

The Role of Lyrics in Estonian Literature: Three Exemplary Cases

ANNELI NIINRE

anneli.niinre@gmail.com

Abstract. Song lyrics are usually positioned in the margins of literature and tend not to be in the first line when writers and their works are discussed. There have been debates about whether to consider lyrics as literature and/or ‘real poetry’. The article examines three cases in Estonian literature where melodised poetic texts have played a significant role in Estonian culture and are considered to be core texts: “Mu isamaa on minu arm” (My Fatherland is My Love) by Lydia Koidula, songs from the feature film *Viimne reliikvia* (The Last Relic), lyrics written by Paul-Eerik Rummo, and “Laul Põhjamaast” (“Song of the Northern Land”), lyrics by Enn Vetemaa. These also represent three ways a text can function: “Mu isamaa on minu arm” was first written and published as a poem and later set to music; The Last Relic represents a case where texts were initially written as lyrics and later published in a collection of poems; “Song of the Northern Land”, by Enn Vetemaa, was meant to be and has remained a song and has not been included in poetry collections.

Keywords: lyrics, poems, Estonian literature, core texts

Introduction

In 2016 when Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” (The Nobel Prize), it caused discussion about the boundaries of literature, for example whether lyrics can be considered literature. In the era of democratised literature, when anyone can publish a book and thus be called a writer, the borders between genres are blurred and the definition of poem varies. The role and position of lyrics (and other more peripheral forms) tends to be ambiguous. For example, at the beginning of literary histories (folk)songs and other hybrid forms are usually included in literary history, although later they move into the background or are excluded. This is the case with Estonian literature, as when the beginning of Estonian literature is discussed various forms, for example traditional folksongs, are examined but then gradually forgotten as literature develops. As a rule, when writers works are discussed, song lyrics and other

peripheral forms are left on the margins. However, a large number of melodised poetic texts have played a significant role in Estonian culture, with several considered core texts, for example “Mu isamaa on minu arm” (My Fatherland is My Love) by Lydia Koidula, songs from the feature film *Viimne reliikvia* (The Last Relic), lyrics written by Paul-Eerik Rummo, the lyrics to “Laul Põhjamaast” (Song of the Northern Land) by Enn Vetemaa. These will be at the centre of the following discussion.

Case no. 1 My Fatherland is My Love by Lydia Koidula

The first example concerns Estonian national poet Lydia Koidula's (1843–1886) poem “Mu isamaa on minu arm” (My Fatherland is My Love), which became a very well-known song when Estonian composer and choir conductor Gustav Ernesaks (1908–1993) wrote a melody for it in 1944.¹ The patriotic poem was written when Estonia belonged to the Russian Empire and was under the rule of Baltic Germans. “Mu isamaa on minu arm” was published in Koidula's second collection of poems *Emajõe ööbik* (Emajõgi Nightingale) (1867). It has not only become her calling card but also the best-known poem to all Estonians even if they cannot name the author (Veidemann 2011: 24). The poem “Mein Lieben”, by the German national romantic Hoffmann von Fallersleben, which exudes intimate patriotism, is said to be the inspiration for the poem. All the characteristics of romanticism are met: devotional confrontation between love and death, loyalty to ideals, willingness to make sacrifices, the spirituality of nature and, most importantly, the inseparable connection of the birthplace and homeland with the poet's own destiny. “Mu isamaa on minu arm” is both an intimate confession and a pathetic hymn to Estonia. Koidula died in Kronstadt and was reburied to Estonia in 1946, “falling asleep in the bosom of the motherland and merging with it, as predicted in the last verse of the poem, came true in this way” (Veidemann 2011: 25).² Koidula has since become a myth, interpreted and discussed in numerous ways.

The melody to this poem was written by Ernesaks during the Second World War when Estonia was under the rule of Nazi Germany and he was recovering from a mental breakdown in exile in Soviet Russia. (It should be mentioned

¹ See also Rummo 1961.

