

*The Lingering Journey of Poetry from “Peripheries”
to “Centres”: the Estonian Case of F. R. Kreutzwald’s
Epic Kalevipoeg (1861) and Juhan Liiv’s (1864–1913)
Lyrical Work*

Despite its contradictory character and being refuted by most radical international left-wing movements, globalization has become one of the basic world phenomena since the last quarter of the past century. For the time being, it seems to continue, though the recent global economic crisis has produced at least in some parts of the world quite surprising responses. There is evidence in several countries that people in times of crisis spend less money on buying material goods and, on the contrary, buy more books and visit libraries more often. The former fact has been echoed by the press of Spain and the latter by the public media of my country, Estonia.

However, one should be cautious, and not hurry drawing too hasty conclusions: also, it can simply be a form of escapism. People try to forget everyday worries by plunging into the fancy world offered by books and journals. The fact that they read more does not mean at all that they read now good literature sharpening their aesthetic sensibility or social awareness. The invention of book-printing in the middle of the 15th century meant an enormous radical leap in turning middle and even lower classes of Western societies into a potential reading public. As book-printing, like any technique, immediately spread all over Europe and the rest of the world, the book-sellers discovered that the new reading public was not at all interested only in absorbing religious books, like the Bible, but was deeply attracted by much lighter literature, like chivalric romances. These books became a great fashion, their adventurous and amorous spirit coinciding with the big Western adventure of conquering the New Continent.

By the time Cervantes published his *Don Quixote* (1605–1615), the fall of the Spanish monarchy had started. The romances of chivalry were close to their final days, as a genre. They had exhausted themselves, becoming empty in the aesthetic and perceptual sense. However, they still served masses of people as a

means of escape from reality. In fact, the first powerful emergence in the closing days of the Renaissance of mass literature, embodied first and foremost by romances of chivalry, can greatly be explained by the fact that the broadest possible reading public started to become aware of a new vast source of comfort and refuge in the valley of existential misery.

The basic function of mass literature, flourishing in our days of globalization, remains the same. It still serves in the first place as a refuge for the bigger part of those who care to read. Thus it is not a mere entertainment, but a part of the existential challenge.

I thus do not reject mass literature as such. It has its important function in keeping societies in movement and maybe even sustaining a certain optimism in life, as a part of the commercial globalization of goods. It creates an illusion that life can be acceptably good in any part of the world. The archetypes and stereotypes of such literature are mostly invented by the most astute writers of Western countries and, especially, the U.S. They are massively translated, imported and spread in any part of the world, while the native writers of smaller countries and communities do their best to imitate these stereotypes. I do not rule out that sometimes imitations can be quite talented. Like the archetypal originals, they successfully meet the function of creating existential refuge spots for the readers of their countries.

Now I come to my main theme. As a writer, translator and cultural scholar who has spent the first phase of his creative life in a country under the autocratic Soviet regime, and has still been continuing his creative efforts for nearly two decades in liberal conditions of a democratic Western-type society, I can observe from my personal experience that beside a massive reading public any society still seems to have a minority that is reluctant to absorb mass culture. It expects from the creators of its country or from international creators of arts and literature something more than merely a targeted perpetuation of certain stereotypes, a kind of a second- or third-rate creation. Under democracies – if ever we speak of true democracies – this minority, however tiny it is – should not be neglected or undervalued. It carries on a deeper sensibility of any society, it is the least putrefied spiritual and intellectual core of all communities.

Poetry is still the very nucleus of creation in the sense that at its best it does not easily surrender to imitation or simulacrums. As any creation it belongs to a cultural and poetic tradition, but every concrete outstanding work is the result of an artistic “explosion“, which can only be explained *a posteriori*, it means that

no theory can be built for its serial reproduction.¹ Besides, even a very talented imitation in this field still remains a mere imitation, which, as soon as it is identified, loses something of its brilliance. Thus Mats Traat, a renowned Estonian prose writer and poet, has reproduced in his cycle of poems *Harala elulood* (1976) a collective saga composed of individual life-stories, in the spirit of *danse macabre*, letting his characters after having passed away look back at their lives and make a confession from the entrance-hall of Hell. From "inside" Estonian literature it is a considerable achievement. However, as soon as we contextualize Traat's poetic cycle in the wider field of Western poetry, we immediately identify it as a copy of E. L. Masters's *Spoon River* poetic saga, written half a century earlier.

