

Lyrical Poetry as a Factor in the Formation of Literary Cultures

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Why speak about poetry at a dramatic time like this, that makes us act, fight for and against, protect and protest?

Inter arma silent musae says the Latin poet, but European history shows the opposite: *inter arma non silent musae*, as the people of Ukraine are proving to us today. In Estonia, in the land of the Singing Revolution, we were beginning to believe even more that when the muses are heard, the cannons are silent. Thus, lyrical poetry has always been an effective non-violent weapon of resistance. It has immense power to bring people together and make them into a nation. Significantly, the idea of the Estonian state was first given word in the poetry of Lydia Koidula and Juhan Liiv.

During the Soviet occupation, freedom was sought in poetry. The Estonian poet Artur Alliksaar, whose 100th birthday we celebrate this year, wrote in his poem “Vabadus” (Freedom), which, like his poetry as a whole, was not published during his lifetime:

Vabadus tähendab võimete
sõltumatust,
teadmist oma peaga,
tundmist oma südamega
ja astumist oma jalgadel.
Vabadus tähendab õigust kahelda ja
valida veetlevaim veene. [...]

Vabaduse jaoks sündinu ei kadesta
vange,
kuigi neil on kergem.
Ka vangina on ta vaba.
(Alliksaar 1997: 77)

Freedom means independence of one's
capacities,
to know with one's own head,
to feel with one's own heart
and to tread with one's own feet.
Freedom means the right to doubt and to
choose the most enchanting conviction. [...]

Who is born for freedom does not envy
prisoners,
though they have it easier.
Even as a prisoner, one is free.¹

¹ Translation by L.L.

Ukrainian Poet Mykola Ryabchuk's 1981 poem resonates with this:

вірші завжди вільні	verses are always free
навіть якщо ми їх заримуємо закуємо у строфи замкнемо у фоліанти ²	even if we rhyme them put them in irons imprison them in folios ³

Until recently histories of literature have emphasised the seminal role of epic poetry in the development of literary cultures. (Beissinger 1999) The genre originated in the traditional oral epic, which has long been considered important in cultural consolidation and identity building. The concepts of epic and nation have been perceived as interconnected and the extension of this connection to the genre of the novel has been reaffirmed by contemporary theoreticians of culture (e.g. Moretti 1998).

Thus, relatively little attention has been paid to lyrical poetry, despite its noticeable presence, particularly in the formation of small literatures (in terms of a relatively small number of both authors and readers and limited international visibility) and the awakening of cultural and national self-awareness. Focusing not as much on the narrative plot as on descriptions, situations and feelings, lyrical poetry and the song have played their role in shaping national identity and strengthening the nation to an even greater degree than the epic. (DuBois 2006: 38; Culler 2015) This claim can be confirmed by argument provided by the long tradition of lyrical folksong in Balto-Finnic cultures, and in many other literary cultures around the world.

Exploring the historical and contemporary self-representation and status of lyrical poetry in various literary cultures, the 14th International Conference of the Estonian Association of Comparative Literature, under the title "The Factor of Lyrical Poetry in the Formation of Literary Cultures" took place on 1–3 November 2021 in Tartu (Estonia). Scholars from 16 countries spoke on topics covering African, Albanian, American, Belgian, British, Dutch, Finnish, French, Greek, Estonian, Galician, German, Irish, Indian (Ihumuri), Italian, Latin, Lebanese, Latvian, Lithuanian, Ryukyuan, Russian and Swedish poetry in its dialects and creolisations, approached from very different (theoretical,

² https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-5594_THE-STRAIGHTFORWARD-POEMS-9/ 27.04.2023.

³ Translation by Mykola Ryabchuk and R. A. Jamieson, published in the *Edinburgh Review*, 1990, 86.

didactic, comparative) perspectives. Eleven of these presentations have been elaborated into articles for this issue of *Interlitteraria*. The same topic will be continued in the next issue.

