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# Ene

# Mihkelson

b y S i r j e O l e s k

Two  
ways  
to  
write  
about

**Estonian  
history**

The Finnish writer Sofi Oksanen's (born in 1977) novel *Purge* (2008) has been very successful internationally. The "novel about life on collective farms in Soviet Estonia" (SO's own summary), translated into more than twenty languages, tells a captivating tale of the difficult lives of two Estonian women of different generations in the twists and turns of history. The first reason for success is naturally Sofi Oksanen's talent. Another reason is the fact that the events (in other languages the surroundings probably seem rather exotic) describe general issues in a simple, straightforward manner: violence and women's fate in the brutal, male-dominated world, whether the sources of violence are state power structures in the 1940s and 1950s or organised crime in the 1990s. In an interview last autumn in Estonia, Sofi Oksanen described how different layers in the book address readers in different countries. People in countries that have recently been under a foreign

# Sofi Oksanen

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power understand *Purge* very well. There is no need to explain in Spain or Poland what censorship is, although it is necessary in the Nordic countries. The eastern parts of Germany still remember the activities of the Stasi and the readers know what persecution and interrogation mean. In western Germany, on the other hand, the readers need convincing that, besides the evil Nazi Germany, there were gulags and communist terror. The crimes committed by the latter can easily be compared to the crimes of the Nazis. And so on and so on (*Eesti Päevaleht* 23 November 2010). Americans would read the English translation of *Purge* more like a novel of a family's or a people's destiny, as critics have compared Oksanen with Tolstoy and Pasternak. In England, on the other hand, the book was categorised as a Nordic crime novel and Oksanen was compared with Stig Larsson, although the critics admitted that Oksanen wrote better than Larsson.

In Estonia, the novel was quite enthusiastically received, although many were annoyed because Oksanen was not quite

precise in depicting historical events and realities of life. Professor Rein Raud said: "When I try to work out why it is Sofi Oksanen who has achieved such international success by depicting recent Estonian history and not, for example, Ene Mihkelson, Arvo Valton, Heino Kiik, Viivi Luik, Arved Viirlaid or another author who has tackled the same topics much more precisely and diversely, I can't help thinking that the key to her success might lie in stereotyping: by combining the historical narrative with functioning clichés familiar to the Western reader, she touches precisely on those keys and strings that mega-success requires" (*Eesti Päevaleht* 5 November 2010).

However, we are well aware that people do not read fiction in order to learn about other people's history. There are other sources for that. Those who like long prose mostly expect a psychological and captivating tale. Oksanen certainly offers that in her novels. Readers are additionally fascinated by the author's genuine passion in telling the tale, and her ethical attitudes, with which she defends the humiliated,



Ene Mihkelson (Photo by Scanpix)

suppressed and insulted. The effect is even greater because her texts follow the rules of melodrama, a fact pointed out by Eneken Laanes, who has carefully researched the novels of both Mihkelson and Oksanen. Oksanen is a contemporary writer who consciously writes for as large an audience as possible. In the above-mentioned interview, she says that, in the aftermath of the success of her novels, the Estonian publishers could seize the opportunity to launch other authors, as is already being done in Finland. The realistic subtext to this attitude might be that today's publishing and book marketing is work like any other, and not daydreaming about high art.

Why, then, have Estonian authors' novels on the same topics not enjoyed

similar success in translation? There are, of course, exceptions, e.g. Arved Viirlaid's war novels have been translated quite enthusiastically. Viivi Luik is highly acclaimed in the Nordic countries. Now that Oksanen's novels are doing so well, it is high time to do something about translating Ene Mihkelson's books into German, Swedish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Czech, Hungarian and other languages. (There is already an agreement on a Finnish translation.) After all, both in her poetry and her novels, Mihkelson writes about the same era and events as does *mutatis mutandis* Oksanen. What then are the differences and why are Mihkelson's works not very well known even in Estonia, although she does have her own dedicated