Thus inimitable artistic "explosions", creating novelty, still seem to be the very core of what we call the canon of world literature.

That canon, naturally, has never been anything "objective" or scientifically constructed. Its source mechanism has been philosophically orientated criticism in major Western cultural areas, English, French and German, above all. The "factor of casualty", in Yuri Lotman's terms (Лотман 1992a), has been in full vigour in the canon-building process. It has always presupposed a happy meeting and a fruitful dialogue at some determined historical moments of great literary works, on the one hand, and sharp minds capable of distinguishing the novelty and excellence of these works, on the other.

Postmodern criticism, championed by French thinkers, has endeavoured to magnify the role of criticism, imagining it almost as something superior to the primary act of creation in literature.

From my point of view, both are equally important. Rather, the act of recognition of novelty is *symbiotic*: it indeed depends greatly on criticism, but its embryo is still deeply in reality, constituting the differing quality. It is like a subterranean explosion: it cannot be perceived by common minds; it has to be discovered by some special sensibility, congenial with artistic creation itself.

For that reason, in the times of romanticism and still until the start of the 20th century, the greatest literary critics were poets and writers, and not professionally formed literary scholars. German philosophers and intellectuals of the end of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century played a key role in establishing what is now known as the canon of world literature. Nearly all of them were also writers themselves.

¹ I rely here on the ideas expressed by Yuri M. Lotman in his late book *Culture and Explosion*: Лотман 1992b.

After the scientific turn, marking in the West the start of the post-romantic era, criticism has gradually been turned into scientific activity. It has greatly undervalued the factor of intuition and taste, which nonetheless constitute the core of aesthetic and perceptual appreciation. Besides, a feature inherent in natural and exact sciences is specialization. Scientists, whatever the talk about interdisciplinary research, are basically *fachleute*, with a strong specialization in a determined area. This attitude has been mechanically transferred and adapted to humanities. Comparative literary research has always been under a strong pressure at Western universities, as something vague and useless. Instead, literary research has been carried on by *fachleute*, indeed, quite well educated in theory, but with failing knowledge of literary and cultural processes beyond a restricted national or linguistic area. The result is that we have a great number of cultural and literary scholars capable of detailed analysis of a concrete literary work or phenomenon, but very poorly prepared to appreciate deeper changes taking place in the wider area of world literature, as well as to discover authentic novelty in literary creation.

It means that even in major literary areas there are considerable difficulties in identifying novelty, not to speak of the vast area of world culture which has deserved the somewhat deprecating feature of “periphery”.

Yuri Lotman in his above mentioned book *Culture and Explosion* has claimed that the natural conditions of the periphery may favour artistic and cultural “explosions” even to a greater extent than “centric” processes, which are inclined to be controlled and homogenized by man’s mental and intellectual activity.

But how to make these artistic explosions visible to the wider world? How to make them enrich the cognition and widen the spiritual and intellectual horizons of humankind?

In the field of music, visual arts and cinema, it is by no means simple, but it is still possible. The work of the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt has in recent decades gained a considerable international audience. His music is intentionally universal. Another outstanding Estonian composer, Veljo Tormis, often considered equal to Pärt in Estonia, has more difficulty crossing Estonian borders. The strength and originality of his music can easily be grasped outside Estonia. However, his music derives almost exclusively from the ethnic Estonian source, the Finno-Ugric traditional folk poetry. Sounds alone, unfortunately, are incapable of translating the integral power of Tormis’s music, in which the meaning of the words, as well as the typical alliteration of the folksongs have an irreducible part.

