

The Reception of Portuguese-language

Literatures in Estonia.

The Historical Context¹

Introduction

This article provides an overview of how Portuguese-language literatures from Portugal, Brazil, Angola and Mozambique that have found their way into Estonian. Because of the small number of books that have been translated, it is possible to look separately at each translation and its historical-cultural context.

The reception of Portuguese-language literatures in Estonia has been fairly limited. The relative youth of Estonian culture could explain why the scope of our interests had not even encompassed all of Europe by the beginning of the 20th century, let alone cultures beyond it. A young culture tends to look for support from its immediate surroundings and only when it becomes more firmly established, its perspectives broaden.

Interest in Spanish studies has increased in Estonia since the country's new independence at the start of the 1990s: Tartu University opened a Spanish Department that rapidly became immensely popular, and the other Estonian universities soon followed suit by offering courses in the Spanish language and culture(s). However, the presence of Portuguese studies is still fairly modest in the academic programs at the beginning of the 21st century.

The data in this article is based upon research from various chronicles in the Estonian National Library and Estonian newspapers and literary journals. In the Estonian reception of Portuguese-language literature, I have distinguished three periods. The first, 1890–1939, begins with the publication of the first translation from

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Portuguese into Estonian. The second is the Soviet period, with its unique rules and systems that shaped translation policy. The third period, 1991–2010, covers the first twenty years of the Estonia's regained independence. Since then, the laws of a free market economy were adopted, which also had a strong influence on translation history.

In addition to the overview of translated works and their respective context, I will study the work of two major translators from Portuguese to Estonian, without whom this article would not have been possible.

1. The Reception of Portuguese-language literatures in Estonia, 1890–1939

The knowledge of the Romance languages was quite limited in Estonia during the first half of the 20th century. French and Spanish were not widely spoken, and Portuguese was even less known. In the 1920s, Estonians perceived Brazil as a marvellous country where newcomers had good opportunities to start a new life. According to official Brazilian statistics, 2593 Estonians emigrated to that country between 1923 and 1930 (earlier data does not differentiate Estonians).

In 1890–1939, there were no direct translations from Portuguese: a few translations into Estonian were made from German or other languages, and the editors made their selections without knowing the background of the author. Stories published in journals often lacked any mention of the language from which the text had been translated, and shorter texts did not even mention the name of the translator. It is usually possible to detect that German or Russian was the intermediary language. There were no novels or collections of poetry from Portugal or Brazil published during the first half of the 20th century, but short stories began to appear in journals.

Most of those stories appeared in the journal *Romaan* (Novel) that contained fiction from around the world – usually inconsequential short stories with elements of soap operas were published, solely for entertainment. H. V. Patera, a Brazilian author, gained

extraordinary popularity. 13 of his stories were published in *Romaan* and other journals at the end of the 1920s and in the early 1930s.

The first literary text ever translated from Portuguese into Estonian appeared in the journal *Laulu ja mängu leht* (The Song and Play Periodical), which was published by Karl August Hermann, a major Estonian literary scholar and composer. It was a sonnet by Luís Vaz de Camões, the 16th century poet and author of the Portuguese national epic.

Literary criticism from 1890 to 1939 contained only one item concerning Portuguese literature: an introductory note about Camões, accompanying the sonnet. However, it is significant for the reception that it occurred quite early – in 1890. The name of the author was not cited, but in all probability it was Karl August Hermann.

2. The Reception of Portuguese-language literature in Estonia, 1944–1990

The second phase of reception started after World War II, when Estonia became part of the Soviet Union. A new ideology was ushered in with the political change which featured a highly normative translation policy. The main aim of the policy was to limit “the decadent influence of the Imperialist West” on Soviet citizens. Strict quotas were introduced for translation.

The quota system stipulated that 45% of translations had to be from Russian, 15% from other Soviet countries, 13% from other socialist countries, and no more than 27% from the rest of the world. From 1940 to 1968, only one Portuguese and two Brazilian novels were translated into Estonian, as compared to eight novels from Spanish. Overall, the quotas were rigorously observed: during the above-mentioned period there were about one thousand books translated from Russian, 250 books from other Soviet republics and slightly more than 800 from the rest of the world (Talvet 1995: 15).

