

*“Estonian Elegy” by Jüri Talvet:
A Vision of an Ethnical Perspective via
Forgiveness and Love*

“Estonian Elegy”¹ is a desperate painful cry of the denied right to happiness. This poem, a sensuous elegy for the loss of nine hundred human lives in a passenger ferry, turns into a lament for the past and the present of a nation. Estonia, an ancient country, with an extraordinary history (dating back to 10,000 B.C, to the end of the Late Pleistocene, by found artefacts of the Kunda Culture) (Kevin O’Connor 2006: 39), has had a long and difficult road toward resurrection, after a lot of suffering and humiliation during the past centuries.

Starting with an evocation of a real life event, the poem introduces “an archetypal event” (Stevens 2006: 103), referring to the difficult survival of the nation. There is an image serving as a smooth transition from real life to the archetypal event; the drowning of a passenger ferry, ironically named ‘Estonia’. This ferry is a symbol of the never ending voyage of Estonia through the rough seas of history, its endeavour to defy the ravenous tides which tried to wreck it and the wild stormy winds which destroyed its mast.

¹ In the original Estonian, the two-hundred-line long poem “Eesti eleeogia” was first published in Talvet’s forth collection of poetry, *Eesti eleeogia ja teisi luuletusi* (Tallinn: Kupar, 1997). It was reprinted in the bilingual Estonian-Spanish book *Elegía Estonia y otros poemas* (translated by the author and Albert Lázaro Tinaut, Valencia: Palmart Capitelum, 2002), in which the author had decided to introduce a slight change (as compared with the initial publication), suppressing the final refrain line of the poem. In the present essay the poem is discussed as departing from its translation into English by H. L. Hix, first published in the journal *Rampike* (Toronto, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2006) and then in the book *Estonian Elegy. Selected Poems* (Toronto: Guernica, 2008). From the latter, the following quotations of the poem in the present essay proceed.

The sea – death relation does not occur spontaneously, being not related only to the tragic event of 1994. The mutual relation of sea and death is present in the *collective memory* (sometimes consciously and sometimes not), enough to remind us that death often came from the sea along with the invaders. Beside this, there is also a thread of ancient history as a proof of such a relation. According to archaeological data, in the Bronze Age, “stone cist graves and cremation burials became increasingly common beside a small number of boat-shaped stone graves”. (*Estonia: Identity and Independence* 2004: 26)

A close connection between the boat and death evokes the concept of death as a trip to the next world. This is not unfamiliar in the history of mankind. We can recall the Greek myth of Charon, helping the mortals with his boat across the river Lethe to Hades, situated beneath the earth’s surface, or as Talvet puts it: “toward the Earth’s roots”. The ferry turns into “archetype-as-such”, which according to Anthony Stevens “is at once an innate predisposition to form such an image and a preparation to encounter and respond appropriately to the object per se”.⁴ (Stevens 2006: 105)

The transition between two images, a) the passenger ferry called Estonia, which unfortunately “sailed” toward the bottom of the sea (death) and, b) Estonia, the country, which has been threatened with extinction throughout its history, carries a powerful symbolic load.

“Estonian Elegy” opens with the verse, “No, it cannot be true”, later to turn into a tragic refrain. The use of negative “No” at the very start of the poem conveys a categorical refusal to something which can never be accepted. It stands for an immediate reaction against something alien, evil.

The delineation of this feeling since the very start of the poem is completed by the use of the modal “cannot”, emphasizing the negativity. “Cannot”, differing from “can not” in connotation, carries more weight being a two syllable word. (The negative meaning in “can not” falls only on “not”, whereas in “cannot” it gets heavier by the use of a two syllable word). The overall feeling that you get is the perpetual effort to come out of a long nightmare where you refuse to believe that the fear you just feel is real.

Cramps of disbelief constricted throats that morning.
 (“The Estonian Elegy”, 12)

The above metaphor can be interpreted in several ways: first is the fact that we have to deal with a suffocating tragic truth which is well-known in literature. Evidence of it is the myth of Laocoon and his sons, “murdered” because of the truth they knew.

The second explanation of “cramps of disbelief constricted throats” can be directly related to the unwillingness to pronounce it, to not give a language form to the truth that really hurts.

