

## *Diderot in Estonian: In Search of a Dialogue*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Denis Diderot's work has recently been enthusiastically translated into Estonian. Translations of *Neveu de Rameau*, *Jacques le Fataliste*, *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, *Lettre sur les aveugles* and *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* have been published from 2003 to 2015. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was seemingly much less interest for his work. Only a few excerpts from his texts were translated and critical attention rarely focused on him. However, a closer look reveals that Diderot has held a rather important place in several culturally significant debates and that the relatively discreet response to his work reflects some key developments of Estonian literature.

**Keywords:** Denis Diderot; history of translation; Estonian literature; Estonian theatre; intercultural contacts; dialogue

### From Apocrypha to Canon

Estonian literature, as perhaps also various other small literatures, seems to be affected by a paradox of translating. Translation has always been an essential part of the Estonian literary tradition, from its inception in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to today's most common literary practices. It can safely be said that no Estonian reader, no matter how perfunctory his or her reading habits, has remained untouched by translated literature or unaware of the constant need for translation in the everyday culture, literary or otherwise. That, however, does not mean that all the other literatures, or even all the major works of other literatures have been translated into Estonian, or will ever be, seeing as more are always written in the world than Estonian translators can tackle. On the contrary, the absence of numerous texts that are known either in original, in translation into another language or from secondary sources has played an important part in the development of the keen translation-awareness that is characteristic of the Estonian culture.

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For any Estonian reader, literature always continues beyond the linguistic and cultural borders. Even well-known, classical foreign authors who make up the basic literary canon, partly remain in that outside world, accessible only through other languages and qualifying as not (yet) translated. The not-yet-translated is rather a norm than an exception, the decision to bring a work of literature over to the translated side needs another reason besides the obvious one, a reason why a translator chooses this particular text from nearly endless possibilities. In a literature to which translation is inherent, but which will never be able to actually acquire in translation all the works that it knows of and relates to, this choice is one of the greatest points of interest for translation studies. Such a literature develops a considerable ability to deal with the not translated: to teach it at schools, to access it via secondary sources and other languages, or to work around it while building the local canon. If a translator in this situation, with no obvious outside pressure (for instance, political or commercial), chooses a text, the significance of this choice merits examination. Several translators showing interest in one author or in the same text is a relatively rare and particularly noteworthy phenomenon.

Such is the case of Denis Diderot. It is, at least as far as the Estonian translations of French literature are concerned, a rather rare case of a long, initially not overly passionate or fruitful search of a dialogue with a foreign author that developed into a meaningful relationship over the course of a century.

Diderot's first translation into Estonian was, as far as I've been able to determine, a story titled *Ema* ('The Mother'). It was published in 1912 in the newspaper *Postimees* by a translator appearing under the initials A.P. and accompanied by a footnote about the author:

Famous French writer and philosopher who lived in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The story "The Mother" has not yet been published in the original; the manuscript is preserved in St. Petersburg. A German translation was recently published in the *Frankfurter Ztg.* (Diderot 1912; here and henceforth my translations, K. T.)

The text in question is the Polly Baker story (a single mother's speech in front of the jury about to condemn her for having her fifth illegitimate child) that Diderot had added to the *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* around 1780. This version of the *Supplément* was indeed unknown to the public until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and was first published in a French edition of Diderot's works in 1935. It has become a very thoroughly studied piece of Diderot's work (Anderson 1995: 15–18), but in many ways a perplexing and paradoxical one. As an opening for a tradition of Diderot translations it seems a rather curious

choice, especially as early as 1912, when it definitely could not be considered a well-established part of the original Diderot canon.

However, in its curiosity, it does reveal something essential about translation as a practice. Canonical importance, pedagogical potential and the most widely recognized qualities of a literary work are among the factors translators tend to consider, but not their only preoccupation and not always the main one. Translation is a creative response to a text that the translator has found a rapport with, even if it may be difficult to determine what exactly the initial rapport was based on, if the translator does not reveal it or sometimes perhaps does not even realize it. Diderot's first Estonian translator has not left many clues that would help to understand his or her interpretation of Diderot, focusing on minimal background facts.