circle of readers and critics have praised her work highly? The problem may be in her manner of writing, and in her method of approaching topics. Oksanen is a modern writer who expects to attract as many readers as possible. Ages ago, Mihkelson began writing in order to deal with a trauma. She wanted to know what had happened to the Estonian people in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and how it influenced these people and their families. Oksanen's and Mihkelson's strategies of writing are different as well: Oksanen clearly reveals the story, whereas Mihkelson tries hard to hide and confuse it. Instead of smooth narrative, her work resembles polyphonic compositions that use the poetic language of late modernism. It is not essential what exactly happened (because Estonian readers know this only too well), but how whatever happened has influenced us. Human suffering in a totalitarian society, the system's violence against people, and how the system changes people are familiar to more than just Estonians. Many readers for whom Mihkelson could be translated would thus understand her books without any problem. Mihkelson's poetry has been read in German; her perception of life and attitudes are similar to those of Herta Müller.

Ene Mihkelson (born in 1944) started as a poet and has depicted the changing winds of 20<sup>th</sup> century Estonian history and the resulting destinies of people. Her novels show that the framework of ideologically correct relations and the balance that effortlessly functions in Oksanen's *Purge* do not necessarily fit into real history and the human relations in Estonia after WW II. People cannot be divided into good and bad, or victims and villains; life forces them to make choices that are immoral, and leads them to temptations they cannot resist. Greed, cowardice, fear and feeling afraid and guilty to the core are things that Mihkelson has been writing about all along. Her novels have been called a series tackling the identity of Estonians: *Rural Roots* (1983), *The Torment of a Name* (1994), *The Sleep of Ahasuerus* (2001) and

*Plague Grave* (2007). A critic said that these novels depict "an increasingly tense insight into the heart of memory and time". In a cryptic way, the same topics have been dealt with in Mihkelson's poetry, in her original harsh poetic language, which has only recently attracted a few followers of Estonian literature. Critics selected *The Sleep of Ahasuerus* as the best novel published in the newly independent Estonia, and *Plague Grave* received the best prose work award when it came out. Mihkelson's latest collection of poetry, *Tower* (2010), received the Baltic Assembly's literary award.

The literary historian Luule Epner has said that Mihkelson's novels are inspired and galvanised by an urge for truth. These works move between personal and social memory, trying to explain the present via the past, and vice versa. In *Rural Roots*, the author describes the loss of a home. Due to the time of writing and publishing, the events taking place during the Stalinist era that caused the loss of the home are conveyed vaguely and in allusions which a more superficial reader might miss. The novel *The Torment of a Name* is the same story, and asks, now going a bit deeper, what has happened to our people and how our psyche has been influenced and distorted by the past and hushed-up past events. It is one of the first descriptions in Estonian literature of the Singing Revolution, the beginning of the second period of Estonian national awakening. The events of this turbulent time form a background to reflections which the writer can now indulge in without having to fear censorship. She asks: "...what was done to us in that period called socialism?"

Eneken Laanes summarises the novel *The Sleep of Ahasuerus* by claiming that it explores the pressure of the past on the present, on the individual level. The narrator's voice is polyphonic – both *I* and *she* talk – which makes following the text rather complicated, but conveys very sensitively the atmosphere of suspicion and silence. This is the atmosphere for a woman whose father was killed in the forest and



whose mother refuses to take her daughter in after she comes out of the forest.

In all of Mihkelson's novels, the protagonist or the narrator or a character identifying with the narrator is a contemporary person who examines, questions and observes. In other words, this person suffers by living through the events that happened about a half century ago with people close to him or her and in which he/she might have taken part as a child. This is conveyed in fragments, via associations, and remains confusing for readers who do not know the described period and circumstances. Mihkelson's novels demand slow and attentive reading, and readers who are used to allusive modernist texts. The situation in *Ahasuerus* is especially complicated. What after all happened with Vilma and Meinhard Reiter, i.e. the narrator's parents? Mother Vilma is alive, but does not stay with her daughter, because after the mother left the forest she adopted another name, set up a new family and rejected the abandoned child subconsciously and sometimes consciously. In their long phone conversations, she occasionally calls the narrator "my dear daughter", but at the same time she is wary of her, because the daughter wants to talk about things the mother has decided to forget. The identity of the father, Meinhard Reiter, has been stolen, his body buried as someone else's, and that someone else took his name in order to use it in the great hide-and-seek games of the 1950s. Talking with the involved people, reading archive documents and comparing various recollections lead the doubting daughter to the inevitable conclusion that her father was not killed in an ordinary attack against the forest guerillas, but in an organised KGB operation. As a result, her father's name was stolen and the man who stole it later became close to her mother. The writer Tõnu Õnnepalu interpreted the whole *Ahasuerus* story as the Estonian version of Hamlet, although in this case Hamlet is a woman who seeks the truth about her family's destiny. Her mother refuses to talk about her late husband, her relatives are reluctant to discuss his family and the official researchers have (accidentally?) given a traitor an award for his services.

