

Discussing Nature, Ideology, Technology, Spirituality, Literature and Language at the Start of the 21st Century

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Jüri Talvet, *Ten Letters to Montaigne: Self and Other*. Translated by Jüri Talvet & H. L. Hix. Toronto: Guernica World Editions, 2019. 132 pp.

In the book titled *Ten letters to Montaigne Self and Other* the meritorious Estonian academic and poet Jüri Talvet addresses our current life, rather than the afterlife. He looks critically into contemporary issues from a long historical perspective and a rich literary context. A key strength of this essay book (originally published in Estonian in 2014) is that Talvet discusses current global tendencies, leading us to ponder over ‘self’ and ‘other’ through his personal life experiences. Throughout the book such issues as gender inequality, racism, high technology, language and literary creativity are discussed. In the following, I will review *Ten Letters* by theme.

Living with technology, not from technology

In the first letter, Jüri Talvet presents the beautiful scenery, and complex history, of the island of Rhodes, on which he tries to ‘talk’ with Montaigne. Based on the narrative of philosophy and culture, he interprets and discusses various aspects of the new era, such as the impact of technological developments on nature, life, ideology, spirituality, literature and language. Negative tendencies are found when questioning the rapid development of technology and rationalism and their impact on nature and the senses. Furthermore, Jüri Talvet uses a quote from the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, to criticise the excessive worship of, and reliance on, technology and rationalism: “Man lives with technique, not from technique”. This point is also argued and emphasised in the book’s last letter. At the same time, Talvet admits that we cannot ignore the benefits of high technology. It is not wise to abandon technology and try to ignore it altogether. The essence of technology and innovation, however, has not changed much since French Renaissance thinker Michel de Montaigne wrote his *Essays*. Talvet establishes an emotional link with Montaigne’s lifestyle and ideological stance. He is convinced that Montaigne’s

ideas can substantially help us to understand the meaning of our own existence at the start of the 21st century.

Gender equality

Gender equality has been the focus of a long debate that centres on the scholarly and literary works of feminist writers. With the development of culture and economy, Talvet's native Estonian language (a Finno-Ugric language akin to Finnish) has experienced dynamic changes in the last decades. In the second letter, Talvet describes several distinguishing features of his mother tongue, as compared to some major Indo-European languages: the malleability of word order, the metaphor of gender equality and the notion that all living beings are equal. These linguistically implied meanings are also similar to some of Montaigne's basic philosophical ideas. Thus, Montaigne proposes that we need to respect women and work for gender equality. Even though it is difficult to realize gender equality, we need to strive for it. The same is discussed in the fifth letter, though mainly from the perspective of literary creativity. The fifth letter expresses the author's sympathy for women's literary production, of which the main value is that the world is viewed from the point of view of the traditional 'other', i.e. woman.

In the sixth letter, Jüri Talvet reaffirms his viewpoint that masculinity and femininity, spirituality and rationality, the 'self' and the 'other' should be balanced. He finds in Dante Alighieri hints at support of a symbiotic relationship between males and females and brings to the fore Giovanni Boccaccio's defence of the right of women to express their ideas. Similarly to Montaigne, other European creative humanist philosophers and writers stressed the importance of respect for life and the 'other'. Desiderius Erasmus criticised male-dominated dictatorships, tyrannies and militarism. In the final Annex, Jüri Talvet quotes and comments on the work of Virginia Woolf. He considers her literary work pivotal in the sense of achieving an aesthetics of equality between 'self' and 'other'.

Writing for research and spreading ideas, not for a guild of specialized scholars

Science and technology are definitely important, but we cannot live without history, culture, civilisation, and emotional values, ideas that are reflected in the third letter. Jüri Talvet highlights the philosophical positions of Descartes, Socrates, Plato and others and expresses in parallel his own views on how our

inner spirituality could connect with the world in a more intelligent, symbiotic way. He points out that hard sciences and humanities could be interconnected. Moreover, Talvet discusses the importance of the poetic genre in literary creativity, relying on Montaigne for support of his views. In the fourth letter, he criticises the current state of research in the humanities: the increasing tendency of scholars to describe their findings and ideas through obscure specialised language, and the building up of disciplinary walls, something that was also criticised by Montaigne. Jüri Talvet is strongly against writing without any novelty and originality of ideas, just moving in a fashionable trend. Tedious graphics do not mean that scholars show evidence in a convincing way. Similar to an excellent poem, discussion in the humanities needs a solid philosophical root to grow.

Female roles in language and literary work

In the seventh letter, Jüri Talvet focuses on how literary works reflect the development of female self-awareness. He endorses the effort to provide women with full rights and freedom of expression and advocates that men should curb their sense of authority and pay more attention to women's needs and requirements, as personalities. Unlike the sixth letter, which is about the awakening of gender equality, this letter focuses on the efforts to progress towards that ideal. To complement the letter, Talvet analyses literary works, revealing his appreciation and admiration of women who fought for themselves. He regards the courage and determination of such women as the (future) strength of humankind. He believes that literature needs to make us better understand human behaviour and the essence of social processes. Efforts and contributions by women in literature and the characteristics of their literary work is the focus of the ninth letter. Talvet points out that no matter where these women writers are, their works show an appreciation of the 'other', i.e. nature. These works have depicted women's emotions more deeply than male authors. Talvet's reverence for women's literature and his respect for feminists is evident. He admires their attitude of not indulging in formalism, excessive intellectuality and rationalism, their richer emotional expression and their respect for nature.

Although there are only ten letters in this essay book, we can feel that the ideas of these thinkers and writers spark doubt in us, prompting us to ponder and reflect upon ourselves. In the 21st century, we are easily immersed in the fast pace of life and may have never thought of the 'self' or the 'other'. Talvet's *Ten Letters to Montaigne* provides a valuable opportunity to rethink contemporary social and cultural issues as well as ideological tensions of the current world. For example, he cites Peter Høeg's success novel *Smilla's Sense of*

Snow, in which the heroine opposes male tyranny, as a sign of the awakening of female resistance to male power. Talvet also exposes the deep social worry and responsibility of creative writers of the past when he refers to Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The sociological, philosophical and psychological insight of that work has not at all become old-fashioned or archaic. It might be too early to hope for a speedy fulfilment of the ideal of balancing the female and the male, but the role of socially and culturally engaged poets, writers, philosophers and scholars is urgently needed and will be fundamental in moving toward these goals.