² It is an interesting coincidence that just as Koidula's ‘My Fatherland is My Love’ became the unofficial national anthem of Estonia, the poem ‘Das Lied der Deutschen’ (‘Deutschland, Deutschland über alles’) written by Fallersleben in 1841, became the national anthem of Germany, set to music by Joseph Haydn (Veidemann 2011: 25).

that Ernesaks was not the first to set the poem to music, the first melody was written by Aleksander Kunileid before the first song festival in 1869. Kunileid's version was first performed in St Petersburg as was the version by Ernesaks, although the city was then called Leningrad.) It has been said that Ernesaks wrote a melody that heightened the poem to an emotional peak (Veidemann 2011: 25).

The song was performed at the song festival in 1947, the first song festival after the war and under the Soviet regime. During the following years the song was banned from song festival programs as officials decided it was too nationalist (Oja 1999). Nevertheless, people did not forget the song and it took on the status of an anthem.³ It has been noted that through the long and dark years of occupation, the song united Estonians and captivated their thoughts with hopes of liberation (Oja 1999). The song was not in the official song festival program in 1960 but was nevertheless performed spontaneously. Since 1965 the song has been in the official program as the final piece (16th laulupidu). The opening of the song is also used as a signature when the national flag of Estonia is being lowered on Pikk Hermann tower.

Therefore, we may say that both the text and the song are loaded with meaning and have a significant place in Estonian culture. "Mu isamaa on minu arm" represents a case where both the poem and the song are equally well known, and has a significant place in Estonian literature as well as in the history of Estonian music.

Case no. 2 The Last Relic

The second example, which also has its roots deep in the Estonian culture, represents a different case. One of the most remarkable Estonian poets Paul-Eerik Rummo (b. 1942) is the author of song lyrics from the Estonian cult movie *Viimne reliikvia* (The Last Relic) (1969) directed by Grigori Kromanov (1926–1984). The film has been praised by the public and by critics. It has been noted that the folklore related to the film has penetrated so deep into Estonianness that it is difficult to look at the film with an objective view (Priimägi 2020: 60). The film is loosely based on the historical story "Vürst Gabriel ehk Piritä kloostri viimased päevad" (Furst Gabriel or The Last Days of Piritä Monastery) (1893) by Estonian writer Eduard Bornhöhe (1862–1923). The text was written during the period of Russification and is clearly pro-Russian, while the film is

³ Ernesaks also wrote the music to the official anthem of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, 'Jää kestma, Kalevite kange rahvas' (Endure, Kalev's Strong People); lyrics written by Johannes Semper.

ambivalently related to Bornhöhe's original text and can be seen as anti-Bornhöhe, and against the background of 1968 also anti-Soviet (Torop 2011: 126).⁴ The 1968 Prague Spring – a period of political liberalisation and mass protest in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic – ended when the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact members invaded to suppress the reforms. Peeter Torop has noted that Russian horsemen burning Pirita monastery in the film, and the roar of Soviet tanks on the streets of Prague, merged into a single world that longed for relics (Torop 2011: 113).

In August 1968 when Russian tanks were in Prague, Paul-Eerik Rummo was in his summerhouse looking after his child and writing the lyrics to the "The Last Relic" (Rummo 1988: 71). Rummo has said that he was influenced by Zen-Buddhism, and that the first lines of the famous "Põgene, vaba laps" (Escape, Free Child)⁵ are a direct translation from the book by Zen-Buddhist guru Teitaro Suzuki, who writes that people think they need this and that, but in fact a free child who knows nothing of good or evil is needed, i.e. a child who is free on the predetermined axis of good and evil, or free from the influence of things and knowledge. The subject as a whole was close to Rummo and it coincided with the ideas he was thinking at the time. The concept of freedom

⁴ The Estonian Film Database introduces the film as follows: In 16th century Livonia a young knight, Hans von Risbieter, inherits from his father a reliquary with the remains of St Bridget, which is craved by the Pirita convent. Risbieter agrees to surrender the relic if he is allowed to marry Agnes von Mönnikhusen, the abbess's angelic niece. However, as events unfold, Agnes falls in love with Gabriel, a Robin Hood-like free man who bravely stands up for freedom and justice. In the shadow of romantic adventures, the exploding anger of the Estonian struggle for freedom is interwoven between the lines (The Last Relic).