In the following years, more information was published, but with the same generally informative purpose. Diderot's name appeared occasionally in various publications until the Second World War, usually in the context of some kind of pedagogical effort: history of theatre, history of social and political ideas, history of literature. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the first time of Estonian political independence, which meant that it was a very active period for developing an all-Estonian basic and higher education, and scholarship. Textbooks had to be developed on a level that had not existed before and the general public brought up to speed via all kinds of enlightening publications. Pedagogical effort therefore did not mean only study materials, but also daily papers and everything in between, although the most thorough looks into Diderot's work can be found in the literary histories dating from the 1920s and 1930s.

The first of them, Karl Peterson's *Euroopa kirjandus üldjoontes* ('A General Overview of European Literature', 1922) focuses on the rationalism and anti-clericalism of the Enlightenment. Diderot appears in that context mainly as the materialist philosopher. The place he holds in the literary canon in Peterson's eyes remained relatively unchanged until mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: important to mention in some aspects, but dwarfed by Voltaire and even more by Rousseau. These preferences are understandable, seeing as the literary histories (and translators) of that time focused mainly on periods and authors that the Estonian literary tradition was most closely related to and the readers could relate to. Rousseau is clearly closer than Diderot to a literature founded primarily on Romanticism. Diderot could not serve well as an example for literary theory or poetics either. These were taught in a rather classical sense at the time and Diderot's idiosyncratic works would not have functioned as an example.

Diderot's early reception in Estonia is difficult to contextualize because of its relative randomness. It is no wonder that his works reached the Estonian readers at least partly through German sources, which were easily accessible, as German was the dominant language in Estonia at the time, and the German culture had been very open to Diderot's works early on (see Rossel 1970: 391, Van Hoof 1991: 236–237). However, studies on reading habits in Diderot's contemporary Estonia (Pullat 2009, Tarvas 2012) and translation history in Finland (Riikonen *et al.* 2007) do not show any unusual enthusiasm for his works in Baltic German and Finnish culture that often served as models for Estonian literary practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Still, it appears that in the fields where his works were generally well known and relevant at the time, they were familiar to Estonian intellectuals. For instance, Diderot's contribution to the development of theatre theory and practices was described by the actor and theatre director Karl Jungholz even before the appearance of the first Estonian translation (Jungholz 1910), and the historian Peeter Tarvel insightfully discussed Diderot's role in the Enlightenment (Tarvel 1937) at a time when Rousseau's and Voltaire's work was becoming increasingly accessible in Estonian<sup>2</sup>, but Diderot still had not found Estonian translators. This demonstrates that knowledge and accessibility are not the (only) key factors in translation, especially in a culture where foreign texts also easily circulate in foreign languages. Translating an author's works into Estonian is not a prerequisite for their influence on and relevance for the Estonian *intelligentsia*. It is, however, a prerequisite for their becoming a part of the general literary repertoire, which tends to be developed when translators perceive a broader cultural relevance in the works of a foreign author.

### Explicit Propaganda and Implicit Dissidence

The first serious attempts to give Diderot some local cultural relevance appeared with the Soviet occupation, which in many other respects stalled and hindered the dialogue with Western authors. At first, it was a forced relevance: in Stalinist time, Diderot was instrumentalized in the antireligious campaign. Various examples of that ideological and propagandist practice can be found in the Estonian press since the early 1940s.

In 1941, the cultural weekly paper *Sirp ja Vasar* notified its readers that Diderot's complete works had been published in Russian and that they

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<sup>2</sup> *Zadig*, *Micromégas*, *L'Ingénu* and *Candide* by Voltaire and Rousseau's *Émile* had been translated by then.

contained “Diderot’s major philosophical works, in which he appears a confirmed materialist” (*Uusi raamatuid N. Liidus*, 1941). From the inaccurate translations of several titles it is obvious that the author of the news was not familiar with Diderot’s work<sup>3</sup> and was using the news mainly in order to promote the obligatory ideological values. In the same vein, but with a seemingly better knowledge of the subject matter, two other anonymous texts about Diderot appeared in *Sirp ja Vasar* that year: “Denis Diderot ja tema mõtteid kunstist” (‘Denis Diderot and his Thoughts about Art’) and “Denis Diderot ja tema entsüklopeedia” (‘Denis Diderot and his Encyclopaedia’). One of them introduced a new translation genre that was going to be used for Diderot’s work for several more occasions: the quote. Brief quotes and some passages from *Jacques le Fataliste* were published in various periodicals in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The most voluminous translation from that period and also the richest fruit of the promotion of the antireligious interpretation was the beginning of *La Religieuse*. The translation covers the account of how the protagonist became a nun (about one-sixth of the novel), which emphasizes the complicity of religious institutions with the basest material interests and hypocritical ways of the lay society. It was published in a book titled *Usk ja mõistus* (‘Religion and Reason’) – an anthology of miscellaneous texts suitable for antireligious propaganda, self-described as follows:

