

World Poetry and Heteropoetics of Poetry Translation

JÜRI TALVET¹

Abstract. A widely circulating commonplace opinion is that translating poetry from one natural language to another natural language is an impossible enterprise. Our pre-World War II influential Estonian literary critic (and writer) Friedebert Tuglas (1886–1971) had fundamental merits publishing the first major selections of Juhan Liiv's (1864–1913) poetry (1919, 1926) and two monographs on Liiv's work (1914, 1927) relying on the manuscripts left by Liiv, who died without publishing any poetry book of his own choice. Tuglas was convinced that Liiv's poetry was untranslatable. That opinion, however, has been put into doubt by the fact that in the 21st century three selections in English have been published of Liiv's poetry (one in Tartu, Estonia, 2007, and two abroad: Toronto, 2013 and Chisinau-London, 2024), as well as two selections in Italian and one each in Spanish, German, Finnish, Mari and Udmurt. As a poet and translator myself, I have been active in the field of translation, both from foreign languages (Spanish, English and many others) into my native Estonian, as well as collaborating with foreign language native (poet-)translators in an effort to make the wider world aware of Juhan Liiv's poetic genius and exceptionality. My book in two volumes *Valitud tõkeluulet I–II* (Selected Poetic Translations I–II) (2021) gathers translated samples of world poetry by nearly 150 authors from all parts of the world, published over half a century (1970–2020). I suppose any person who has with some persistence dedicated a substantial part of his/her life to translating poetry has gradually moulded some kind of creative philosophy (poetics). Such a philosophy does not need to be exhausted by discussion (discourse) on translating poetry and its ideals – that is, by explicitness. Much more can be discovered and learned by closer research on translations themselves and the practical process (which often contradicts ideals...). Looking back at my creative path in this field, I would define my translation philosophy and practice as 'heteropoetic', for one thing because I have not remained faithful to my early principles or considerations, which were strongly conditioned and influenced by my predecessors. All the same, today I still very much respect their ideals, even though they may differ from mine. I sincerely admire many translations achieved by the older generation. In my university lectures over several decades I have introduced my students to these translations and have tried to explain the factors of their rare success. The other aspect

¹ Jüri Talvet, Professor Emeritus, University of Tartu, Estonia, talvet@ut.ee

of heteropoetics is my conviction, crystallised during the past half a century, that one cannot apply the same translation principles to whatever poetic texts. Every successful poetic work is an individual and exceptional creative-poetic deed. Accordingly, I have tried to find in my native language such means that would allow me to resuscitate the original work here in Estonia, in another and different culture. It is a complex topic. To briefly summarise its kernel, the liberties of a poetry translator, above all in what concerns the (external) form of the original work, should be the greatest possible. On the other hand, I consider as absolute the responsibility of a translator before the original creator. This means creating in another language a work that aspires to be as close as possible to the spiritual and mental content of the original image.

Keywords: world poetry conception; heteropoetics; poetry translation

Preliminary remarks

As the topic of world poetry is fairly wide, I will very briefly summarise my postulates. Under the term ‘world poetry’ I will stick to the traditional understanding first defined and applied by Goethe and the German romantics to ‘world literature’ (WL): it is literary creativity that in the historical practice, above all as the fruit of the efforts of translators, allied with criticism, has made some works in particular excel and cross exclusive national (language and cultural) borders, becoming universally shared creativity. The canon of world poetry (as well as of world literature) has been and will perhaps always remain hesitant, tentative and open. The works created by big (leading) nations in their internationally dominant languages and translations into these languages do not exhaust the much wider phenomenon of world literature. Especially as regards world poetry, my latest position and conviction is that any nation and nationality historically creates its own canon of world poetry, as a part of the canon of world literature. The real canon is always imaginary. It works by coincidences, but it is not at all exhausted by simple copying or imitation. There is a lot of room for discovery and pioneering work for translators and critics around the world.

I have previously discussed the question of WL canon(s) in a number of articles. I have proposed to differentiate between three types of canons: active, passive and potential (cf. Chapter XIII: “Can World Literature (Re)vitalize Humanities? Conditions and Potentiality”, Talvet 2019: 182–192).