Today, the concept of a centrally planned economy directed by Moscow sounds very bizarre and utterly restrictive, but there was actually a positive aspect to this kind of publishing policy. Such a

selection process served to filter out trivial literature that in market economies tends to prevail at the expense of the more consequential. “Soviet cultural ideology continually restricted [the publication of products of] Western culture and gave priority to translations of older classics of world literature.” (Talvet 2005: 433) A consistent program for translating the canon of classic literary works was developed and followed.

The first book translated from Portuguese into Estonian (with the Russian translation being used as the intermediary) was an exceptionally ideological text about Luis Carlos Prestes, the leader of the Brazilian Communists, written by the extremely popular novelist Jorge Amado in his youth. The year of the translation, 1955, was responsible for the choice of the novel – the 1950s were the first decade of Soviet rule, and there was strong pressure to establish the new ideology. The quality of the translation was very poor and the literary level of the book is lower than that of any of Amado’s other works. Fortunately, some much better translations of his books into Estonian were eventually published. Starting in 1949, when an excerpt of a story by Amado was printed in a newspaper and an introductory article appeared in the literary journal *Looming*, Jorge Amado became one of the favorites of the Soviet Estonian media. This is logical in the light of his leftist views: Amado also became hugely popular in some left-leaning African countries.

In the 1960s, one of the most renowned Estonian translators, Aita Kurfeldt, made her first influential translations from Portuguese: in 1963. She translated one of Jorge Amado’s best known books: *Gabriela, nelk ja kaneel* (Gabriela, Cravo e Canela / Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon) and in 1968, the first important book of Portuguese fiction: *Reliikvia* (A Reliquia / The Relic), by the 19th century classicist, José Maria Eça de Queirós.

Jorge Amado, who was by that time very popular in Brazil, also became well read in Estonia. The first printing of 30 thousand copies in 1963 was followed by a second printing of 40 thousand copies in 1978. In the context of a language that is spoken by fewer than one million people, these numbers are quite remarkable.

Eça de Queirós, the author of *A Reliquia*, the second novel translated from Portuguese into Estonian, is undoubtedly the most

important author of 19th-century Portuguese literature. The choice of the author is therefore logical, but the selection of the novel is debatable. Portuguese critics consider *Os Maias* (The Maias, 1888) his best work. *A Reliquia* (1887, The Relic) is from Eça de Queirós's third period, which has been called decadent and postnaturalist. It is definitely *not* the book for which he is known in his homeland. Nevertheless, "The Relic" is widely read in English and some critics (see Sousa 2001) claim that this novel, with its radical departure from realism, will endure longer than his other works. That argument may have been a factor in Aita Kurfeldt's decision to translate the book; in the preface to *Reliikvia*, she compares Eça de Queirós to Flaubert, and the character, Cousin Basilio, to Madame Bovary. "Just as Flaubert, after writing 'Madame Bovary', escapes from banal everyday life and creates 'Salammbô', Eça writes *A Reliquia*, in which the present and the past, reality and fantasy intertwine." (Kurfeldt 1968: 8)

In addition to disseminating the classics, the Soviet translation policy had another positive aspect: writers from the so-called "revolutionary" and "progressive" cultures were permitted to be translated, and their publishers obtained financing more easily and were allowed to include them in their publishing plans. "Third World" countries were regarded even more favorably, as the Soviet Union wanted to cultivate its image as "the protector of repressed nations" (Talvet 1995: 16). Attempts by African colonial states to become independent were monitored with great enthusiasm. Translating the literature of those countries and other kinds of cultural liaisons were strongly encouraged: several Estonians had the opportunity to visit African countries or meet black poets in Moscow.

A small group of men of letters was formed in Estonia to translate African poetry. The two principal members were Ain Kaalep and Eerik Teder. Both published translations of poems in newspapers and magazines, and in 1964, they assembled an anthology of African poetry. A comprehensive collection *Vabaduskoidiku rütmid* (The Rhythms of the Dawn of Freedom) included poetry from sixteen countries and was accompanied by a long foreword by Eerik Teder that provided a brief introduction to the political background of the countries and to the poets whose work had been translated.

Translating Latin American literature was also encouraged during Soviet times, although not as strongly as African literature. The choice of texts to translate was usually made from among books that had already been translated into Russian.