The whole story is extremely confusing and is clarified only for the protagonist at the cost of great physical suffering; for others, it is an old story they wish to forget. The protagonist visits the usurper of her father's name, the old man now again bearing the name Kaarel Kolgamets, who reads out to her (it is important that he does not just tell her!) his own memories of that fateful raid. The re-independent Estonia has awarded the brave resistance fighter a medal and the relevant officials are not prepared to admit that they have made a mistake. Times are unpredictable and still confusing; the shadows of the past have not dissolved and haunt people's minds, health and destinies.

In Mihkelson's novel, uncertainty in memory, history, identity and people's fates are expressed in the manner of a narrative, and the protagonist has simultaneously two voices: I and She. Such polyphony makes it difficult to follow the narrative, but shows very well the ambivalence of memory, and the bewilderment of people when they try to find out about something in the past, something complicated, violent and perhaps shameful. This novel occasionally turns into a thriller, when the main character attempts to match up family lore: what she has heard from her mother and what she has read in the archives.

The past is also examined in Mihkelson's latest novel, *Plague Grave*, where the protagonist questions her aunt, her mother's sister, who looked after the four-year-old child when her parents fled to the forest. It could be said with some simplification that in *The Sleep of Ahasuerus* the protagonist is trying to find her father, whereas in *Plague Grave* she asks about her mother. The stories that Ene Mihkelson as a writer conceals, instead of intriguingly unrolling in the style of Sofi Oksanen, are different in the two novels. These two novels are therefore totally different works, united by insights into life and history, and by similar poetic narratives.

Mihkelson carefully tackles the suppressed frustrations of a nation's collective memory in each of her novels, going deeper with each





Sofi Oksanen (Photo by Scanpix)

novel. Both *Ahasuerus* and *Plague Grave* have a remarkable number of different layers of meaning and fragmentary plot lines, which the dedicated reader can follow and connect. There are several reading strategies: someone interested in history follows the fate of the guerillas in the forest and the relevant Cold War KGB operations (e.g. when the English/Americans dispatch Estonian secret agents to the guerillas' bunkers, where the bogus guerillas hired by the KGB are waiting for them; some are transferred to the West as double agents, etc). In Mihkelson's *Ahasuerus*, such radio-play secret agent games acquire an eerie meaning when the protagonist tries to find about how her guerilla father died in a raid in the forest in 1953, and is convinced that her father's dead body is recorded in the archive as another

man's. What happened to her father's name? What became of the man who took his name?

Vilma in *Ahasuerus* could be the parallel character to Aliide in *Purge*. However, Vilma is blurred, ill-defined, because we learn only as much about her as the narrator or her stand-in bother to tell us. *I listened to my mother and wept for her for the first time in my life and also for our family that will never be. Only in the evening when I wept with my mother did I finally realise why we have never been able to be mother and child and that nobody from outside will ever understand how alienated we are (AU 272).*

What do we know about Vilma? She marries very young, a man much older than herself, whose family does not approve of

her as much as she would wish. She then has a child, but leaves it and goes to hide in the forest with her husband. Why does she not stay with her child? Because the child would be in danger? Because she wants the child to be safe with her sister? Because she does not care for the child? What happens to Vilma in the forest, when she dumps her husband Meinhard and chooses another man— Kaarel? Why does she do it?