Since at least the time Miguel de Cervantes wrote his ‘total novel’ *Don Quixote*, world literature has become strongly ‘contaminated’ and influenced by mass and genre literature. In that sense, poetry seems to be the ‘least contaminated’ species of literary creativity. “You may play the fool anywhere

else but not in poetry”, Michel de Montaigne observes in one of his essays (II: “On Presumption”), as he quotes Horace’s “Ars poetica”: “Poets are never allowed to be mediocre by the gods, by men or by publishers” (Montaigne 2003: 722).

Translating poetry

Here the basic questions are: what is the purpose of translating poetry and who have been (and ideally should be) the translators of poetry?

There is an interesting historical fact: in 1635 Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645), one of the greatest Spanish poets of the Spanish Golden Age, published his translation in verse of Greek stoic philosopher Epiktetos’ (50–130 AD) book in prose, *Ench(e)iridion* (Moral Manual). Quevedo translated it into *silvas* – a strophe or stanza with an irregular number of verses in which longer (11-syllable) and shorter (seven-syllable) verse lines alternate. This form achieved its greatest fame in Luis de Góngora’s hermetic mannerist long poem (of more than 2,000 verse lines) *Soledades* (Solitudes, written in 1613).

During the Renaissance it became a widespread practice to write long narrative poems in metrical forms, applying end-rhymes. The fashion and tradition continued, roughly, until the Romantic era, but not much longer. In addition, for several centuries nearly all drama works were written in verse, though there, some parts could alternate with text and chapters in prose.

Today, nobody thinks seriously of writing and translating practical texts (in law, economy, politics, philosophy, etc.) in verse. I have (half for fun and half seriously) written a verse chronicle of world events of the 2018–2019 period (coinciding with the centenary of the Estonian Republic: Jüri Perler (2018), *Oikumeeniline missa*). However, this is a rare exception.

Thus, the basic function of creative literature, including poetry, has remained what it has above all been: to provide reflections on life (in the social, philosophic, ideological, psychological and moral sense) by means of a language based on aesthetic (sensitive, sensual, sensuous) images that has the capacity to reach a wide audience in any society. Even though in our digital, computerised, era visualisation dominates in all arts, there is and will probably always be room for creativity (with poetry on the front line) that is evoked by at least a small part of the reading public in its “spiritual eye” and thus individualised, made ‘one’s own’, private, intimate – in contrast with mass public, which is easily submissive to and manipulated by uniform visual images.

Poetry much more than prose writing is the creative ally of any national and autochthonous language, and thus, of the core of the individual identity of any nation(ality). It is well known from universal poetry practice that poetry

can achieve its full value aesthetically when created in a poet's native language, and when the reading public, too, can fully enjoy it in its native language. This explains why poetry has been in the vanguard of a nation(alitie)s' assertion of self-identity, both in the past and in the present day. This is the surest guarantee of a nation's existence, an irreplaceable contribution to the world's cultural ecology, of which the absolute imperative, in parallel with biodiversity, is cultural diversity. That role of resilience is shared by translated poetry and original native language poetry: they intertwine, complement and mutually gain strength.

To achieve a full reception and transmission of poetry across the borders of national languages, creative people who have excelled themselves as poets, generally have better premises than those who have never written poetry. In any case, sensitivity towards poetry is fundamentally important. Yet at the same time one should not suppose that any poet or poetically minded person is capable of translating poetry in such a manner that the translated poem could be enjoyed by the target public.

Any translator, both of prose and verse, can learn a lot from the experience of other, skilled translators, as well as from his/her own mistakes. A translation can nearly always be improved, especially of poetry translated in classical (uniform, homorhythmic or homometric) rhyme forms.

To comfort those translators who have less natural talent and fewer ideas, they too can contribute valuably to the translation process in which more people take part. Any published creative literary work, including translations of poetry, in the long term inevitably becomes the heritage of humankind. Thus, to give an example, the first complete translation in German (1852) made by Anton Schiefner (a Baltic-German linguist and folklorist born in Tallinn and living in St. Petersburg) of the Finnish epic *Kalevala* (1835–1949) written by Elias Lönnrot became a seminal 'pilot translation' by means of which that Nordic epic reached the wider world beyond Finnish and Finland. Thus, the best acknowledged complete English translation by John Martin Crawford of *Kalevala* (1888) relied on Anton Schiefner's translation in German, while the translation in Chinese (1981), by Sung Yong, relied on the Briton W. F. Kirby's notably literal full English translation (1907).