Soviet domestic and foreign policies also had a direct effect on publishing. During the first decade of Soviet Estonia, the ideology was strongly emphasized: the new rules needed to be instated and the citizens needed to be compelled to follow them. In the 1940s–1950s, almost nothing was translated from Portuguese, including news and short journalistic excerpts. The few pieces that appeared in print had a strong ideological slant: the style was convoluted and the contents were very much in line with Marxist-Leninist thinking.

Conditions were relaxed at the beginning of the 1960s, during the administration of Nikita Khrushchev. African poetry began to be translated, and the literary magazine *Keel ja Kirjandus* (Language and Literature) published an article on “The Literary Situation in Brazil” in 1966. Literary news, poems, short stories and excerpts from novels by Portuguese authors were now translated. 1968 was an important year for the reception of Portuguese literature: besides the publication of the novel by Eça de Queirós, in Aita Kurfeld’s translation, a selection of Fernando Pessoa’s poems appeared in Ain Kaalep’s translation in the literary magazine *Looming*.

Brezhnev’s tenure as General Secretary of the Communist Party (1964–1982) was marked by attempts to curtail the relative liberalism of the first half of the 1960s. It was still not permitted to translate Kafka or Pasternak. But, little by little, the situation eased. In the 1970s, the process of translation became less tightly controlled and relied less on Russian editions. The larger libraries in Moscow stocked more books from abroad. People also received books by means of personal contacts. Thus books sent to the Estonian translator Ain Kaalep by Ivar Ivask (an Estonian poet and scholar living in the United States, long-time editor of the journal *Books Abroad / World Literature Today*) were important sources of Kaalep’s knowledge about Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American literature, and influenced his future selections of works to be translated (Talvet 1995: 19–21; Kaalep 2006).

The publication of *Autopsühhograafia* (Autopsicografia, Auto-psychography), a 1973 collection of poems by Fernando Pessoa and his three heteronyms, was a milestone in the history of Estonian translation. Although the little booklet became famous, its publication was met by complete silence on the part of newspapers and journals. The silence persisted for many years. However, *Autopsühhograafia* was noticed, and widely read and discussed. Many Estonian poets, such as Tõnu Õnnepalu and Doris Kareva, have acknowledged that they were influenced by Pessoa. Mats Traat even wrote a poem called “Pessoast inspireeritud” (Inspired by Pessoa).

Ain Kaalep discovered Fernando Pessoa in a French literary magazine that named him as one of the major European poets of the 20th century. In 1968, Kaalep published the nucleus of his collection, translations of seven important poems, in the literary journal *Looming*. In so doing, he departed from the principle that he later used for compiling the larger collection: the best examples from each of the heteronyms used by Fernando Pessoa. Kaalep’s choices provide a good overview of the nature of each heteronym.

Two Brazilian children’s books were also translated into Estonian during the Soviet era: *Kollase rähni ordu* (Picapau Amarelo / The Yellow Woodpecker Ranch) by Monteiro Lobato in 1964, and *Võlurpoiss* (O Menino Mágico / The Magic Boy) by Rachel de Queiroz in 1978. The former was translated by Hilja Välipõllu from a Russian version by Inna Tõnjanova, so it was twice distanced from the original Portuguese. The final product was nevertheless easy to read and well suited to children. However, the latter book, *Võlurpoiss*, is from the 1970s, when the translation process was becoming more independent. Aita Kurfeldt’s translation was directly from the Portuguese and is of excellent quality.

These two authors, especially Lobato, were ideologically acceptable: both were leftist, and Lobato had even opposed the right-wing dictatorship and been imprisoned for his political views. Both of the books were of good literary quality and, in the case of *Võlurpoiss*, the publishing house has already managed to circumvent the obligatory, moralizing, accompanying text.

In 1974, another children’s book was published that included a few translations from Portuguese. A collection of African short

stories called *Isa, mamba ja mina* (Father, Mamba and Me) was assembled by Andres Jaaksoo; it was intended for “older school-children” but it could also have appealed to adults who were interested in African ways of life. The stories from seventeen African countries, among them Angola and Mozambique, give an interesting insight into the life of ordinary people in those countries. Several are not universal children’s stories that could have transpired anywhere in the world, but are quite specific to the locations where the events of the story took place.