The anthology does not by any means aspire to give a complete picture of all atheist and anticlerical prose and poetry in the world literature. It should, however, offer something from this domain to every reader, because in addition to famous authors presented in alphabetical order, there are, at the end of the book, sayings of the ever-talented simple folk in the form of proverbs and anecdotes. (Tarand 1970: 5)

No matter how questionable the literary merit of such a compilation, the translation itself was of great quality. It was made by Ott Ojamaa (1926–1996), a prolific and influential translator and a knowledgeable critic of French literature. The choice of *La Religieuse* did not emerge out of nowhere, the novel had already gotten some attention in the late 1960s, when news about the film *Suzanne Simonin, la Religieuse de Diderot* by Jacques Rivette reached the Estonian press. The most detailed account was given in Aino Gross’

<sup>3</sup> Diderot has some fortunate titles in that respect, such as *Neveu de Rameau*. Since an Estonian translator has to decide if the nephew is a sister’s or a brother’s son, the wording can be indicative of his or her knowledge of the work’s content.

article about the difficulties with censorship that Rivette had encountered (Gross 1966). Gross compares the current situation in France to Diderot's own time, seizing another opportunity for anticlerical criticism. However, the main object of her criticism is censorship. Carefully attributed here only to capitalist countries and religious institutions, it was obviously an important issue for readers in Soviet Estonia. Gross' article is a classical example of a text that would lend itself to the literal pro-Soviet reading and to the exact opposite interpretation – implicit criticism of the Soviet regime. Many texts functioned in this manner during the Soviet occupation in Estonia, the subversive reading between the lines was a well-mastered cultural competence by the 1960s. The case of the anti-religious reading of Diderot is a relatively marginal but characteristic example of how the means to undermine the Soviet propaganda were gradually developed out of its own rhetoric.

### Information and Art

Another way of neutralizing the propagandist interpretation of literature and cultural history was to find common ground between the ideologically acceptable and genuinely relevant. In Diderot's case, the Encyclopaedia was an obvious topic for that kind of approach. In 1984, Harry Õiglane, one of the main editors of the *Eesti Nõukogude Entsüklopeedia* ('Estonian Soviet Encyclopaedia'), published an article about the social functions of information. He portrayed Diderot as the creator of the first work that had a modern encyclopaedia's two basic characteristics, according to him: "diffusion of reliable knowledge and information, and the function of ideological guidance" (Õiglane 1984). As the work on the Estonian encyclopaedia progressed and theoretical issues concerning information and society grew in relevance worldwide, this shift in focus seems more than just a choice of a relatively safe subject.

Other new aspects appeared as well. 1984 was the year of the the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Diderot's death, which led to other mentions of him in periodicals and to the publication of Ott Ojamaa's article "Denis Diderot' mälestuseks" ('In Memory of Denis Diderot'). It is one of the very few texts dedicated to Diderot alone in Estonia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the only one that aims to give a really general and comprehensive portrait.

The article is basically a didactic text, resembling a chapter of a popular encyclopaedia, but the information is selected, composed and interpreted with a great deal of personal reflexion. Ojamaa does not follow the earlier Estonian representations of Diderot, he seeks to create a new image and to rethink Diderot's relevance for himself and his readers. In comparison with

Voltaire and Rousseau, who were better known to the Estonian public, Ojamaa considers Diderot to be the greater philosopher and the more modern thinker. This argument is based mostly on Diderot's materialist ideas and the scholarly aspect of his work, but Ojamaa pays a lot of attention to Diderot's fiction as well and goes as far as to cite *Jacques le Fataliste* and *Neveu de Rameau* as Diderot's major works.