What to do with poetry? Is it irreversibly fated to be untranslatable from one ethnic and language area to the other? Tens of arguments can be found in favour of denying the possibility of translating poetry. The proverbial "lost in translation" is especially applicable to poetry. I would call lyrical poetry a kind of an "intra-genre" of any national literature. It is almost inalienable from the source language. Yet it remains a fact that despite all warnings on the part of theoreticians, poetry is still being widely translated all over the world. But whose poetry? Once again, one has to admit that the process has been, in rough lines, extremely one-sided, strongly biased in favour of the Western centres.

From the Estonian experience I can provide evidence that nearly all major authors of Western and world poetry have found their way into the Estonian language. Despite the fact that Estonian (one of the Finno-Ugric languages), having a great number of individual noun and verb forms, has much more limited rhyme possibilities than those offered by Romance and also some major Indo-European languages, like English, German and Russian, there still exist highly successful examples of rhymed poetry in Estonian translation. Thus it is even possible that Ants Oras's Estonian translation (1931) of E. A. Poe's famous poem "The Raven", in the use of both interior rhymes and end-rhymes might surpass in its final effect the original English poem!

We have in Estonian two complete (and competing) translations of Goethe's *Faust*, a complete translation of the Icelandic *Older Edda*, of the German *Nibelungenlied*, of at least the most famous verse novellas of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, as well as *Kogutud teosed* (The Complete Works) of Shakespeare, following in everything original metrics, rhythm and rhyme patterns. Some years ago I myself edited a major anthology of American poetry in Estonian (*Ameerika luule antoloogia* 2007). With its nearly forty poets included – from Poe, Whitman and Dickinson till the end of the 20th century –, and more than five hundred pages, it is most probably one of the largest anthologies of American poetry ever published beyond the English language area. The work of eighteen translators, most of them poets themselves, alive or dead, was involved in the anthology.

No doubt, similar achievements could be found in other smaller cultural and linguistic areas and those included in the imaginary cultural "periphery". Besides, the process from the centres to peripheries has not been limited to mere translations. Thus, the works of major Western poets have always been taught at Estonian schools and universities. As we teach at Tartu University a general comparative course of Western literary history, it is not rare at all that besides students of humanities, also young people specializing in natural or

exact sciences take part in these courses, often excelling in their interest and capacity of analysis.

What about the process in the opposite direction, from peripheries to centres? One may be pretty sure that at any bookshop of North-America, Great Britain, France and Germany translated poetry books from the European periphery, like Eastern or even Northern Europe, constitutes a tiny minority. Just as Harold Bloom's monograph *The Western Canon* is strongly biased in favour of writers working in the English language, the editing language area also tends to determine the choice of authors in international literary dictionaries. Dictionaries edited in U.S. and U.K. generally give their strong preference to authors writing in English, German-edited dictionaries make stand forth writers working in German, the French dictionaries favour literature created in the Francophone area. The recent major effort under the auspices of the International Comparative Literature Association, *Romantic Prose Fiction* (Eds. G. Gillespie, M. Engel, B. Dieterle), a vast collective monograph valuably enlarging the existing knowledge of an important phenomenon of world literature, has already provoked some severe criticism. One of its main failures is that it leaves us with the impression that everything valuable and worthy of analysis in Romanticism was created exclusively in major Western language areas (Virk 2010).

Kreutzwald and Liiv

In broad terms, it is the background on which I will try in the following to characterize the lingering journey into the canon of world literature of the work of two major Estonian authors, Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803–1882) and Juhan Liiv (1864–1913). The former is known as the founder of Estonian literature and above all, as the creator of *Kalevipoeg*, an epic in twenty songs (1861), generally labelled as the “Estonian national epic”. By the present day, *Kalevipoeg* has been translated into a number of Western languages, the latest important translation being in French, in 2004 (by Antoine Chalvin, in Gallimard) and a second English translation, in 2011 (by Triinu Kartus, a late Estonian poet in the Australian exile; the book was published in Estonia). Yet the position of *Kalevipoeg* inside Estonian literature remains polemical, while in the international reception, though being included in dictionaries of literature, it has not become actualized as an object of international criticism and research.