In the keynote speech as well as in the opening article of this issue, “Heart to Heart: The Power of Lyrical Bonding in Romantic Nationalism”, **Joep Leerssen** (Amsterdam) emphasises the roots of lyricism in the (feminine) oral tradition: face-to-face performance and convivial and emotive involvement often held together by women in their domestic setting and (subaltern) language. This kind of merging of the individual voice into the choir has been one of the powerful community-asserting (and nation-building) functions of lyric before modernised (and masculine) print culture and professionalisation. Lyricism can create emotive communities that move between affects from tender rustic sentimentality to violent militaristic patriotism.

In the case of American poetry, the latter is demonstrated by **Heinrich Detering** (Göttingen) in his article “This Land Is Your Land”: A Note on America as a Nation of “Varied Carols”, which compares two patriotic songs, Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” from 1918 (revised 1938) and Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land” (written in 1940). The latter, based on the American tradition of song poetry laid down by Walt Whitman and continued by Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost as well as by Allen Ginsberg, the Beat Poets and Bob Dylan, focuses on political equality and social justice as collective human rights, and at the same time the free development of every person’s individuality, creating and articulating a specifically US patriotism.

Unlike the US poets mentioned so far, who have contributed significantly to American nation-building, in the 1970s the Californian singer-songwriter and actor Tom Waits built an emotive community for the “desperate failures of society”, for those who come home to nothing, giving a voice, a name and a body to those who would otherwise remain invisible. In her article “‘We’re All Mad Here’: Alienation, Madness, and Crafting Tom Waits”, **Nadia López-Peláez Akalay** (Granada) looks at Waits’ lyrics in relation to the many discourses of art that his lyrical speech interacts with (interviews, live concerts, album artwork) giving a multimodal examination of Tom Waits’ artistic discourses.

While ‘major’ literatures such as the Anglo-American have been free to choose their own patterns and models of development, small literatures, the ‘latecomers to the world republic of letters’ as Pascale Casanova described them (Casanova 1999), developed in a relationship of dependence on a major, dominant (often colonial), literature, which led to a long separate evolution of oral and literary culture, the use of different languages and dialects in poetry and the importance of translated (or adopted) literature. Until the early 20th century, Estonian and Latvian poetry were to a large extent translated poetry.

Since the late 18th century, in parallel with an enthusiasm for the folksong (and partly influenced by it), a model for the formation of Estonian and Latvian poetry, as well as many other ‘small’ European literatures and a significant medium of popular enlightenment, has been translated German song. Arising from German cultural colonialism, this had a long-lasting effect on the (written) Estonian and Latvian culture of poetry and singing. **Māra Grudule** (Riga) in her article “The Transition from Song to Poetry in Latvian Literature in the Second Half of the 19th Century” explains how, a new genre of song, the secular, didactic and sentimental *ziņģe* (a term coined from the German verb *singen*, ‘to sing’), was created by the German pastor Gotthard Friedrich Stender, marking a poem translated from German. This type of translated song remained a favourite (oral) medium of popular enlightenment until the second half of the 19th century. As the level of literacy among Latvians rose, *ziņģes* receded to the periphery of the literary landscape, paving the way for a new concept to denote rhythmic text that was for the first time not melody-bound: *dzeja*, or ‘poetry’. The emergence of the new concept in 1869, which was related to the formation of a national literary culture, at the same time marked a turning point from orality to literacy in Latvian society.

At the same time, in 1867, the Estonian poet Lydia Koidula published her poem “Mu isamaa on minu arm” (My Fatherland is My Love), following a familiar German pattern. With a melody composed by Alexander Kunileid, this song was performed in 1869 at the first Estonian Song Festival. Under the Soviet Occupation, Koidula’s poem, with a new melody by Gustav Ernesaks, became the unofficial Estonian anthem. **Anneli Niinre** (Tallinn) explores The Role of Lyrics in Estonian Literature, using this song among other two examples from different time periods.