For more details of the universal reception of *Kalevala* and F. R. Kreutzwald's Estonian *Kalevipoeg* see Talvet 2024: 315–326. From the above, it is absolutely clear and proved by practice that the widespread prejudice towards indirect poetry translations, as such, can hardly be justified. In our days it has become a worldwide practice to use translations from a third language, mainly from English. This has become almost inevitable, above all, when translating from such minor languages as Estonian. It would be wonderful if there were

good poets in different parts of the world who know by chance Estonian and wished to translate directly from that language. Yet, how many such poets are there? In the greater part of the world (beyond the widest-spread international languages) they are a rare historical miracle.

For that reason, some compromises have to be made. Enjoyable translations can be achieved by relying on 'base versions' in a third language. Ideally, such cases presuppose an intense collaboration between two (or more) translators (poets or poetically sensitive people), of whom at least one knows the original language and culture of the object text (to be translated) well, as well as the mediating ('pilot') language (that has been involved in translating process). The final version should be revised by both (or all) translators involved in this kind of work.

Departing from my own experience I can assure you that (perhaps even) the majority of translations of 'world poetry' in our days rely on that kind of practice. Naturally, no translation is 'definitive', made for ever. There may be a number of translations that are equally good and enjoyable. As the 'receiver' (reading public) is a fairly abstract notion, in reality tastes may strongly differ. Some prefer one certain translation, others prefer others. If the author of the poem is alive and knows the target language, translator(s) may importantly gain from his/her explanations and comments (if ever needed).

For example, my own short poem "Armastus" (Love) which in 1997 was awarded the Juhan Liiv Poetry prize (the distinction given for a single poem, for the first time published in print the year before), has been translated into more than 80 world languages. Only a tiny minority of these translations have been made directly from the Estonian. Most of them rely on mediating versions in 'pilot languages' (which in my case have been English and Spanish above all) (<http://talvet.edicypages.com/poems>). In the effort to spread awareness of Juhan Liiv's poetic heritage in the wider world, I have collaborated intensely with translators in English, Spanish, Italian and German.

More about the 'heteropoetics' of poetry translation

The history of Estonian poetry translation over the last hundred years can be both instructive and illustrative of how a *national canon of world poetry* is gradually formed in a minor autochthonous 'peripheral' society that basically relies on its own native language.

Although there have been some talented poetry translators (especially from German) since our 'national cultural awakening' (the second half of the 19th century, when no sovereign Estonian state existed), these were rare happy exceptions. (For instance, Jaan Bergmann's translation of Friedrich Schiller's

“Laul kellast” (Das Lied von der Glocke, first published in 1891, has been reprinted in a reader for Estonian high schools, *Maailmakirjanduse lugemik* (1993: 332–341.)

When the present-day Estonian language was still in its formative years, the first fully conscious and responsible poetry translations started to appear in Estonian magazines, and above all in the almanacs of the literary cultural group Noor Eesti (Young Estonia) in the 1920s. The main poetry translators of the Young Estonia group, imitating the principle dominating in German, Russian and Scandinavian poetry practice, established a homopoetic–homometric poetry translation pattern as a rule. It presupposed a translator’s fidelity to the original poetic text in every sense, including verse metrics and rhyme patterns.

The main ideologists of Young Estonia, the poet (and later literature professor) Gustav Suits (1883–1956) and essay and fiction writer Friedebert Tuglas tried to make patriotism and poetry compatible with science and scholarship. Tuglas and the linguist Johannes Aavik (1880–1973), a great innovator of the Estonian language, could not understand why the greatest Estonian poetic talent, Juhan Liiv, their immediate predecessor, in his aphoristic cycle “Killed” (splinters), rebelled against end-rhyme in poetry; even when he did apply end-rhyme in most of his poems, Liiv did not submit to traditional established scholarly patterns.

The homopoetic translation principle was faithfully followed by one of the main Estonian poetry translators, Ants Oras (1900–1982), also an important literary critic. Oras specialised at university in English and American literature and was the first important Estonian translator of Shakespeare, Shelley, Byron, Keats, Poe, among other classics. Even though T. S. Eliot’s poetry and ideas were at the centre of Oras’ scholarly work, still after World War II, while in exile in Florida in the US, Oras reaffirmed that the “only correct” way of writing poetry was applying end-rhyme and regular metrics (cf. Olesk 1997: 17).