Eerik Teder’s collection of African poetry *Vabaduskoidiku rütmid* (The Rhythms of the Dawn of Freedom, 1964) is a comprehensive overview of African poetry in the 1960s. Teder and other translators used every collection of African poetry they could find to put the book together. There are poems from fifteen countries in all, among them Angola and Mozambique. The biggest selection of poems comes from Angola: when the book was published in 1964, the only remaining European colonies were Portuguese. The translations are of good quality, and the Portuguese poems were translated by Eerik Teder and Ain Kaalep. Kaalep recalled in a 2006 interview that because African poets were viewed favorably by Soviet authorities, control was not so stringent and it was possible to create an “ideological diversion”: in some of the translations, Kaalep and Teder used free verse, which was not officially favored. “This helped considerably to subsequently improve and renew Estonian poetry,” Ain Kaalep comments in retrospect.

A collection of poems titled *Püha lootus* (Sagrada Esperança / Holy Hope, 1980), also translated by Kaalep and Teder, paid homage to their Angolan author and freedom fighter, Agostinho Neto, who had passed away a year before. Neto and Fernando Pessoa are the only Portuguese-language poets whose works were translated as separate books in Estonian. The afterword of *Püha lootus* is an excursion into the closely intertwined political and literary history of Angola.

After the Portuguese revolution in 1974, the Soviet Union intensified its contacts with the leftist political forces of Portugal. It was even possible to buy Portuguese newspapers at Estonian newsstands. However, there was still no official opportunity to study

Portuguese language or literature in Estonia during the Soviet period. It was possible to take correspondence courses from the Center for Distance Learning in Moscow, or to study it at Moscow University or a few other major universities of the Soviet Union. At the beginning of the 1980s, Margit Moritz, a student at Tartu State University, was permitted to study Portuguese at the University of Vilnius (with a private docent there). She was probably the only Tartu University student ever to graduate with a thesis in Portuguese: *Fernando Pessoa e a sua obra poética* (Fernando Pessoa and his poetic works); her supervisor was Ain Kaalep.

In the same year that *Autopsühhograafia* was published, Aita Kurfeldt translated one of the most important novels of 19th century Brazilian literature: *Dom Casmurro* by Machado de Assis. The work, an outstanding analysis of jealousy, was an avant-garde novel far ahead of its time. Machado de Assis is considered to be the most important Brazilian novelist of the 19th century.

In the 1970s, Ain Kaalep and others began to publish translations of Brazilian poetry in newspapers. Their attention shifted away from the African war poets. In 1976 and 1980, a collection of two volumes of poetry translated by Ain Kaalep was published. The second volume, *Peegelmaastikud* (Mirror Landscapes II, 1980), contains his best translations of Pessoa and some Brazilian poets, accompanied by comments.

Two significant shorter novels were added to the list of translations in the 1980s. In 1984, the Loomingu Raamatukogu series published *Pühapäeva õhtupoolikul* (Domingo a Tarde / Sunday Afternoon) by Fernando Namora, a book that was very popular in Portugal in the 1960s. The other short novel, also translated by Meelike Palli, was published in the same series in 1986. *Quincas Vesikuradi kolm surma* (A Morte e a Morte de Quincas Berro d'Água / The Two Deaths of Quincas Wateryell) by Jorge Amado was another excellent choice for translation. This genial text is a paean to the relativity of truth. The “facts” and fiction are so intertwined that the reader cannot be sure about what “really” happened.

3. Reception of Portuguese-language literatures in Estonia 1991–2010

The publishing situation changed radically after Estonia regained its independence. The ideological barriers suddenly vanished and the whole world opened up. There was immense curiosity and a desire to take part in everything that had previously not been permitted, but economic opportunities were scant, as was the knowledge of how to survive in the Western publishing market. The price of books began to rise rapidly at the beginning of the 1990s, and book sales and newspaper circulation started to shrink. Books were not quite luxury items, but neither were they common purchases. Publishing houses had to adjust their principles for making publishing decisions. They quickly grasped that in a market economy, a book is a commodity like any other, and the most important task is to find a book that will sell. Anglo-American culture seeped into all facets of life and the balance shifted strongly towards translations from English. Translating literature from less widespread languages became the private interest of a chosen few.