In this and in the next novel, Mihkelson also writes about how the children and grandchildren (there may still be hundreds, if not thousands of them in Estonia) of the forest guerillas were influenced by the life and death of their parents “from the third and fourth generations onwards”. The author additionally wonders how the politically repressed people and their children suffered because they were not allowed to talk about their family traumas. The narrator in *The Sleep of Ahasuerus* visits archives and doctors, and her blood pressure reacts like the most sensitive barometer. Forty seven years have passed since the day in February her father was killed during a raid, but her body reacts as if all this has happened quite recently. In addition, there is a scene in *Plague Grave* where the narrator, driving along the roads near the village where she was born, suddenly hears brief, but very real sounds of a battle and learns later that this was exactly the place where a raid against the forest guerillas took place decades ago. Both her parents were there as well. *DYING IS AN ART, but killing isn't. My father was murdered and the explosion of painful energy has not faded away. I am floating on a sea of violence like a cork and beg for mercy, to no avail (AU 462).*

Mihkelson's books can also be read as psychological novels about the relationship between mother and daughter, between daughter and father, family and the desert of solitude and alienation that a family can be. “We were a rubbish family”, and “We were a bunch of traitors”, says Kaata in *Plague Grave*. This novel is additionally a story of two young girls, thirsty for life, whose destiny is determined by the war and what came after. Sanna hides in the forest with her

husband and leaves her child to her sister Kaata to look after. The book starts when the same child, half a century later, asks them both to explain how it all happened. What she learns contradicts our usual image of the heroic tale of the forest guerillas, as well as the most natural relationship between mother and child.

There is another layer in both novels, if indeed the reader is able to grasp it: the relationship between Estonians and Baltic Germans, between the manor and the village. The tenacity of German culture stretches from Estonian manor houses to imperial castles in Vienna, thus offering a kind of conciliatory dimension to the hideous family tragedies of a small nation, where a mother shares her bed with her stepson, a wife betrays her husband and a mother-in-law betrays her son-in-law, where a son lets his mother fade away in a house that resembles a haunted castle, and a daughter fears the knife in her mother's hand. The Estonian critics who accused Oksanen of demeaning the Estonian people and praised Mihkelson's work had not read Mihkelson carefully. But, never mind.

Mihkelson's characters are not characters in realist prose, just as her story is not a story in the usual sense. Her work focuses on questions to which she seeks answers, and on the language that she employs. Mihkelson uses late modernist poetics in order to tackle difficult matters so that they will seem personal (this is achieved by describing bodily reactions in her texts) as well as general. The writer is as subjective as possible, because in this way she is able to get closer to the reader. At the same time, she tries to protect her privacy, to reject in advance all suggestions of autobiography, which would inevitably limit this to a particular case. Mihkelson also wants to say that this could be the suppressed tragedy of many people, poisoning the Estonians' perception of history and the present time.

Everything Mihkelson writes about is seen at the time of writing. She is not writing because of historical events, and not because of the story. She writes in order to understand how such a time and such

stories have influenced the characters. The past is observed through the glance of today's viewer: *Is memory a disease of the brain? I asked. Is the short circuit of denied tensions like a self-absorbing hole that vanishes without a trace? (KH 318).*

The novel *The Torment of a Name* begins with the depiction of one of the happiest moments and most meaningful events in the history of Estonia, the movement toward restoring independence. In April 1988, the narrator participates in a huge public meeting in Tartu, at the end of the National Heritage Days. A procession moves from the university towards the Estonian Student Society, and the students for the first time openly wear the national colours, blue, black and white, although separately.

The novel *Plague Grave* was published in early May 2007, only a week after the unrest in Tallinn caused by the removal of the Soviet Bronze Soldier monument. The book was, of course, written before, but it starts in an amazingly prophetic way, describing the exact location of the monument as the "place of the final battle", surrounded by police tape. However, the author does not think that the final battle will be between Estonians and Russians, but between "our and their" conquerors and the conquered (those who deported people to prison camps and the forest guerillas?). In a sense, "they" are all "we", i.e. those who betrayed and those who were betrayed are all part of the same family. Using almost interrogation methods, the narrator questions her mother and her aunt, and what she hears from them constitutes confessions of back-stabbers and traitors. *For the sake of surviving, the convolutions of the brain have been swept clean (Plague Grave, p 261).* Abysses open up that cannot be filled by merciful time or a placatory fact. Only the murdered father remains pure; he was better than everyone else.