The homopoetic–homometric line thus became deeply embedded in Estonian poetry and poetry translation through the pre-World War II period and the first decades of Estonia, as annexed by the USSR. Russian-Soviet academic ideology flatly rejected any kind of modernism (or rather, what they considered modernism) and defended the practice of traditional metrics and poetics.

However, in the 1920s, Johannes Semper (1892–1970), a versatile writer, literary critic and one of the main translators of poetry from Romanic languages, brought new winds to Estonian poetics, including poetry translation. He was an early adherent to modernism and vanguard currents in French literature. He also looked beyond Europe, and even though English was not his speciality, in 1920 he published the small book *Walt Whitman*, which contained

a selection of Whitman's free verse in Estonian translation and, in addition, a philosophically orientated essay on Whitman's work. I would call it the first manifestation and premise for heteropoetics in Estonian literature in the sense that Semper was fully open to the first great Western 'hetero-poet', who as early as the mid-1850s started to write and publish poetry exclusively in free verse, dissenting from the long-rooted tradition of English-language rhymed poetry, written in regular metrics.

Before World War II, Semper also translated several French poetry books by the Belgian Émile Verhaeren, who did apply end rhyme in many of his longer poems, but at the same time rejected regular metric patterns. The result was irregularly rhymed *verse libre* (something similar to Spanish *silva* in the Baroque poetry of Góngora and Quevedo). It goes without saying that in some other verse forms, such as sonnets, Semper achieved wonderfully enjoyable translations by using end-rhymes and regular rhythm patterns (for example translating poems by Ronsard and Baudelaire).

After World War II, Semper made important contributions to two major Estonian anthologies of Medieval and Renaissance literature (Altoa, V. *Keskaja ja vararenessansi kirjanduse antoloogia*, Tallinn, 1962; Altoa, V. *Renessansi kirjanduse antoloogia*, Tallinn, 1984). The clearest example of heteropoetic poetry translation practice is Semper's (partial) translation of the best-known French medieval epic *Chançon de Rolland*. Instead of imitating the assonant end-rhyme patterns of the French original, Semper has translated the work in blank (unrhymed) (mainly) 11-syllable verse lines. I admired this translation when I first read it, still as a university student, in our *Keskaja ja vararenessansi kirjanduse antoloogia*. I have recited it to my numerous students in lectures on Western medieval literature throughout my academic career, lasting nearly half a century. I have always admired how Semper was capable of conveying in his poetry translations psychological and emotional atmosphere, as well as vivid shades of moral and spiritual accents.

I owe much gratitude to several other Estonian poetry translators, my immediate predecessors, who above all were active in the post-war period in Estonia (Ain Kaalep, Jaan Kross, August Sang, Harald Rajamets), who overwhelmingly practiced the homopoetic-homometric principle, thus deepening its influence. I have learned from them the homopoetic art of translating rhymed poetry in regular patterns (as in Quevedo's *Valik luulet* (Selected Poems), Tallinn, 1987) and in parallel, the art of translating free unrhymed verse (for example the Cuban Fayad Jamís' long poem "12 ja 23" ([12 and 23], in the book *Iidse lootuse tagasitulek* [Return of the Ancient Hope], Tallinn, 1988).

I definitely admire Ain Kaalep's great effort translating the Spanish Golden Age verse play *La Estrella de Sevilla* (attributed to Lope de Vega) in his near-perfect imitation of the original Spanish metric, rhyme and strophe patterns. Yet, in my own translations of Spanish Renaissance and Baroque drama I have rather been a continuer of a more liberal heteropoetic principle, as applied in the translations of the work of Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca by August Sang as early as the 1950s. I have preferred consciously to alternate patterns of (mainly unrhymed) *verse libre* and blank verse over the original Spanish language rhythms applicable to the Estonian theatre stage.

As for heteropoetics concerning more specifically the phenomenon of rhyme (characteristic of the greater part of Western poetry across nearly a thousand years since the European (late) Middle Ages), it forms a vast problematic corpus in such languages as Estonian, which do not belong to any major Indo-European language groups (Romanic, Germanic, Slavic). Estonian is not at all rich in rhyming words, which abound for instance in Romanic languages and offer rich possibilities for full (consonant) rhymes in German, English and Russian. It is the main reason why our poet and thinker Juhan Liiv quickly rebelled against full end-rhymes. Instead, in a great number of poems he used rhymes based on the coincidence of secondary accents in words, of which our language really has a great reserve: *isamáa*, *temagá*, *elamá*, *rännatá*, *mõtleb tá*, etc.