Juhan Liiv is for many Estonians, including myself, the greatest lyrical poet of Estonia. It is my deep conviction that Kreutzwald and Liiv deserve to occupy

a worthy place in the active canon of world literature. But is my personal conviction a sufficient argument? The present day American patriarch of literary scholarship Harold Bloom, despite his great influence and authority, has not yet been able to persuade scholars outside the U.S. that they should resuscitate to the glory of the 21st century Samuel Johnson (maybe in some respect an 18th-century predecessor of Bloom himself). Likewise, Bloom's attempts to make Stephen Crane, a contemporary of our Juhan Liiv, stand forth as a major American poet and novel writer, have not been duly echoed in Europe or the rest of the world.

It means that a fruitful dialogue between an influential philosophically minded critic and the author (poet) alone does not guarantee success in the canon-building enterprise. One cannot ignore the third part, the reader, whose tastes and preferences are in a constant flux, depending of the change of values and attitudes of a concrete society and the whole world. A lot depends on the genre. Some literary genres have enjoyed great popularity in the past, but since the 19th century have become increasingly less cultivated. It especially concerns the genre in which our Kreutzwald excelled, epic poetry.

When Kreutzwald, in one of Europe's deep peripheries created *Kalevipoeg*, the Estonian nation as such was still almost non-existent. At the same time the "leading" European nations had entered the phase of the scientific turn and were leaving gradually behind the romantic enthusiasm for the Middle Ages, the medieval epics (of which, let us not forget it, all major examples were revived by Romanticism) and verse form, as such, both in the epic, which became increasingly replaced by prose novel and drama.

For the European periphery, however, these were the days of the youth of their nations. Nationally minded epic poetry responded to the spiritual needs of these young nations and gave them energy in their fight for freedom. For long centuries these ethnic communities had been humiliated by the "leading nations". They had been kept in serfdom, deprived of any chance to make their choices as individuals in their own language and culture.

Kreutzwald's own parents had been serfs, until the abolition of serfdom in the Russian tsarist Empire at the start of the 19th century. Overcoming a number of difficulties, he graduated from Tartu University as a medical doctor, and in the remote southern Estonian small town, Võru, inspired by the ideas of some enlightened Baltic-Germans, like G. J. Schultz-Bertram and his Estonian friend and colleague F. R. Faehlmann, beside his daily hard work curing people, started to write *Kalevipoeg*, based on folkloric motives and relying on the tradition Finno-Ugric verse, basically, trochaic tetrameter. The immediate

example, to be followed, was the Finnish epic *Kalevala* which Elias Lönnrot had completed shortly before (1835–48), but the broader background comprised naturally the ideas of J. G. Herder and German romanticism, as a whole.

The epic was thoroughly patriotic. It made stand forth a national Estonian hero, Kalevipoeg (the Son of Kalev), a man of gigantic physical dimensions, who after his grave mistakes and even crimes in his youth, gradually became the builder of the Estonian nation, symbolized by a major collective action of building the town of Lindanisa, in honour of the hero's raped and dead mother, Linda. According to Kalevipoeg's project, Lindanisa (Linda's Tit), had to be a peaceful city, a shelter for the weak, the women, children and the old. Kalevipoeg fights against the foreign invaders, but also Devil, the lord of the underworld, symbolizing the evil of greed both of the foreign invaders and of the Estonians themselves. Even though Kreutzwald in the introductory verses made a bow to the Russian tsarist government, it is quite clear that the pathos of his epic is directed against any foreign occupation of the country.

Kalevipoeg's publication in the Proceedings of the Learned Estonian Society (*Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft*), between 1857 and 1961, coincided with the start of the Estonian "national awakening" movement, culminating in the 1860–1870s. Thus Kreutzwald's work responded to the vital needs of a budding nation.