Kaata and Sanna have been in no-man's land, the name of which depends on who is looking back and from where. After the war, this no-man's land was a little island of freedom for thousands (the forest sets one free!), full of ideas and hopes, and still our

homeland, for others already a thicket, a place to hide to stay alive. It then became a human hunting field, still like home, but surrounded by invisible barbed wire.

The mutual hunting time is usually concealed from the public eye. Whoever remembers will forever suffer. Whoever is able to forget has no memory. The third kind dig up mass graves, and the bones of those who were killed separately are gnawed by animals, covered with dirt and soil (Plague Grave p 311).

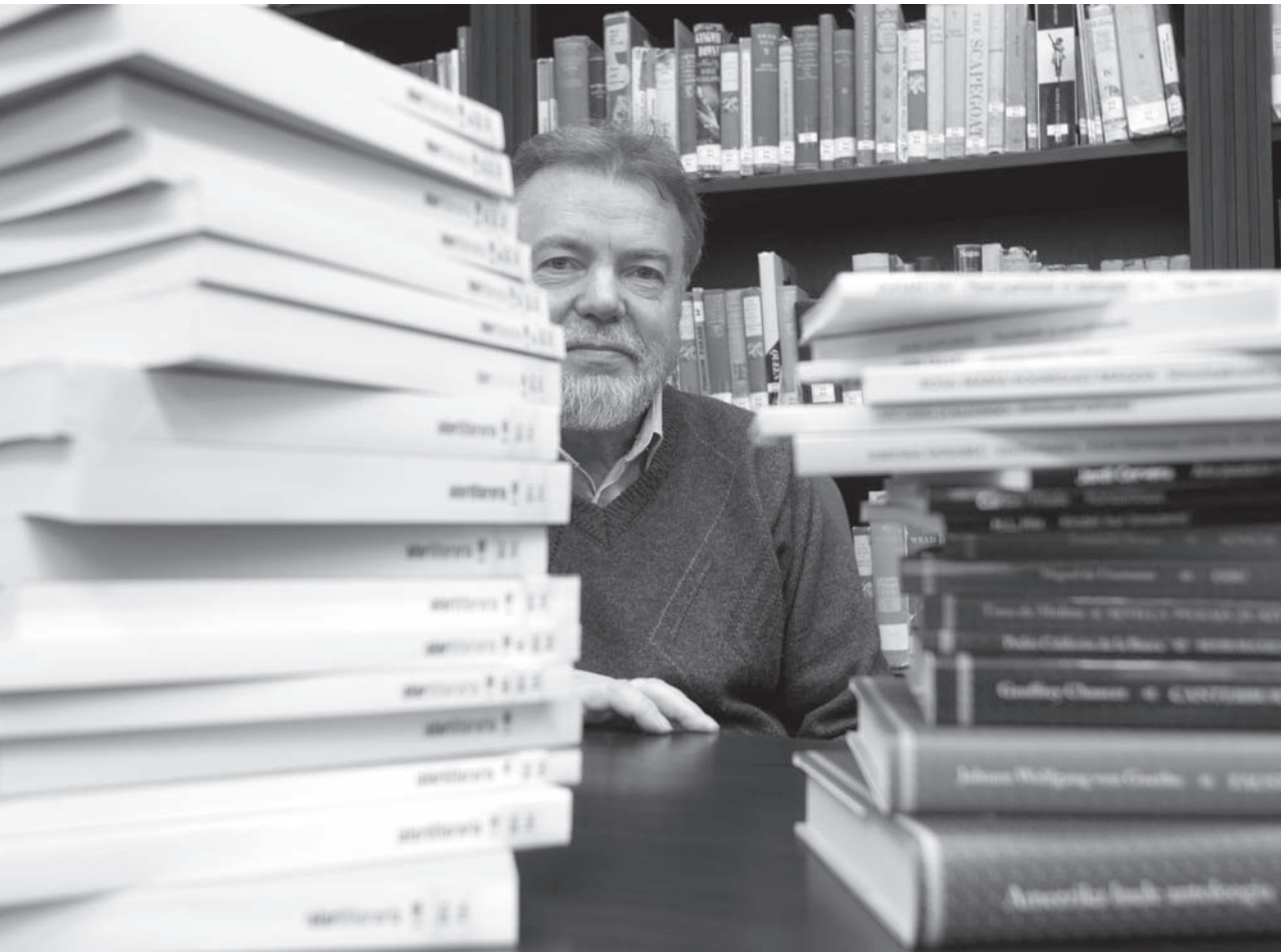
Mihkelson's novels are an uncomfortable read, for several reasons. What she depicts does not correspond to our official narrative of history. Heroes and traitors, victims and villains, are all mixed up and whoever decides to take a closer look at their deeds and motifs will be faced with ugly and painful revelations. At the same time, the end of *Ahasuerus*, for example, is quite cathartic. The literary critic Eva Rein admires the remarkable skill with which the novel tackles "individual and collective historical trauma in a way that does not increase pain or divide people, but creates a space where understanding, mercy and forgiveness are possible."