This was a considerable shift of perspective in the Estonian readings of Diderot (and relatively synchronous with the general tendencies of Diderot studies – the late 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an increased interest in Diderot and enthusiastic rediscovery of his literary work everywhere). Ojamaa moved Diderot from the domain of intellectual history towards aesthetic and poetic modernity, setting him apart from his contemporaries and bringing him closer to 20<sup>th</sup>-century readers:

Thus, Diderot is, even as a writer, essentially a man from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And the fact that that's who he is can be visually proven. Contemporary artists portrayed Voltaire and Rousseau always with wigs, as was appropriate for cultivated men of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, posthumously, laurel wreaths were added, but who among us has seen Diderot, in painting or in sculpture, in a wig? (Ojamaa 1984)

It is interesting to note that this new image of Diderot was aimed at experienced readers, published in a cultural newspaper. In his Diderot chapter for a school textbook from the same period, Ojamaa remained more conservative, focusing on the traditional representation:

[Diderot] was outwardly the least conspicuous of the three great men of the Enlightenment, but this does not mean that his influence was negligible. His energy was spent on editing the great Encyclopaedia of the Enlightenment. [...] Literary work was a hobby to Diderot, he was not eager to publish it. (Leht, Ojamaa 1988: 114)

The difference is understandable – redesigning the didactical representations and school canon is always more complicated than suggesting new interpretations and launching debates in general culture, and under the Soviet regime there were added complications. However, outside school a new look at Diderot imposed itself, because he had steadily been gaining attention among theatre professionals since the early 1970s and as the discussion intensified, it was bound to influence the overall interpretation of his work. In his article, Ojamaa points out Diderot's contribution to theatre theory, the reactualization

of his ideas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their comparison with Stanislavski's and Brecht's. This point is clearly related to the perception of Diderot in theatrical circles.

## The Modern Man of Theatre

Since the early 1970s, Diderot's name began to come up in various periodicals where matters of theatre were discussed. At first in passing, but in a register that had formerly been quite rare: not with a pedagogical intent, to educate the public, but in a peer-to-peer discussion about topics where his work was relevant. These discussions were clearly influenced by the Russian theatre tradition, some of them translated from Russian periodicals, such as *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Tovstonogov 1973) or *Sovremennaya Dramaturgiya* (Brook, Kagarlitski 1990), but soon enough were also happening locally. For instance, in 1974, *Sirp ja Vasar* published an account of a roundtable discussion of Estonian playwrights and actors where Diderot was referred to (*Dramaturg ja näitleja*, 1974).

Understandably, *Paradoxe sur le comédien* was the major work of reference in these discussions and even in some not directly related to theatre (Stolovitš 1984). The most original and substantial contribution to this topic was the article "Lähtudes Diderot'st" ('Following Diderot') by an Estonian man of theatre, Ingo Normet, in the journal *Teater.Muusika.Kino* (Normet 1995). The article also quotes several long passages of *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, making it partly available in Estonian for the first time.

A few years later, a full translation by Linnar Priimägi was announced to be in the works (Balbat 1997) and a few other references to this translation project can be traced in the press, although that translation does not seem to have reached publication. The full text of *Paradoxe sur le comédien* became available to the Estonian public in 2006 and 2007, when Mirjam Lepikult published her translation in the journal *Akadeemia* (Diderot 2006, 2007). This translation was accompanied by a brief afterword by Ingo Normet, an abbreviated version of his article from 1995.

In the meantime, Diderot had also made it to the Estonian stage. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there were several Diderot-related theatrical productions: Milan Kundera's *Jacques et son maître* (Tartu, Vanemuine, 2000, directed by Ain Mäeots) and Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's *Le Libertin* (Tallinn, Vene Draamateater, 2003, directed by Vladimir Petrov; Tartu, Vanemuine, 2006, directed by Madis Kalmet). While these are not Diderot's own plays, but contemporary writers' interpretations of his life and work, they demonstrate



even more clearly the importance of his creative influence in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The evolution of that creative influence is the most noteworthy phenomenon in Diderot's reception in Estonia. All aspects of his work that gained particular significance at one time or another were essentially known since the early days. The successive discoveries of new aspects of his work were not brought on by appearance of entirely new information to the cultural repertoire. The shifts of focus and significance resulted from the changing historical context and cultural situation, as is usually the case, but it is rather unusual to have such a clear-cut example of this process.

### A Contemporary from Two Centuries Ago

The latest changes in society and culture have brought on yet another renewed interest in Diderot. The further away from Diderot's actual lifetime, the more his work has been perceived as the readers' contemporary in Estonia as well as elsewhere in the world.