To get the work published and received by his nation, however, was not at all an easy task. Estonian literature as well as Estonian own literary criticism did not exist as yet. The reading public, comprised mainly by peasants, was not prepared to receive and appreciate a major poetic work, with its quite complicated symbolism in a number of the episodes. Kreutzwald inevitably had to rely on some astuteness, to get his work published. He could not publish it in book form in Estonia, because the tsarist censorship would have crushed it in the bud. He had to use the language of the "outside", of bigger and advanced nations, the language of science. He published the work in the Proceedings of *Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft*, making the readers believe that it was an authentic folkloric text, while in reality he had only used some fragments of existing prose legends about Kalevipoeg. The whole story, as such, and all the philosophic and ideological content, with its varying patriotic, tragic, lyrical, but also humorous and grotesque images and rhythms was born in Kreutzwald's own imagination, as the author of the epic.

Secondly, as Estonian own literary criticism did not exist in those times, the first appreciation of the work, having some weight and making the work visible in Estonia itself, had to come from "outside" or from the "border". Here,

Kreutzwald's previous contacts with some corresponding members of St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, working between Estonian and St. Petersburg, as well as with Finnish intellectuals and learned men proved to be crucially important. The St. Petersburg's academics F. J. Wiedemann and A. Schiefner proposed Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg* for a prize of the Petersburg's academy, even when the publication of the work was not yet finished. Indeed, Kreutzwald was awarded the prize in 1860! Quite early, S. G. Elmgren, a Finnish intellectual, praised Kreutzwald's work in a public speech in Helsinki, claiming that *Kalevipoeg* was not inferior to the Finnish own epic, Lönnrot's *Kalevala*.

Also an important detail is that in the Proceedings, *Kalevipoeg's* original Estonian text appeared with a parallel translation in German (partly made by C. Reinthal and in part by the author himself). It means that from the very beginning, *Kalevipoeg* had an important premise to overcome the national language barriers and reach the wider "outside". Another, possibly a more advanced translation of *Kalevipoeg* in German was made by Ferdinand Löwe. Parts of it were published in Kreutzwald's lifetime in 1881 in the Proceedings of *Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft*, to be followed by a separate book, in 1900 (Reval/ Dorpat). Still before the end of the 19th century, also a Russian translation of *Kalevipoeg* (by Yuri Trusman; Reval, 1886) and even a Danish adaptation (by P. Rasmussen; København, 1878) appeared.

The first book edition of *Kalevipoeg*, made in Kuopio, Finland, in 1862, did not attract any attention in Estonia itself, were only a limited number of copies circulated. However, especially after a popular edition, destined to the Estonian public, appeared in 1875–76 (Tartu), a wider circulation of the epic began in Estonia. Estonian enlightened clergymen and other early "awakeners" started to understand *Kalevipoeg* as a milestone in their aspiration to seek more liberties for the Estonian people and resist foreign, especially German hegemony. Still in his lifetime, Kreutzwald could see a wide national acceptance of his chief work. He gradually became to be identified with the founder of Estonian literature, the "Father of the Song", as he is popularly called.

As Estonia in its modern history has been on the crossroad of different and antagonistic political currents, Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg*, with its strongly forwarded message of a nation's fight for freedom, has naturally been subject to ideological and political manipulation. In the first period of Estonia's independence (1918–1939) Kreutzwald's epic gradually occupied its honourable place in the early histories of literature and school textbooks (like those by Mihkel Kampmaa and Karl Mihkla), as the founding chef-d'oeuvre of Estonian

literature. Some very influential figures of the “Noor-Eesti” (Young Estonia) movement, like the writer Friedebert Tuglas and the linguist Johannes Aavik, under the spell of French symbolism and positivism indeed tried to claim that Kreutzwald’s epic had a merely ideological importance, while having serious faults in its artistic form and not containing genuine folk-songs. However, their view was balanced by other leading intellectuals of the pre-war period, like the poet Gustav Suits (who later wrote a monograph on Kreutzwald’s life), and the folklorist August Annist, who subsequently emerged as the principal researcher of Kreutzwald’s masterpiece. Annist’s posthumously published monograph, with its nearly 900 pages, is a major homage to *Kalevipoeg*, confirming the greatness of Kreutzwald’s work (Annist 2005).