Amongst contemporary writers, Mihkelson's manner of writing about the past most resembles what Herta Müller achieved in her novel *Herztier*. Viivi Luik, who met and talked to Müller, said in an interview: "I got the impression that Herta was full of fear, terror, pain and courage, and she will not be at peace until she has poured everything out of her, until she has written her books. /—/ To this day, Herta Müller is tormented by Ceaușescu's Romania, from where she escaped. Or, in other words, Herta Müller has a dark area inside her, a hell, and her task in this world is to show it to people" (EE 18.X 2009).

*Mutatis mutandis*: this kind of dark area is also present in Mihkelson's work, although the crucial issue for her is to understand how people who have been through horrors can live on. Mihkelson, who according to Viivi Luik "tells us about the past, which can wake up at any moment", is a creator comparable to Herta Müller. Through her texts, a serious reader can reach depths only rarely achieved in literature.

Rein Veidemann's interview with

# Jüri Talvet



Jüri Talvet (Photo by Scanpix)

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**RV: Thirty-eight years ago, when you started your life as a lecturer, foreign literature (*väliskirjandus*, direct translation from Russian *zarubezhnaya literatura*) was still studied and taught at the University of Tartu, and Gustav Suits (prominent Estonian poet, 1883-1956) was a professor of Estonian and general literature. 'World literature', after all, does not mean the whole world. Isn't 'world literature' a model above national literatures and regions, as Goethe determined back in 1827?**

JT: In the Soviet Union, 'foreign literature' primarily meant Western literatures – those on the other side of the border. In the fifteen 'fraternal republics', Russian literature was not included in the notion of 'foreign literature', because it was considered 'our own'. At Leningrad University I defended my thesis (later accepted as PhD in Estonia) on Western literatures. Nobody could grasp literature created in the whole world, and therefore we are teaching world literature in the meaning conferred to it by Goethe and the German romantics: it is the part of national literatures that has transcended or is potentially able to transcend national borders. From the romantic era onwards, the canon of world literature has taken shape. Naturally, it is full of injustice, especially from the point of view of smaller cultures. However, if one ignores it, there would be very little chance to participate in the world of spirit.

**Here comes the often repeated question to professors of literature: is it really possible to teach literature?**

More than other arts, literature is also philosophy. You cannot teach any definite or final truths in philosophy either. The form of a work produces a tempting certainty, but literary works are hardly ever created because of form. Teaching literature means a discussion with students about the different ways of knowing truth, as it appears in the work of great minds; it also means trying to show how the most

talented critics/researchers/literary philosophers have interpreted it.

**You have been the leading light in Spanish studies in Estonia, although you studied English philology at university. How have you managed to bring together and balance the Anglo-Saxon and Iberian-Latinamerican worlds?**

I began studying Spanish in my second year in Tartu, encouraged by the only foreigner living in Tartu at that time, Arthur Robert Hone (our lecturer in English literature, who was a philologist of Romance languages and taught Spanish to those who wanted to learn it, extra curriculum), and by Ain Kaalep, who became my main teacher-mentor in the art of literary translation. Perhaps I was called to do this. At that time next to nothing was known in Estonia about Spain and the great Spanish-language literary tradition. The chance to discover something is the best possible stimulus. The closer I got to Spanish culture, the more I realised that it suited my mindset more than the Anglo-Saxon spirit – which does not mean at all that I do not greatly admire the work of many British and American writers.