There was an extremely small number of translations from Portuguese in 1990s, the percentage of works of good literary quality is very low. The first 1990s translation, *Tuparize mõõk* (*Tupariz / The Sword of Tupariz*), a collection of short stories by Vítorio Kali, translated by Margit Levoll, Siivi Sarap and Anneli Tuulik, appeared only in 1999 in the series *Loomingu Raamatukogu*. The stories are not of outstanding literary merit – critics in neither Estonia nor Portugal have spoken highly of them.

The 1990s brought to Estonia a second wave of interest in the work of Fernando Pessoa, although no books appeared in print as yet. The literary journals *Vikerkaar* and *Looming* published quite a few new translations of his poems by Ain Kaalep, Tõnu Õnnepalu, Anneli Tuulik and Jüri Talvet. The learned journal *Akadeemia* featured a story by Pessoa: *Anarhistist pankur* (*O banqueiro anarquista / The Anarchist Banker*) translated by Maarja Kaplinski; *Vikerkaar* published excerpts from *Rahutuste raamat* (*Livro de desassossego / The Book of Disquiet*) translated by Tõnu Õnnepalu.

Livro de desassossego is the most singular work of the non-conformist author.

Merimees (O marinheiro / The Seaman) is the only play that Pessoa completed (in 1913). The author referred to it as an “anti-” or “static” drama. It was translated into Estonian in 2001 by Anneli Tuulik, a member of a small group of people who had started learning Portuguese at the Estonian Humanitarian Institute (now part of Tallinn University) in the 1990s. A short introductory note accompanying the text states that *O marinheiro* is a drama that takes place in the soul, in complete isolation and denial of reality. It speaks of “a soul escaping to its dreams and its past as its only chance for happiness” (Pessoa 2001a: 874). Despite the fact that the topic does not appear suitable for a play, the work has been staged in many languages in many countries. Anneli Tuulik’s translation was also produced in Estonia at Theatrum, a small theatre in Tallinn. The performances were well received and the production conformed to Pessoa’s concept of static theatre.

The next most popular long poem by Fernando Pessoa after *Ode marítima* (Ode to the Sea) is “Tabacaria” (The Tobacco Shop), which is still frequently cited at literary gatherings in Portugal. It was first translated into Estonian in 2001, the same year as *O marinheiro*. The translator, Jüri Talvet, explained that he chose to translate this text because it occupied second place in a list Brazilian literary critics had compiled of the best poems of all time from all over the world (Talvet in: Pessoa 2001b: 983).

By the end of the second decade of independent Estonia the time was ripe for publishing the fruits of work completed over a long period. In 2009 and in 2010 two collections of poems by Fernando Pessoa appeared in print, the first translated by Tõnu Õnnepalu and the second by Ain Kaalep, Jüri Talvet, Maarja Kaplinski and Anneli Tuulik.

Tõnu Õnnepalu translated only poems by Álvaro de Campos, one of the four main heteronyms of Pessoa, and picked mostly poems written during the last years of Pessoa’s life. In an afterword of the book titled *Tubakapood* (Tabacaria / Tobacco Shop) Õnnepalu explains that this is not a “best of” but a very personal choice of poems that “talked to him”. Õnnepalu also notes, that in his opinion

the texts signed by Álvaro de Campos form the best and most mature part of Pessoa's works. One of the reviewers expresses an opinion that this is not an anthology of a big poet but "a personal relationship of an Estonian poet with one of his favourite writers" (Kaevats 2010). The poems appear both in Portuguese and Estonian, offering a possibility to compare the original version with the translation.

Sõnum. Valik loomingut (A Message. Selected Work) was put together by Jüri Talvet and Ain Kaalep, translated by Ain Kaalep, Maarja Kaplinski, Jüri Talvet ja Anneli Tuulik. It includes all the poems translated by Kaalep in *Autopsühhograafia* (1973), with additions provided by Talvet's translations (of Álvaro de Campos's poems), parts from *Livro de desassossego* written under the heteronym of Bernardo Soares, the story *O banqueiro anarquista* and the short play *O marinheiro*. This wider choice of Pessoa's work is the first one in Estonia serving the purpose of inviting a reader to have a thorough look into the rich and varied world of the Portuguese genius. One of the reviewers called the book a bit eclectic (Kangro 2010) but that seems to also be its strength: *Sõnum* builds a bridge between the historically important debut of Pessoa in Estonian culture and the newer reception. It also points to the different directions where a more thorough reader or future translator of Pessoa could continue the work.