There is an evident distance between real time and the evocation period which is clearly expressed by the use of the pronoun “that” in the word cluster “that morning”. This distance does not serve as an evidence of the passing pain. No, the pain remains the same. It stays there as a disease to every living cell.

Now, what has just happened? What is the experienced trauma? Talvet reveals the answers in the opening verses, using tragic images to describe an apocalyptic episode.

Legs turned to lead, as if earth were dragging us to its
 roots,
 the way water tore them, naked children,
 suddenly from their dreams to her iron-cold breasts.
 (Ib.)

“Legs turned to lead” is the first image through which death is related to the tragic event. This is not a natural death which is considered (painfully though) as an end of life’s full circle. The proper choosing of the verb “lead” and the internal rhyme connecting it with “legs”, creates an association of the subverted image of “head” (noun) and “heads” (verb).

What has just happened is far from being perceived by normal logic, thus unaccepted. Death has embraced kids and innocent angels inflicting so an unworldly pain to the speaker. Through the experienced trauma of the just happened tragic event, the speaking

persona experiences “dissociation, a complete separation from reality” (Pango 2005: 95).

The drowning in itself is the last cup of pain of the overflowing spirit throughout the years.

The speaker evokes via flashback the harsh sailing in the swelling seas of the history of this specific ferry, author’s beloved country, Estonia. He experiences through brief moments tragic images that are retained unaltered in the *collective memory* of his people. These images are proof of the effort to preserve the nation, the ancient existence of which goes hand in hand with the peril of extinction.

Had there not been enough bowing already
to German Lords, scions of Vikings, Russian wags?
Enough hauling of stumps and stones at the marsh’s edge?
(Ib. 13)

Invasion and invaders posed a long remaining threat Estonians had to live with. Sometimes they came one after another, sometimes they shared their trophies. But they all had the same features, irrespective of their names or their fighting ideals. Seizing territories, invading new land, cultural expansion – this is just a matter of naming. What always remained the same was violence, fierceness, brutal means to achieve one’s goals. Unfortunately though, even when their purpose was not strictly material but related to something higher and sublime like the saving of the soul, the means used to draw “the non-believers to the right path of God” remained cruelly identical.

What stupid sophistry about God, sin, the duty of
fasting!
Where was Christ when the Knights of the Cross
killed
the children of Mary’s Land and raped women and
girls,
when barely having roofed the first rooms of our
own

we found ourselves back on the snow Siberian plains
gnawing on permafrost
 (Ib. 13)²

The speaking persona can do nothing but recall the injustice and misery his beloved country had to endure throughout centuries. Most lines are not marked with a period, comma or semicolon, but through *enjambment*. (DiYanni 2000: 194). The verse breaks exactly on the words which hold the most significant meaning: *fasting, killed, girls, own, and gnawing on permafrost*. Therefore images provided are more than enough to create a tragic view of Estonia's history.

These images contrasted each other, at other times they are very exclusive.

The commitment to fasting, an effort to cleanse the internal self, an attempt to detach from the material needs and deliver the soul openly to the Creator is strongly contrasted to the verb *killed*. The confrontation between the cleansing ritual and the greatest sin of all, brings forth a tragic contrast.

And the confrontation goes deeper when a third image emerges, *girls*. Life is marked by the feminine figure because it is the female herself that gives birth to life. The verb *killed* stands in a *sandwich position* between two notions, both related to life; *fasting* evokes eternal life and salvation in Heaven whereas *girls* (as in females) give continuity to life as we know it, bearing descendants of the generations to come. The verb *killed* is linked in parallel to those two notions so as to prove that the duel between life and death sees the latter being victorious more often.

The image *gnawing on permafrost* is related to the difficulties the nation had in order to survive. The verb *gnaw* shows pain and sacrifice. The hardship of the job (which must be done in whatever circumstances) is described not only semantically but formally also through the use of the sonorous structure of the word itself (which perfectly refers to the image of suffering, thanks to a wonderful find of the translator, H. L. Hix.)

² Underlining here and in the following quotations is mine. M. K.