As soon as a poet starts to form full (consonant) end-rhymes in Estonian, it is likely that he or she will run into trouble. The rhymes found by the poet can easily be surmised by the reader, and this would naturally diminish their effect. Such rhymes can be used in verses for children and for humoristic and comical effect. In translations of lyrical and philosophically inclined poetry the frequent use of such rhymes tends to sound childish. If, against the nature of the language, full end-rhymes are still employed, the work in translation is prone to lose the natural sonority it has in the original-language work. Translation would sound artificial and false, damaging the overall impression one obtains from reading such a poem.

Encouraged by the example provided in numerous translations from Spanish by Ain Kaalep, I have translated many poems and parts of poetic works (such as Spanish verse drama) using assonant rhymes (*rima asonante*), close to the way it is used in the original Spanish work. In fact, it does not exceed the patterns of homopoetics. However, in the last decade I have moved on to experiment more boldly with elements of heteropoetics, as can be observed in my anthological volumes of *Valitud tõlkeluulet* (Selected Translated Poems). For instance, I have translated the popular anonymous romance "Romance del aviso de la Fortuna y de la derrota de don Rodrigo" (approximately the 15th

century) faithfully imitating the assonant end-rhymes and the length of the rhythm of the verse. Yet, when translating the famous philosophical poem “Coplas por la muerte de su padre” by Jorge Manrique (second half of the 15th century), written in full (consonant) rhyme and in very short verse lines (alternating eight and four syllables), I have used both blank verse (without rhyme) and assonant rhyme throughout the poem, not exactly following the original line length, though keeping close to it.

Once again: applying heteropoetics in translated poetry tends to be foretold by the nature of each individual language, its possibilities and limitations. The linguistic nature of an original poem may substantially differ from the nature of the target language. Every poem whose translation one attempts asks for an individual approach in translation. A translated poem can, in some happy cases, equal the aesthetic value the poem has in the original language and culture. It can sometimes happen that a talented and inspired translator in a young (and small) culture may produce a poem translation that reaches a fairly wide native-language audience, whereas the big culture in which the poem was originally created has almost forgotten it. The reception process depends substantially on historical and social circumstances.

To conclude, let me suppose that my own original poetry in Estonian has been more inclined to heteropoetic liberties than to any rigid prescriptions, inherited from previous homopoetic practices. If there have been generous poets and other poetically minded people who have tried to translate my poems into other world languages, I never mind if they have done and they do it following either homopoetic or heteropoetic principles. I accept all these efforts and I am thankful to all the translators.

References

- Altoa, V. ed., 1962. *Keskaja ja vararenessansi kirjanduse antoloogia*. Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus.
- Altoa, V. ed., 1984. *Renessansi kirjanduse antoloogia*. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat.
- Montaigne, M. de. 2003. *The Complete Essays*. M. A. Screech, transl., London: Penguin Books.
- Olesk, S. 1997. Kaks rahvusvahelist eestlast Ameerikas. – S. Olesk, ed., *Akadeemia kirjades*. Ants Orase ja Ivar Ivaski kirjavahetus 1957–1981. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, 10–20.
- Perler, J. (Talvet, J., pseudonym). 2018. *Oikumeeniline missa*. Tallinn: Grano Digital.
- Quevedo, Fr de. 1987. *Valik luulet*. [Selected poems] J. Talvet, ed., transl., Tallinn: Eesti Raamat.
- Talvet, J. ed., transl., 1988. *Iidse lootuse tagasitulek. Kuuba nüüdisluulet*. [Return of Ancient Hope. Contemporary Cuban poetry]. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat.

Talvet, J. 2019. Can World Literature (Re)vitalize Humanities? Conditions and Potentiality – J. Talvet, ed., *Critical Essays on World Literature, Comparative Literature and the “Other”*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 182–192.

Talvet, J. 2021. *Valitud tõlkeluulet*, I, II. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.

Talvet, J. 2024. Expanding World Literature: The Factor of Native-Creative Enthusiasm. – D. Figueira, J. Bessière, eds., *Criticism, Literary Theory and Ideology*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 315–326.

Talvet, J., Mäll, L., Torop, P., Unt, J. eds., 1993. *Maailmakirjanduse lugemik*. Tallinn: Koolibri.