The two books complement each other well in the receiving culture, providing a wider overview and a closer insight into a certain period of Pessoa's works. It also provides an excellent opportunity for comparative translation studies. Besides, both books contain significant and extensive introductory essays, respectively by Tõnu Õnnepalu and Jüri Talvet.

The two closer reviews of the collections were written by two young Estonian poets and translators of poetry: Maarja Kangro and Mariliin Vassenin. Kangro introduces *Sõnum* and brings the reader onto the doorstep of the multi-faceted and rich world of Pessoa. Vassenin compares the two collections on the level of translation choices. She concentrates on the work of Õnnepalu but also shows how his choices tend to differ from those made by Kaalep and Talvet and how this reveals their different styles of translation. Both books

include a translation of “Tabacaria”. The reviewers detect different interpretations of some parts of the poem by the translators.

The reception of the two new collections revive the earlier translations. Thus Rein Veidemann mentions that the publishing of *Autopsühhograafia* in 1973 influenced very strongly his worldview (Veidemann 2010), Maarja Kangro puts the relatively early entrance of Pessoa into Estonian culture into the European context (Kangro 2010). Veidemann in his review calls Estonian poet Juhan Liiv “the Estonian Pessoa”, using a comparison of the two poets made by Jüri Talvet.

In 2000, news of the bestselling author Paulo Coelho reached Estonia and his books started to be translated one after another. The third period of reception is dominated by Paulo Coelho – he is without a doubt the Portuguese-language writer who is most discussed in the Estonian media.

The works of Paulo Coelho arrived in Estonia a little later than the rest of Europe. “Coelho-mania” only really began when the publishing house Philos, which makes good use of marketing and media relations, started to publicize Coelho and conducted an advertising campaign in connection with the printing of a second edition of *Alkeemik* (Alquimista). In 2000–2010, eleven Coelho novels were translated and ten of his stories published in women’s magazines. Between 1990 and 2005, Brazilian literature was the topic of 28 articles in the Estonian media. Only two of the 28 are not about Paulo Coelho or his books. Despite the large number of references to Coelho, a professional critical discourse is nearly absent, the literary magazines are silent about his work, and newspaper critics do not analyze them, but typically provide a brief negative opinion with little explanation.

It is interesting that the most thorough discussion of the Coelho phenomenon appeared years before the first translation of his works. In 1998, the Estonian orientalist translator, Haljand Udam, wrote an article entitled “Euroopa loeb muinasjuttu” (Europe is reading a fairy-tale) for the Estonian weekly newspaper, *Eesti Ekspress*, introducing a fashionable new writer who had already been a hit in Paris and Rome for some years. Udam expressed his doubts whether Coelho’s books would be worth translating, because, in his opinion,

Estonians lacked the background necessary to understand pilgrimage or alchemy, central themes in Coelho's works (Udam 1998). The Coelho phenomenon in Estonia has occasioned debates about book sales tactics, the relationship between self-help books and "real" literature, and the author's presence in his works, etc.

A Portuguese author who did receive media attention was José Saramago, not because of his books but because he won the Nobel Prize in 1998. Daily newspapers tried to provide timely reports about the ceremony and allotted some space for Estonian writers to introduce his works. In his article, Jüri Talvet compared Saramago with the Estonian writer Jaan Kross (who had been presented as a candidate for the Nobel Prize many times but had never received it). The Estonian poet and essayist Jaan Kaplinski wrote about his meeting with the great Portuguese author at the World Literature Academy. Judging by the media reports, it is reasonable to say that the writer was not well known in Estonia at the end of the 20th century.

Beyond doubt enhanced by Nobel Prize Saramago got a chance to enter into Estonian culture: *Pimedus* (Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira / Blindness) by José Saramago, was translated by Mare Vega Salamanca in 2007 and appeared in the series of books by Nobel Prize winners. *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* first appeared in print in 1995 and has become one of the most important out of Saramagos 16 novels. It provides harsh social criticism, describing something that might be called "social blindness" through a metaphor of an epidemic that makes people blind. The author has said that the writing process was terrible and painful and he wishes the readers to re-live his pain.