In 1999, the journal *Vikerkaar* published a special issue dedicated to the Enlightenment. In this issue, the historian Marek Tamm declares in his afterword to a selection of letters between Diderot and Sophie Volland:

Among the rich legacy of the Enlightenment, the work of DENIS DIDEROT (1713–1784) has probably the most potential to speak to today's reader. (Tamm 1999: 98)

This compatibility, according to Tamm, is partly due to Diderot's style, but also to his general nature as an author: he is versatile, complex, difficult to classify in any way. The complexity is something even simple readers rejoice about. The 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Diderot's death prompted a short and rather conventional biographical article in the history column of the newspaper *Oma Saar*, which ends on the following note:

Diderot wrote brilliant philosophical treatises, but also sensational accounts of Parisian lairs of depravity, and even though he was married, he, the ever merry Frenchman, had numerous mistresses. Quite a versatile and contradictory person, that famous philosopher of the Enlightenment! (Kiil 2009)

Present since Ott Ojamaa's article from 1984 and propelled by the theatrical productions of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the interest in Diderot's personality and

private life has added yet another aspect to his image in Estonia. However, it remains marginal compared to the recent enthusiasm for Diderot's literary work and critical thought.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has so far seen four translations of Diderot, with a promise of a fifth (a selection of philosophical dialogues) occasionally mentioned since about 2009. The first complete translation to appear was that of *Neveu de Rameau* by Andres Raudsepp (Diderot 2003), followed by *Jacques le Fataliste* translated by Kristiina Ross (Diderot 2005), the already mentioned *Paradoxe sur le comédien* by Mirjam Lepikult (Diderot 2006, 2007), and, most recently, *Lettre sur les aveugles* and *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* translated by Katre Talviste (Diderot 2015).

Marek Tamm's afterword to the translation of *Neveu de Rameau* emphasizes the importance of dialogue in Diderot's writings (Tamm 2003: 1338). He points out that the dialogue is not a mere rhetorical device for Diderot, as it was for most of the writers of the Enlightenment era. Diderot does not use dialogue to make his own ideas stand out in contrast to a fictional opponent's arguments. His is a truly complex thought that expresses itself in all the voices of the dialogue that may contradict, but do not disqualify each other. Tamm's interpretation is connected to Jan Blomstedt's essay on Diderot published a few years earlier in the Enlightenment-issue of *Vikerkaar* (Blomstedt 1999). The translation of Diderot's *Letters on the blind and the deaf and mute* relates to the same line of reasoning (Talviste 2015).

In addition to the importance of the dialogue as such, several points of mutual understanding with Diderot have been suggested in the wake of the translations. Marek Tamm develops the subject of author's independence and the modern concept of copyright, of which Diderot was an early advocate (Tamm 2003: 1342–1343). In the translator's afterword to *Jacques le Fataliste*, Kristiina Ross reflects upon relativist thought, stating that the realization that no self-evident truths exist constitutes a bridge between Diderot's time and the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ross 2005: 255).

As our contemporary concerns have been recognized in Diderot's poetics and thought, the perceived closeness has occasionally approximated an identification with him. The reviewers of a contemporary music festival of 2011 gave their article in the newspaper *Sirp* not only a form of a dialogue in imitation of Diderot, but of a dialogue between Diderot and D'Alembert, with a brief introduction in the footnote:

A conversation between the French playwright, art critic, philosopher and encyclopaedist Denis Diderot and the mathematician, philosopher and music theorist Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert, set in our time and inspired, in

addition to the music played at the festival, by Diderot's fictional conversation about materialist philosophy, a piece of a three-part literary work *D'Alembert's Dream* dating from 1769. (Mihhejev, Lock 2011: 17)

The history of Diderot's reception in Estonia is a fascinating example of how a chance encounter with a foreign author may develop into a meaningful relationship where meanings change and grow with time. This is never a dialogue just between one author and one translator or critic, nor a dialogue between just two cultures at a time, but a whole network of literary contacts evolving within a changing sociocultural context. Cases like Diderot's in Estonia offer a helpful look into these processes, which are constantly at work everywhere, but are not always easy to trace. Many general patterns of Estonian literary and translation history are represented in Diderot's reception, while the corpus of texts that reveals them remains remarkably compact, a model situation not unlike some that Diderot himself imagined for a better understanding of human perception and communication.

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