**You have been a translator, compiler and editor. What has been the greatest challenge for you and what have you enjoyed most?**

I well remember how I rejoiced over my first published translation – it was Pedro Antonio de Alarcón's short story *El afrancesado*, published in January 1970 in the newspaper *Edasi*. I used to translate quite a lot, but after Estonia became independent again, my workload increased drastically: essentially I began to head two university chairs at the same time. Besides, the world opened to us, and every trip abroad, naturally, disrupted the working rhythm. In recent times I have reserved my translating capacity for poetry. I have perhaps derived the greatest pleasure from three grand works of the Spanish 'Golden Era': Calderón's *Life is a Dream* (1999, *La vida es*



*sueño*) and *The Great Theatre of the World* (2006, *El gran teatro del mundo*), and Tirso de Molina's *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest* (2006, *El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*). The first two have already been produced here, at the Tallinn Drama Theatre and at a church in Rakvere. I am now waiting for a brave director who would present Tirso de Molina's Don Juan to theatre audiences. After all, this is the character on whom all later Don Juans are based. I found myself in the role of compiler-editor mainly because I initiated three new series at the Tartu University Press: *Maailmakirjanduse tõlkevaramu* (Treasures of World Literature in Translation), *Kaasaegne mõte* (Contemporary Thought) and *Kaasajaluule* (Contemporary Poetry). To keep them going requires a lot of everyday practical work. For the last fifteen years, I have been editing the journal *Interlitteraria*, in various languages, on comparative

literature. My reward is knowing that there are many people who enjoy these publications.

**Your articles, published in many languages, certainly place you among the elite of the Estonian academic humanities. I made an attempt to count your works published in this century – about one hundred, plus the collection *Tõrjumatu äär* (Irrefutable Edge, 2005) and the book-essay *Sümbiootiline kultuur* (Symbiotic Culture, 2005), which crowned your achievements of the last decade. What has literary research meant to you?**

Literary research means reflecting on the deeper layers of spiritual-intellectual creation. For me it is certainly a philosophical activity, although I would not call myself a philosopher. At best, I might be a thinker following in Michel de Montaigne's footsteps. For this type of expression, an essayistic manner suits better

than strict literary research. *Irrefutable Edge* contains both.

**One of the major achievements in your career is promoting Estonian literary historians in the international arena through *Interlitteraria*, the journal of the Estonian Association of Comparative Literature. How are the Association and its publication doing?**

EACL unites most Estonian literary scholars, currently listing about 40-50 members. We organise international congresses every second year; the next one is this autumn and it will be the ninth. It will focus on relationships between world literature and national literatures. The monographic issues of *Interlitteraria* are based on the conference materials; in the intermediate years authors are invited to contribute on topics of their own choice, so no talented writer is excluded. The number of contributors keeps growing. The younger generation of Estonian researchers speak and write excellent English, so the language problem is no longer an issue.

**It might come as a surprise to some readers, but we cannot today talk about our national epic, Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg*, or the poet Juhan Liiv or the novelist Jaan Kross, without referring to your part in treating these giants of Estonian literature. You have tried to reinterpret the genius of Juhan Liiv. What has attracted you most in Liiv?**

Well, it requires more than one or two researchers to interpret a genius. Translating examples of Liiv's poetry into Spanish, I suddenly discovered that without any polemics or questions asked, there were circulating two versions of the famous poem "Ta lendab mesi-puu poole" ("It Flies to the Hive"), whereas one of them is clearly weaker. This made me want to take a closer look at Liiv's poetry. The deeper I got into it, the more I was convinced that his poetry had not actually been thoroughly examined at all. And yet Juhan Liiv is perhaps our greatest poet! I have compiled three collections of his poems; the most recent of them relies on manuscripts. Hopefully I can deal with

Liiv for some time to come, although there are signs that new interest in Liiv has already emerged in some nimble-witted souls of the younger generation. What our literature especially needs is a comparative approach outside the national context. Unlike the work of some of our other prominent writers, Liiv's poetry does not pale in comparison with European poetry.