Surprisingly enough a well-done translation of an influential book did not manage to get much attention in Estonian media. Judging by the silence in newspapers, literary journals and even blogs, the earlier phenomenon – everybody says Saramago is good, but very few have read him – seemed to continue. Only the weekly papers *Eesti Ekspress* and *Sirp* published very short introductory notes, the latter just mentioning that the book appeared in print and the publishing house did not send a free copy to the newspapers. Occasionally *Pimedus* was also shortly mentioned in film reviews of "Blindness", by the Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles, based on

the book. The death of José Saramago in June 2010 received more attention in Estonian media than the translation of *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*.

4. The key factor: Portuguese–Estonian translators

In a small culture such as Estonian, subjective reception factors – the translators’ personal choices, tastes, experience and networks – become extremely important. It is often possible to pinpoint the exact reasons for the selection of a translation, because those decisions were based on a combination of subjective factors, rather than the less transparent decision-making processes of more institutionalized translation units (such as big editing departments in larger countries).

In the short history of translations from Portuguese to Estonian, there are two outstanding names: Ain Kaalep and Aita Kurfeldt. Portuguese was not the principal foreign language for either of them, but by virtue of their talent and hard work they managed to make a worthy introduction of Portuguese-language literature in Estonian culture. Ain Kaalep primarily translates poetry, while Aita Kurfeldt translated prose works during her lifetime. More Portuguese translators, such as Tõnu Õnnepalu, Jüri Talvet, Maarja Kaplinski and Meelike Palli, have emerged in the last two or three decades, but Ain Kaalep and Aita Kurfeldt have made the most significant contribution to this field until now.

Aita Kurfeldt (1901–1979) was a multi-faceted, talented and creative individual. She brought many influential works from various languages into the Estonian literary world. Aita Kurfeldt was one of the first translators in Estonia who started to write detailed afterwords to accompany her translations. She authored one of the few monographic books ever written by an Estonian about world literature, *Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra* in 1934 (Talvet 1995), as well as an article about the Portuguese national epic *Os Lusíadas* in the literary journal *Looming* (Kurfeldt 1973). She wrote informative afterwords for her most important translations from Portuguese, *Gabriela, nelk ja kaneel* by Jorge Amado (in Estonian, 1963), *Reliikvia* (The Relic) by Eça de Queiros (in Estonian, 1968) and *Dom Casmurro* by Machado de Assis (in Estonian, 1973).

Võlurpoiss (The Magic Boy), the children's book by Rachel de Queiroz, came to Kurfeldt by way of Ivar Ivask, an Estonian literary scholar living in United States, and her fellow Portuguese translator, Ain Kaalep. Ivask used to send huge boxes of books to Kaalep, who selected some and mailed others to Kurfeldt, accompanied by occasional notes suggesting that a particular book be translated into Estonian.

Ain Kaalep was born in Tartu in 1926; he graduated from Tartu University in 1956 with a major in Finno-Ugric languages. In addition to translating a huge body of work, he is also a poet, dramatist, critic, essayist, and professor. His translations from the literatures of many different countries reveal a fairly wide spectrum of interests. In addition to Portuguese, he has also translated from German, French, Spanish, Russian, Latvian, Tajik, Uzbek, Ukrainian, Greek, Latin, Finnish, Bulgarian, Polish and Turkish.

Jüri Talvet emphasizes Kaalep's importance in introducing the literature of the Iberian peninsula and South America. His most important translation from Portuguese is the above mentioned *Autopsühhograafia* (1973), a selection of poems by Fernando Pessoa and his three heteronyms – Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos and Ricardo Reis. His introduction of many Brazilian poets to Estonian readers was also an extremely important achievement.

Although Ain Kaalep considers himself to be an intellectual brand of poet, as do others, his selections of translations reveal another aspect. He has translated Spanish and Portuguese poets whose work emanates more from the heart than the intellect. Jüri Talvet commented that this ambivalence makes Ain Kaalep a soul-mate of other humanists of wide scope, among whom one of the most original was the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa.

If a translation lacks an intelligent commentary and foreword explaining the cultural context there is a danger that the reception will be limited, retarding the progress of the receiving culture. Ain Kaalep was among the first, along with Aita Kurfeldt, who made it a rule rather than an exception to accompany the text with explanatory comments. The essays he published in addition to his translated texts reached their zenith from the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s (Talvet 2001).