⁵ Üle kõige on maailmal vaja üht vaba last,
kes pole midagi kuulnud heast ega kurjast.
Üle kõige on maailmal vaja üht vaba last –
ükskõikse huviga vaatab see oma ja võõrast.
Üle kõige on maailmal vaja üht vaba last –
paraja pilguga mõõdab see luuravat sundust
ega viitsi mõeldagi püüdjate paelust –
aga neil püüdjal on vaja just vaba last. (Rummo 2005: 132).
More than anything, the world needs one free child
who has heard nothing of good or evil.
More than anything, the world needs one free child –
who looks at the familiar and the foreign with indifferent interest.
More than anything, the world needs one free child –
who with a good eye measures the spying compulsion
and doesn't even bother to think about the catchers –
but these catchers need a free child. (My translation)

in general, the possibilities of abuse of freedom, the situation where freedom turns against itself (Kangur 2011: 153). The national meanings of the songs of *The Last Relic* have been strengthened through the film, music and time context, but it is interesting to observe how Rummo himself fuses national subtexts with Eastern influences and Christian keywords, thus adding weight to them. The following lines cannot be read without thinking about the Bible, and of A. H. Tammsaare, author of the novel *Truth and Justice*: “Happiness, faith, hope, love, / truth, right, justice, freedom. The core texts of culture have been referred” (Velsker 2002: 107–108).

Film director Grigori Kromanov had commissioned the lyrics on specific topics and made these to broaden the perspective on, and give extra meaning to, the film. Songs create a separate text in the film with their own leitmotiv and story, which ultimately interprets the whole film (Kangur 2011: 153). Rummo has commented that he had a script with the placement of songs. The addition of the songs was based on the Brechtian principle of estrangement effect, so that the story runs its own course and is mixed with a new truth or reality. The idea was taken from the Greek tragedy where the choir interprets the events on stage (Kangur 2011: 153). The music was written by Uno (1928–1980) and Tõnu Naissoo (b. 1951) and the artist singing was Peeter Tooma (b. 1946) whose image was of a headstrong protest singer. It has been noted that his deep bass matches the concept of the film (Kangur 2011: 157). A different interpretation is given in the Russian-language version of the film in which well-known and officially recognised Georg Ots (1920–1975) sings.

Therefore, in the case of *The Last Relic*, texts were initially written as lyrics and later published in four of Rummo’s poetry collections *Ajapinde ajab* (1985), *Valitud luulet. Oo, et sädemeid kiljuks mu hing* (1985), *Luuletused* (1999) and *Kogutud luule* (2005), in each case marked as songs from *The Last Relic*. When discussing the book *Ajapinde ajab*, Toomas Liiv has noted that a more fundamental question arises when it comes to song lyrics, brought into sharp focus by the line “Relic, relic”, that is, what to do with lyrics that are excessively song-like in that they have too much repetition? Shouldn’t even the best song lyrics be processed a little before being included among real poetry, to reduce their similarity to song? (Liiv 1985). Here a difference is made between song lyrics and ‘real poetry’. Actually, when one compares lyrics from the film and texts included in the collections of poems, one notices some differences, such as some lines being omitted from the songs. For example, the version of *The Song of the Dagger* that appears in the poetry collections is longer and has some additions.

One may say that those who are not familiar with the film are able to read these texts as poems, while those familiar with the film read them with the melody in mind. These texts were written as lyrics first and then later included

in poetry collections. Although these lyrics are not considered to be at the heart of works by Rummo, they have been included in the majority of his poetry collections.

Case no. 3 Song of the Northern Land

The third example discussed in this article represents a case where the text was meant to be, and has remained, a song. “Laul Põhjamaast” or “Põhjamaa” (Song of the Northern Land or Northern Land) is a song from the musical adaptation of Astrid Lindgren’s *Pippi Longstocking* (1969) by Ülo Vinter (1924–2000) with Ülo Raudmäe (1923–1990). Vinter is generally known as the composer of film scores and musicals, for example music for the cult films “Mehed ei nuta” (Men Don’t Cry) (1968), “Siin me oleme” (Here We Are) (1979) and “Noor pensionär” (The Young Pensioner) (1972), all directed by the legendary Sulev Nõmmik (1931–1992). Lyrics were written by Estonian writer Enn Vetemaa (1936–2017), who also wrote lyrics to several songs in Here We Are and “Don Juan Tallinnas” (Don Juan in Tallinn) (1971), directed by Arvo Krusement (b. 1928). Song of the Northern Land has also been included in the programs of Estonian Song Festivals and has been performed by Toomas Uibo in the film “Kevad südames” (Spring at Heart) (1985), directed by Mati Põldre (1936–2023).