Before WWII, full translations of *Kalevipoeg* appeared in Hungarian (by Aladár Bán; Budapest, 1928) and in Latvian (by Elina Zālite; Riga, 1929), while an adaptation of the work was published in French (by Nora Raudsepp, Paul de Stoecklin; Paris 1930) and Italian (by Guglielmo Ceroni, on the basis of the French adaptation; Roma, 1930).

The Soviet period in Estonia marked a rapid spread of the epic both on the national and international scale. The communist regime, naturally, could not accept the work as a manifestation of national fight for freedom in its full transcendence. Instead, it emphasized in the epic the fight of the Estonian people against the historical German hegemony. It claimed that under the Soviet regime the freedom dreams of Kreutzwald and the Estonian people had become true.

Despite the ideologically manipulated rhetoric of that period, one cannot deny important advances in the epic’s editions and further international spread. Besides a several popular editions, between 1961 and 1963 *Kalevipoeg* was published in two volumes, containing a thorough academic treatment of the work, with detailed commentaries and notes by August Annist and some other renowned scholars. A new translation in Russian (by V. Derzhavin and A. Kotchetkov; first published in Moscow, 1949) had a number of reprints (Tallinn 1950, Moscow 1956, Tallinn 1961, 1979, 1986), all of them provided with introductory treatments and commentaries by Estonian folklorists and literary scholars (like Eduard Laugaste and Endel Nirk). The fact that the importance of Kreutzwald’s epic was not at all just tendentiously magnified by Soviet literary scholars, but notwithstanding obvious translation difficulties had a much broader international repercussion, was proved by *Kalevipoeg*’s full translations in Finnish (by Helmer Winter; Helsinki, 1957), Czech (by Miloš Lukáš; Prague, 1959), Lithuanian (by the poet Justinas Marcinkevicius;

Vilnius, 1963), Romanian (A. Calais; Bucharest, 1978), Ukrainian (by Anfis Rääpo; Kiev, 1981), English (by Jüri Kurman; Moorestown, 1982), as well as a new Hungarian translation (by the poet Zsuzsa Rab; Budapest, 1985).

Besides, some partial translations of the epic appeared (in Swedish, by Rafael Herzberg and Helmer Winter; Stockholm, 1963; in Esperanto, by Hilda Dresen; Tallinn, 1975).

After Estonia's re-established political independence (since 1991), there have been some attempts to resuscitate the old doubts expressed by Tuglas, Aavik and some Estonian folklorists about Kreutzwald's epic. However, by far more influential have been serious new studies, making the work stand out as a "root" or "kernel" text of Estonian literature, with a wide net of intertextualities departing from it and running through the entire Estonian culture, including all its fields and manifestations (thus, Laak 2005). F. Löwe's German translation has been reprinted twice (Tallinn, 1996, Stuttgart-Berlin, 2004), the latter edition being provided with new commentaries and treatments both by German and Estonian scholars (P. Petersen, Ü. Valk, R. Veidemann). As mentioned above, another English translation (by Triinu Kartus), besides the one by J. Kurman's (reprint 2007, Tallinn), was published, with the original Estonian text included (Tartu-Tallinn, 2011), while first full translations appeared in Swedish (by Alex Militis; Boras, 1999) and French (by A. Chalvin; Paris: Gallimard 2004). Besides reprints of Helmer Winter's translation (Helsinki 1996, 2006), a new translation in Finnish by Kyösti Kettunen appeared in 2005 (Tampere). Finally, Vishnu Khare's translation in the Hindi language was published in India in 2012 (*Tõlkes leitud* 2011).