The word starts with the consonant *g* (silent when pronounced), followed by a nasal consonant, *n*. Then follows vowel *a*, (combined with *w*), is pronounced *o*: (a long *o*). *A* and *O* are similar to each other in the way that they affect the psychic of the receiver. According to Xh. Lloshi, there are associations between “back vowels (a, o, u) and heavy, gloomy and dark thoughts”. (Lloshi 1999: 87)

The adjacent positions of the verb *gnaw* and the name *permafrost* shows that there is no balance between the job done and its provisions. No matter what the amount of energy, sweat and blood are given to permafrost, there is little to expect. If this image represents the difficult history of a nation, then it can easily be deduced that the survival “in the freezing days of the past” is the result of titanic efforts and will. The word *own* connects the above images with the belonging of the speaker. An event related to the history of a nation is told by one of its members.

The above analysis provides results that are not related to a specific period of history, (notorious crusades) but in an interesting way it becomes an evocation of all the tragic past of a nation which is filled with pain, death and the struggle to survive.

Countries like Estonia (or Albania) have fought for their existence through centuries. The war to protect the ethnicity and national values has begun *ab origine*. And the ashes of this war still glow. But there flies the phoenix again, proving that the values of a nation, fighting uncompromisingly against annihilation, extinction, oblivion, can never be wasted away. The images of a continuous struggle against disappearance are prominent in the Narrator’s mind and they come alive through memories of the past.

For thousands of years already we have been
Europeans:
 early tillers, at a time when others, the stronger,
consumed their neighbors, like an insatiable swarm of
grasshoppers
 (Ib.14)

The use of the numeral *thousands* evokes an indefinite period of time which looks like going back to the very beginning of ancient times.

This very long period serves to establish the European identity of Estonia; they have been Europeans since Europe was called Europe and Estonia was named Estonia.

The adverb *already* indicates a certain insistence to expose the above opinion as strongly as possible, concealing another view of history. Voices arise when what we care most is endangered, when the ground upon which we tread feels like quicksand. It is this adverb, *already*, that serves as a key to understanding what we cannot comprehend directly.

The emphasis put upon the fact that Estonians are part of Europe, witnesses their denied truth about the matter. Belonging to the infamous Soviet Union, unjustly extended to more than one continent, Estonia was neither Europe nor Asia.

The antiquity of the country compliments certain noble features of natives. The predecessors of Estonians were working people (tillers) supplying their decent lives, acknowledging survival as a reward for the job well done. We call all this, civilization. This feature turns out to be very commendable when opposed to savage barbarian tribes, hungry-ready to ravage new territories not belonging to them.

The most prominent feature ascribed to strangers is usually power. It characterizes the animal world as well, where the big eat the small, just like in Darwin's theories. This trait stands out particularly well when compared to uncontrolled crowds intent on devastation and the swarm of the grasshoppers, an evil which is impossible to fight.

The history of small countries reminds us of a dramatic literary composition, the most acts of which are written by strangers. *Primordial images*, dating back to history and the past, quite surprisingly coincide with Albania. It does not matter how many miles of border Albania shares with its neighbours. All of them, more than once, have owned pieces of its territories. Apart of them, evil winds many times blew from the East; at one time being called Ottomans with their hegemony lasting five centuries and another labelled Communism which completely isolated the country for forty five years (the subjective time lasting longer because of the violence, terror and fear imposed).

The occupation of small countries does not comprise only their physical territories. The cultural invasion is even worse because the war against it becomes more difficult. This is the case where the enemy is “invisible” so the challenge sometimes looks impossible. Fighting against something you do not see, you do not touch, but you feel it as strange, is not that easy. What are the odds of an efficient defence against it? Close to none. The strange matter sometimes takes shape after the “prophets” of thought, the influence of whom is inevitable, and some other times this impact is imposed on you as a way of thinking and living. Though you do not embrace it, you have to accept the laws and rules of an authoritative country imposing it on you.

In this land the breath of prophets put pressure
on both ears, Hegel, Marx, Lenin, Bakhtin...
Who from the left hand, who from the right, depends
on which side of the map you adopt...

(Ib. 13)

The binomial East-West has always been a companion to Estonia’s history and life.

Hegel or Marx, Lenin or Bakhtin, the difference is a matter of names. Each and every one of them consists of an “invader”. Their theories give shape to viewpoints, thoughts and sometimes to life itself. The two principal classics of Communism (whose thoughts became the philosophy and the motivation of life for many eastern block countries) stand not so randomly between the brilliant “prophets” of thought like Hegel and Bakhtin. Whatever was the influence of communist theories in Estonia, it was destined to perish due to the fact that such an influence was not coming from within as a free choice, but as an imposition from a foreign government.

