

Nevertheless, my own selection is also ideological, in the sense that I left out a great part of conformist poetry written on Soviet themes. Thus, I also consciously shaped Kolla's image by presenting her poetry in a certain way. Since the poems written for publishing were the ones the author herself did not like, it seemed justified to leave most of them out. On the other hand, it is clear that those poems are also part of Kolla's creative output and as such, they deserve to be published because they create the understanding about the ideological climate of the Stalinist period. The problem how to represent Kolla's poetry is therefore complicated, depending on different factors and the editor's underlying ideological assumptions toward her poetry.

Conclusion

Text editions are an important aspect of canon formation and through the canon formation they contribute to shaping a literary history. Editing an author's texts is inseparable from the interpretation of those texts as editing is comparable to any critical activity involved in literary interpretation and research.

The edited collections of the Estonian poetess Kolla are good examples of the editing process as interpretation because all books provide a different image of her poetry. Three collections of her poetry have been published so far – in 1957, 1983 and 2009 – belonging to different periods. Neither of them contains all of her

poems but a selection, reflecting different viewpoints and aesthetic understandings. Therefore, to come closer to the essence of Kolla poetry, it is necessary to rely on manuscripts. Only they can give an idea of her production as a whole in the context of the Stalinist period in the Estonian literary history.

In the cases when the author had no chance to publish her work during her lifetime – which was also Kolla's case – , this task is left to editors who will face the difficult problem of making a selection from the author's work. The only way to avoid selection is to publish all poems. Otherwise, in making a selection of the author's texts, the editor has the power to shape the image of the author in question and through this also her place in literary history.

If we look back – and the making of literary history means always looking back – we construct literary history also in a gendered way. The place of Kolla's poetry in literary history depends also on gendered meanings. Kolla's poetry is feminine poetry – the speaking subject is feminine. It is a young woman's point of view that is presented in her poems. The feminine subject of Kolla's poetry posed a problem for the Soviet literary history and also for the Soviet editors of her texts. Besides, the resistance of literary history to femininity is connected to the idea of literature as non-gendered, as representing general and national values which – paradoxically – often turn out to be masculine ones. We cannot also underestimate the role of text editions in creating a gendered subject since hidden gendered evaluations will lie behind the selective processes of texts.

Archives

EKLA = Estonian Cultural History Archives: The archives of Ilmi Kolla, Fund 220.

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