One of the intersectional themes of the conference was minority literature and literary multilingualism. A special issue of the Journal of Baltic Studies, titled *Multilingual Poetry and Multilingualism in the Baltic History*, no 1/2024) is being prepared to explore this increasingly topical issue in more depth. In this issue, **Lauri Pilter** (Tartu) devotes his article “Romantic Poets in Epic Form of Nordic Countries and Estonia’s Classical Dialect Poetry” to the literary heritage of the Estonian Swedish minority, little known in today’s Estonia. Through the example of Mats Ekman, who wrote around 1900 in the local dialect of Swedish on Estonia’s western coast, Pilter discusses the influence of Scandinavian literatures on Estonian poetry at that time.

Juhan Liiv, Estonia’s best-known and best-loved lyrical poet, almost all of whose poems have now been set to music, is generally regarded in Estonian literary consciousness and literary studies as a weak-minded, mentally unbalanced genius, an uneducated *Naturdichter*. In his chapter, titled “Juhan Liiv’s

Comprehension of Poetry”, **Tanar Kirs** (Tartu) analyses Liiv’s critical work showing that his comprehension of poetry did not evolve in a cultural vacuum, and that he was well acquainted with German classical poetic thought, as represented particularly in the works of Friedrich Schiller. On the other hand, Kirs points out that Liiv’s comprehension of poetry stands in strong correlation with music both in the aspects of conveying emotion as well as use of language.

Marko Pajević (Tartu) in his article “The Semantics of the Absurd: On German ‘Hermetic’ Poetry and Political Commitment after 1945” examines the role of German poets by coming to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*) after World War II, when it was recognised that the poetic medium itself – the language – was corrupt. Pajević demonstrates how the poets of so-called hermetic poetry, Paul Celan and Ilse Aichinger, by integrating silence and the absurd into a literary language, contributed greatly to the development of a new political awareness and renewal of poetic language.

The last three articles in this issue are dedicated to the poetry translation. The first, “Estonian, Russian and Samizdat Identity: Arno Tsart and Elena Shvarts”, by **Miriam Rossi** (Tallinn), deals with the phenomenon of pseudo-translation, which played a role in Samizdat, a network of exchange for forbidden or uncensored literature in the unofficial cultural field of late Soviet Leningrad (as well as other literatures behind the iron curtain). The advantage of pseudo-translation in cases of cultural control and censorship was the opportunity to hide behind a fictitious author, delivering the real author (the pseudo-translator) from responsibility for the content of the text. Rossi explores a literary mystification, the poetry of the alleged Estonian Arno Tsart, created by the Russian poet Elena Shvarts, but behind which a number of Russian poets were obscured. This strategy was used not only to avoid serious repercussions, but also to bring formal or content innovations in the target literary language with the excuse of a fictitious source text, while at the same time enabling intercultural play. In this case, the mystification triggered creative forces and inspired other writers to get into the game.

Liina Lukas (Tartu) dwells “‘In a Miracle Wellspring’ of Goethe’s Poetry...”, reflecting the significance and dynamics of the translation of Goethe’s poetry in Estonia from the first translation of 1841 (which was a prose adaptation) to 2021. Putting this story in the broader sociocultural context of all Baltic cultural space, and its neighbouring countries Finland and Russia, Lukas comments on the role of translated poetry in small literature. In the last article, “An Attempt to Account for Distributed Cognition in Translating the Poetry of Juhan Viiding”, **Miriam Anne Mcilpatrick-Ksenofontov** (Tallinn) presents her theoretical insights into the translation of poetry based on her own practical experience of translating the poetry of one of Estonia’s most widely read

and appreciated poets, Jüri Üdi/Juhan Viiding. Taking the wider human perspective of distributed cognition, as elaborated by neuroanthropologist Merlin Donald, and using examples from the poetry of Viiding, the author shows how to create poems in translation that will continue the qualities of original poems in the minds of new readers in another linguistic and cultural sphere. Making this journey with her would be a rewarding exercise for readers, as it was for Mcilfattrick-Ksenofontov.

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