Nevertheless, the structure *put pressure* (applicable for every name above) indicates that this imposing was not consumed naturally (you choose it because you like it).

To be an intruder in small countries, to culturally master them, or even worse, total assimilation is a process often used by more powerful countries (sometimes unconsciously, other times politically like in the case of Russians in Estonia, Serbs in Kosovo, etc). This

idea is enforced by the connotation of *breath/on both ears*, which give the impression of an obligation to accept the stranger. The real discontent of this "invasion" is not expressed only semantically. Cacophony, made up from the alliteration of the discordant sounds *th, p, f* in the jarring juxtaposition, is purposely used in the poem to emphasize the effect.

This flux of incoming theories, ideas and respectful names surely overshadows the native cultural values. The gifted, originating from small countries, have "to burn the sky" with their talent in order to break through in the eyes and ears of a strict jury, which takes under serious consideration the nationality concept.

Who would notice Schmidt's sweat and soul
 in the lens, piercing into space, that illuminates
 regardless
 or Martens, among the faithful Russian civil servants,
 in the rear of the regiment, without a necktie?(...)
 Then, Peterson, the Estonian Keats taken too young to
 the grave,
 and the father of our song, Kreutzwald, who
 conducted the hero
 of Mary's land to Tartarus, as Vergil did Dante, to
 find love there (...)
 Or the singer of sunrise, Koidula (...)

The giants of thought and art are purposely put close to each other so as to affirm that in every field of life (science, military strategy, literature, music) the Estonians never fell behind.

The challenge to fight the prejudice of belonging to a small country is exceptionally difficult. First of all you have to overcome the communication difficulties (distance and language) and then come the conventions of what the international public expects.

Nationality is like a brand you carry with you with every step, your whole life.

Labels like *Made in Germany, (Britain, France, Spain, Russia* etc) stand behind successful products through the centuries (it even happens that fake products reach the market using such labels).

This is the circumstance when the “end-user” hangs back surprised while reading the label *Made in Estonia* (or even worse, *Made in Albania*) instead of what he expected to get. In most cases refusal comes up due to the stereotype working in his mind, *well-known means good quality whereas unknown means fake*. There are a few of open-minded people who judge the quality without checking the label first, allowing geniuses hidden under “strange names” to unfold their talent.

Who would learn to pronounce their names, or the
even less

sonorous, clumsily compound Tammsaare?

Who would care about his earth-colored proofs

in a language the same as the tongue of Basques,

the nahuatl of Indians, the nonsense of Celts.

(Ib. 15)

Sometimes, having a “small” language in the long list of top spoken languages of the world does not always have a negative connotation. Very ironically, the language and culture of small countries many times hold a rich ancient history compared to those who play an important role in the international arena.

The defined characteristics of the Estonian language are spectacular: 1) it is ancient, 2) it stood up to every invasion for a thousand of years (quite contrary to some other languages that were lost along the way), 3) it is a special branch of the Finno-Ugric family of languages (the first two characteristics coincide with Albanian language too, while it stands quite alone among the Indo-European family of languages).

The “small” Estonian language matches the tongue of the Basques, the nahuatl of Indians, the nonsense of Celts. *Verbal irony* is used because languages considered inferiorly “small” have a precious cultural value. These ancient languages have retained their linguistic identity unchanged in every circumstance. (Although in some case the speakers are just a few)

Even though a great part of the poem evokes the sour past of ancient Estonia, the voice of the poet does not blow wind to the sails

of hatred; he seeks to declare the injustice induced, the long Calvary that has just ended.

No revenge is sought as in *lex talionis*, (an eye for an eye) because the Estonian soul knows how to forgive. Instead, he rather tries to recover the lost time and reclaim those *dark* long centuries of history (the suffering past of Estonia and the infamous saga of European countries' invasions) in order to gain a new era where humanity is the main feature of mankind.

All words bore the zero-sign when
 an Estonian stretched his hand to a drowning Russian,
 when a dry Swede from his scraggy breast
 withdrew warmth to tender it to a freezing Estonian.