To conclude this overview of *Kalevipoeg's* travels in Estonia and the wider world, I would say that by today both the merely folkloric point of view and the ideological manipulations of Kreutzwald's epic seem to be definitely exhausted. What we need now, are new philosophic interpretations of that founding work of Estonian literature, to shift it from its present passive position in the canon of world literature into an open space of international discussion. All the premises for that important shift, in my personal opinion, are there.

Epic poetry has its obvious advantages over lyrical poetry at least in the international dynamics of the reception. Major national epics are not so numerous in European literature that they could be left entirely without attention. More often than not their authors are identified with the greatest representatives of a national literature and culture. It is the case of Camões in Portugal, Mickiewicz in Poland, Donelaitis in Lithuania, Lönnrot and Runeberg in Finland, Jacint Verdager in Catalonia, José Hernández in Argen-

tina and our Estonian Kreutzwald, among a number of others. Maybe their epics are really read much less than lyrical poetry, but somehow they create a spell of a major work and, as such, impress both the general reading public and publishers. Byron, too, had to write and publish first his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, only then he was recognized as a major poet outside England.

The journey of lyrical poetry from a national literature to the international space of reception is generally much slower and more difficult, as compared with epic poetry. It is particularly hard to convince the international audience of the value of lyrical poetry created in minority linguistic areas, in national languages which are very little known outside a nation itself. The lyrical work of Juhan Liiv, generally accepted as one of the greatest poets of Estonia, can well illustrate the above-said.

Liiv came from a humble peasant family. Unlike Kreutzwald, he never studied at university. He spent his life in elementary poverty. For short periods he worked as a journalist, but never liked the job. Since 1893 he was mentally ill (suffering from persecution mania, a kind of schizophrenia; there are a number of witnesses among his contemporaries, according to whom Liiv imagined himself to be the son of the Estonian poetess Lydia Koidula and the Russian tsar Alexander II; at the same time he imagined that he was the heir of the Polish throne). Nevertheless, the fact remains that Liiv wrote the most mature and best-known part of his poetry during the years when he was mentally troubled.

Liiv published some of his prose stories and poems in periodicals. His early work was gathered in the supplement of the newspaper *Uus Aeg* in 1904, but he never managed to publish a book of his own. At the start of the 20th century, his talent was noticed by young Estonian writers and intellectuals who in 1905 formed the "Young Estonia" movement. They would have liked to have Liiv as an immediate forerunner of their symbolist aesthetics and cultured aspirations, modelled mainly on French literature. However, Liiv rejected their offer. He remained apart, not only because he was reluctant to join any official literary life, with its manifestos, programs, honours, etc., but also because Liiv deeply detested any imitation principle, any theory that would predetermine creation and thus restrict its freedom.

Despite the above said, it is an undeniable fact that Liiv was moved from his humble invisibility into the canon (by that time, in formation) of Estonian literature by "Young Estonia" writers. Still in Liiv's lifetime, in 1909/1910, a small selection of Liiv's poetry was edited by Gustav Suits, at that time a budding poet himself. It contained some of Liiv's best-known patriotic poems

(like "It Flies to the Hive", first published in a journal in 1905), along with Liiv's nature lyrics. However, establishing Liiv's broader canon in Estonian literature was to become the work of another leading member of "Young Estonia", Friedebert Tuglas, a prose writer and essayist who in the subsequent years emerged as a major intellectual authority of Estonian literature. While rejecting the "old-fashioned" Kreutzwald, Tuglas made Liiv stand out as the forerunner of a renewal in Estonian literature, a "mad genius" who as if by a miracle had managed to write prophetic poems about his fatherland and could reflect nature with a delicacy and sensibility, seldom achieved by symbolist poets themselves.