Song of the Northern Land, which cordially and poetically depicts the northern homeland was, along with the previously discussed “Mu isamaa on minu arm”, mentioned as one of the candidates for the new Estonian national anthem (Raun 2018). It is noteworthy here that the original context of the song is left in the background, i.e. that it was written for the musical *Pippi Longstocking*, which is set in Sweden, although this turned out to be a minor detail as neither the musical as a whole nor the song emphasise this fact. The northern land in the song has been equated with the Estonian homeland. The song has become so to say independent as the link between the musical and the song is quite weak in contrast to songs from *The Last Relic*, which are closely associated with the film.

Unlike the *The Last Relic* and *My Fatherland is My Love*, Song of the Northern Land has not been included in Vetemaa’s poetry collections. Actually, Vetemaa, who was himself a composer, has stated that “lyrics are lyrics and a poem is a poem. A poem can function on paper while lyrics in most cases need music” (Urmet 2016). Therefore, in this case the author identifies a fundamental difference as lyrics and poems are said to belong to different categories. Based on this idea, lyrics cannot be transformed into poems by including them in poetry collections.

Conclusion

In the article three cases were discussed: My Fatherland is My Love, which was first written and published as a poem and then set to music; The Last Relic, which represents a case where texts were initially written as lyrics and later published in Paul-Eerik Rummo's collections of poems; and Song of the Northern Land, which was meant to be and has remained a song and has not been included in Enn Vetemaa's poetry collections. All are core texts of Estonian culture but have a different position in Estonian literature. The first, the poem by Koidula, has a central position in her works and can be said to be one of her signature texts. While Rummo's works are discussed, songs from The Last Relic are not usually addressed, although it may be said that their role is more significant than Song of the Northern Land which is not included in the essential works by Vetemaa. When authors are discussed, lyrics tend to be left in the background as poems tend to have more value. However, the difference between song lyrics and poems is not embedded within the texts themselves but stems from extratextual factors.

References

- Kangur, P. 2011. *Viimne reliikvia. Pilk legendi taha*. Tallinn: Ajakirjade Kirjastus.
- Liiv, T. 1985. Mitme pilgu läbi. – *Sirp ja Vasar*, 14.06.1985
- Oja, E. 1999. Mu isamaa on minu arm. – *Sirp*, 2.07.1999
- Priimägi, T. 2020. *101 eesti filmi*. Tallinn: Varrak.
- Raun, A. 2018. Kas Eesti vajab uut hümni?. – *Eesti Päevaleht*, 7.01.2018. Web link: <https://epl.delfi.ee/artikkel/80712291/alo-raun-kas-eesti-vajab-uu-humni-jah-praegune-ei-koneta-enam-koiki> (12.07.2022)
- Rummo, P. 1961. Ühe laulu lugu. – *Looming*, 1, 111–128.
- Rummo, P.-E. 1988. Lõikuskuu 1968. – *Teater. Muusika. Kino*, 70–74.
- Rummo, P.-E. 2005. *Kogutud luule*. Tallinn: SE&JS.
- The Last Relic. Web link: <https://www.efis.ee/en/film-categories/movies/id/499> (12.07.2022)
- The Nobel Prize. Web link: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/summary/> (12.07.2022)
- Torop, P. 2011. *Tõlge ja kultuur*. Tallinn, Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli kirjastus.
- Urmet, J. 2016. Enn Vetemaa öised välgatused. – *Looming*. Web link: <https://www.looming.ee/artiklid/enn-vetemaa-oesed-valgatused/> (12.07.2022)
- Veidemann, R. *101 eesti kirjandusteost*. Tallinn: Varrak.
- Velsker, M. 2002. Liikumine Paul-Eerik Rummo luules. – *Looming*, 1, 94–111.
- XVI laulupidu 1965. Web link: <https://sa.laulupidu.ee/ajalugu/xvi-laulupidu/> (12.07.2022)