(Ib. 16)

Elimination of differences between human beings (*the passport lost - long live liberty*³), defining them by only one characteristic, that of being human, is the perspective Jüri Talvet has for the world. Love, this divine feeling should wrap with her cloak every living organism, because each one of us comes into this world as an offspring of a great love (a divine one).

The poet's position would perfectly find shelter in Ungaretti's periphrasis *M'illumino d'imenso* ("Matina"), a position where negative conventions cease to exist (*enemy, invader, stranger*) and the soul freely roams the unlimited space, where a man is just a man, no other definition needed.

(...) Just so we ask
 of ourselves, we who receive ourselves,
tenderness (more than a name), love (more
 than blood), light (more than bones)

(Ib. 20)

The antagonism between tenderness ≠ name, love ≠ blood, light ≠ bones stands as a proof of the difference between two worlds; the

³ It is a line in Talvet's poem "On Losing a Passport", in *Estonian Elegy. Selected Poems*.

poetic world of dreaming, (where each of us would like to live) and the real world, the painful one, where we wake up in the morning and we lay down to sleep every night. Words, used to create the image of the real world are lined in a descending order: name, blood, bones (from life to death). On the contrary the poetic world of dreaming reaches a climax; words tenderness, love and light are arranged in a continuously ascending order of intensity.

The two final verses of the poem, which may be considered as an advice from the poet to all humanity, are distinctive by the frequent use of the letter E, whose linguistic connotation is mostly positive. According to Xh. Lloshi, “acoustic experiments remark the existence of solid associations among front vowels (*e, i*) which give the impression of harmony, clarity and lyricism”.⁹ (Lloshi 1999: 100)

None of the mentioned past events can ever influence him, because the poet lives above time, relieved from its weight. He is the owner of “hieratic space”, which according to Bachelard has some certain symbols; *wings, ascending, flight, purity and the special glow*.¹⁰ (Bachelard 1942: 83f) The frontal arrangement of nouns; tenderness, love, light which stand for the beloved image of the poet (alongside the antitheses name, blood, bones), is a clear expression of the poet’s decision to live forever. He has chosen his *Locus Amoenus*, the kingdom of love, relieved and fluid as the light itself.

Summary

“Estonian Elegy” is a fascinating poem where the boundaries between epic and lyric merge so naturally that it is hard to identify whether the persona speaking is the poet himself, whose mission is to unfold to the reader (of all times and civilizations) the history and the past of his country, or the sensitive spirit of the poet sublimating his pain through the words of his verse. Such integrating relation between them makes the poem sound subtle and deeply felt. There is no more noble pain than that of the country one belongs to. And it is this feeling (though it may sound old fashioned in the view of our global era of today) that serves as a link among the members of small nations, whose pride builds up their national identity when they sense a lurking menace to their nation.

There are several distinctive stages of the poem:

- 1) It starts as an interior monologue, a struggle to sublimate the utmost feeling of despair.
- 2) The silence (that death left behind) was filled with names and events of the recent or long forgotten past of Estonia. The monologue shifts into an inclusive dialog; the poet strives to communicate with the outer world, in order to denounce the centuries of injustice inflicted upon his beloved mother, Estonia. He emphasizes it by the use of *who would notice*, or *who would care*, like he is standing face to face with the reader to whom he speaks.
- 3) In the final stage the epic slowly turns into the lyric again, but the derived feeling confronts the pain in the introductory stage of the poem. Verses stem from love for all mankind, trying to leave behind the hatred and the pain. "Presence of the absence" (death) dating back to the beginning of times through to the 20th century drives the poet to love life fully. Like Coelho's Ulysses in his *The Zahir*, the poet needs to forget the past in order to reach to the island of love, where the sky is always blue. *Carpe Diem* is his driving force, because life is short and time is flying.

"Estonian Elegy" is an outstanding poem which sheds light on the past history of Estonia and carries messages of love for the future. It was predestined to be written by a Poet Laureate such as Professor Talvet. In his consciousness (probably in his subconsciousness too) he is an appropriate guide because, due to an old toponym of Tartu (*Yuryev, Jurjev* → *Yuri, Jüri*), his name strongly holds a bond to the city representing Estonia, his cultural capital city.

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