Liiv himself never saw his canon. It was posthumous. Plunging into Liiv heritage, his manuscripts, for the most part not at all prepared for publication, written in hand and obscured by abundant scribbles, numerous corrections and different versions, Tuglas published first a short monograph on Liiv (1914), and some years later, a larger selection of Liiv's poems (1919). Continuing to work on Liiv, Tuglas finally published, again in parallel, within a year, what was to become the major pre-war selection of Liiv's poetry (1926, including nearly three hundred poems) and a substantially enlarged monograph on Liiv's life and work (1927). As by that time Tuglas's own authority in Estonian culture had importantly grown, Liiv's work started to be widely known in the Estonian society. Liiv's canon got a firm and solid basis because of Tuglas's strong cultural personality: not only he selected and compiled the texts of the poems departing from Liiv's manuscripts, but he also wrote a spirited interpretation of Liiv's life and work.

Liiv became now a canonical author also in school text books and anthologies. As Liiv wrote mostly very short poems, which are apparently simple, but loaded with a very special intensity and sensibility, a great part of Estonians know some of Liiv's poems (or at least some lines of them) by heart since their early school days.

After WWII in the Soviet Estonia, literary histories and school text books made Liiv stand forth as a poet coming from humble social circumstances, writing from the position of those "who are below". Especially the realistic aspect of his work was now appreciated, as realism was the officially accepted and praised method of any artistic creation. Aarne Vinkel, a literary historian, took up revising Liiv's canon established by Tuglas. As a personality, he could not compete with Tuglas, but his additions to Liiv's canon, on the basis of researching Liiv's manuscripts, are of substantial value. Vinkel edited two major

selections of Liiv's poems (1954/1956 and 1989), granting a sound basis for the circulation of Liiv's work during the Soviet period.

Though widely accepted in literary histories and school text books, as Liiv was, there was still a controversy about his work in the Soviet years. Thus Juhan Liiv Poetry Prize, established in 1969, was suppressed by the communist party authorities a year after, in 1970, as a manifestation of Estonian nationalism. Although the prize was re-established in 1984 and has ever since continued, the fact shows that Liiv was a "difficult author" to be swallowed by the official communist regime. His radical patriotism (which by the way did not exclude at all criticism of some features in his own people, the Estonians) could not be so easily turned into a flat rejection of German hegemony, as it had been in the case of the work of the writers of the 19th-century national awakening.

Liiv is the epitome of a poet whose canon was established exclusively from the inside of a small literature, inaccessible to international criticism. Selections of his poetry were translated into Russian before and after WWII (by Ed. Kansman; Tallinn, 1933; by Leon Toom and others; Moscow, 1962) and Esperanto (by Hilda Dresen, an Estonian Esperanto poet; Tallinn, 1980), but I doubt if these books had any significant impact in or outside Russia or beyond the circles of Esperantists. Despite his poems being included in some international anthologies, one can claim that until very recently, Liiv's work, unanimously applauded in Estonia, was still practically undiscovered in the wider world.

Collaborating with the American poet H. L. Hix, I managed to edit a first small selection of Liiv's work in English in 2007 (Liiv 2007). In the introductory essay I dare to compare Liiv with some of the greatest philosophically minded lyrical poets of Europe, like the Spaniards Antonio Machado and Federico García Lorca, or the Portuguese Fernando Pessoa. I also try to seek parallels for Liiv's philosophy in existentialism combined with holism, phenomena and notions that have emerged and have been put into an international circulation after Liiv's death. Some resemblance for Liiv's intuitive existentialism could be found in the views and the work of Liiv's contemporary Spanish-Basque philosopher and writer Miguel de Unamuno.²

Departing from our bilingual Estonian-English selection, Julia Potrč has translated a beautiful selection of thirteen poems by Liiv into Slovene (published in the journal *Literatura*, 226/ 2010). A highly encouraging fact is that the prestigious US journal *Poetry* included in its recent issue (June 2011)

² For a more extensive treatment of Liiv's philosophy and poetics, cf. Talvet 2011.

two until then unpublished translations of Liiv’s poems (“Music”, “Leaves Fell”) Time will show if these efforts of enthusiasm gradually develop into a wider international reception of Liiv’s poetry, or it is fated to live forever inside Estonian culture, separated by a wall of silence from the outside.

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