His interest in translating from Portuguese started with African poets. “We had a small active group; Eerik Teder, for example, translated through Russian. We managed to meet some of the African poets personally in Moscow,” recalled Ain Kaalep in a 2006 telephone interview. By the time Kaalep started translating the war poetry of the Angolan Agostinho Neto, he was already translating from Portuguese without assistance. In 1980, a book of Neto’s poems became the first, and up to the present time (2011), the only book entirely dedicated to the work of an African poet ever translated from Portuguese to Estonian.

Paradoxically, Ain Kaalep did not value poetry written in Portuguese very highly at that time. “Portuguese is a language with international currency, and Portugal has always participated in global cultural movements, but compared to the other three Romance nations – France, Italy and Spain –Portuguese literature has always made a more modest contribution to world culture.” (Kaalep 1968: 1240) He offers the explanation that Portugal’s position on the edge of Europe made them more interested in exotic overseas countries, such as those of South America, Africa and the Far East, than in those of their own, more indistinctly perceived, continent (ib.).

In 1998, it was obvious that Ain Kaalep, commenting in the Estonian daily *Eesti Päevaleht* on the Portuguese writer, José Saramago, having received the Nobel Prize in literature, had radically changed his opinion of Portuguese literature in the intervening 30 years. “We welcome the fact that Portuguese literature has finally received well-deserved recognition that its role in world literature is no less important than British, French or Spanish; it simply escaped our attention.” (Kaalep 1998)

During an interview conducted in 2006, Ain Kaalep said that he considered African Portuguese-language poetry insufficiently intriguing to require immediate translation, but in his opinion there was enough worthy material in Brazilian poetry. He was ready to publish a collection of poems by Carlos Drummond de Andrade, if he could find a willing publishing house.

Conclusions

The reception of Portuguese-language literature in Estonia has always been quite modest. At the beginning of the 20th century, this could be explained by the lack of cultural contacts; a century later, at a time when Estonia and Portugal are both members of the European Union and Brazil is a rising super-power, it is more difficult to explain that phenomenon.

Only two books by the 19th century masters have been translated and none of their contemporaries have been introduced to Estonia. A couple of books by two popular 20th century Brazilian authors (Jorge Amado and Paulo Coelho) have been translated. The extremely diverse, interesting and vibrant 20th century fiction from Brazil is still completely unknown to Estonian readers. One unfortunate reason is that many of the wonders of Brazilian literature have also not been translated into English, and thus remain unknown to the rest of Europe and the US. Likewise Portuguese modernist poetry, Pessoa excepted, remains unknown in Estonia.

Some Brazilian poetry was introduced in Estonia through the work of Ain Kaalep. No collection of works of a Brazilian poet has yet been published in a separate book.

African prose and poetry were important for political reasons in the 1960s–1970s in the Soviet Union. However, Estonian readers have had nearly no opportunity to read anything new from Angola or Mozambique in the last 30 years – the only piece that has been translated is the fairy tale *Kaval kass* (The Clever Cat) for the newsletter of the Estonian Farmers Union in 1995. During this period, the works of the Mozambican avant-garde author, Mia Couto, have been translated into more than ten languages. The Angolan language reformer, José Luandino Vieira, is better and more widely known; José Eduardo Agualusa is a best-selling author, and new young writers keep emerging, transforming the colorful history of their countries into a diversity of literature.

Translation policy has been very closely tied to historical circumstances. It is commonly believed in independent Estonia that everything was worse during Soviet times. But the numbers actually show that the strict translation quotas and the principle of avoiding

commercial mass literature were responsible for classical literature being published more easily. Since Estonia's independence, nearly everything except for mass literature in English escaped the attention of the new commercial publishing houses in the 1990s. Only the best-selling author, Paulo Coelho, has managed to fight his way into Estonian and garner much attention.

From 1890 to the present time, the global attitude towards Portuguese-language literatures has changed radically. After a long pause, the important Portuguese authors Pessoa and Saramago have emerged on the world stage, and this has helped to improve the general attitude towards Portuguese-language literature. There is some interest in translating the works of other authors writing in Portuguese into the major translation language of the world, English. I hope that this revival of interest will also give rise to more translations into Estonian.

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