**And still, as a creator your soul belongs to poetry. In recent years you have travelled from one European poetry festival to another. Last year you were in Bolivia, Spain and Romania. You have published a new collection of poetry, and your texts circulate in Spanish, English, Catalan and French. Who is the poet Talvet, as characterised by the literary scholar Talvet?**

An intellectual world traveller and a cosmopolitan, who more than anything needs love, home and the pure childish mind of all the beginnings.

**Two-thirds of your sixty-five years you have lived in Tartu. The city has given you a medal, and articles written about you mention 'Talvet's spirit of Tartu'. But your roots are in Pärnu. If you had to personify or find metaphors for the town of your birth and childhood, what would you say?**

Here is a poem (Translated by H. L. Hix) from my recent collection. It was inspired by the linden alley along which I have walked to the seaside innumerable times.

*PÄRNALEHTEDE VAHELT PÄIKE  
piserdab pähe kulda.*

*Seal kus lõpeb roheline  
algab kõrb.*

*Mere valutav selgus.*

*THROUGH LINDEN LEAVES THE SUN  
sprinkles gold on one's head.*

*Where green ends  
desert begins.*

*The sea's aching clarity.*



# Jüri Talvet

born in 1945 in Pärnu.

- Graduate of Tartu University in English philology (1972);
- PhD from Leningrad /Saint Petersburg University in Western literature (1981);
- Member of Estonian Writers' Union (since 1984);
- Chair and Professor of World Literature and Coordinator of Spanish Studies at Tartu University (since 1992);
- Juhan Smuul Annual Prize of Literature (in essay, 1986);
- Juhan Liiv Poetry Prize (1997);
- Ivar Ivask Memorial Prize for Poetry and Essay;
- Founder (1994) and Chairman (1994-2008) of EVKA (Estonian Association of Comparative Literature);
- Founder (1995) and Editor of *Interlitteraria*, EVKA's international annual journal of comparative literature;
- Member of the ICLA (International Comparative Literature Association) Executive Committee (2000-2007);
- Order of Isabel the Catholic for Hispanic activities by the Spanish Government (1992);
- Order of the White Star, 4<sup>th</sup> Class of the Republic of Estonia (2001);
- Medal of the City of Tartu (2008).

## WORKS (books)

### Poetry

- *Äratused* (*Awakenings*, Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1981)
- *Ambur and karje* (*The Archer and the Cry*, Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1986)
- *Hinge kulg and kliima üllatused* (*The Soul's Progress and Surprises of Climate*, Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1990)
- *Eesti eleegia and teisi luuletusi* (*Estonian Elegy and Other Poems*, Tallinn: Kupar, 1997)
- *Kas sul viinamarju ka on?* (*Do You Also Have Grapes?*, Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2001)
- *Unest, lumest* (*From Dreams, from Snow*, Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2005)
- *Silmad peksavad une seinu* (*Eyes Beat the Walls of Sleep*, Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2008)
- *Isegi vihm! on hing / Jüri Perler. Oo Hamlet, mu vend!* (*Even Rain Has a Soul / Jüri Perler. O Hamlet, My Brother!* Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2010)

### Poetry books in translation:

- *Elegía estonia y otros poemas* (a selection in Spanish, trans. by the author and Albert Lázaro Tínavt, afterword by Janika Kronberg, Valencia: Palmart Capitelum, 2002)
- *Estonian Elegy. Selected Poems* (trans. and afterword by H. L. Hix, Toronto: Guernica, 2008)
- *Del sueño, de la nieve. Antología 2001-2009.* (trans. Albert Lázaro-Tínavt; Zaragoza: Olifante, 2010)
- *Of Snow, of Soul. Poems* (trans. H. L. Hix; Toronto: Guernica, 2010)

## Prose (essay)

- *Teekond Hispaaniasse* (*A Journey to Spain*, Tallinn: Loomingu Raamatukogu, 1985)
- *Hispaaniast Ameerikasse* (*From Spain to America*, Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1992)
- *Hispaania vaim* (*The Spanish Spirit*, Tartu: Ilmamaa, 1995)
- *Ameerika märkmed ehk Kaemusi Eestist*  
(*American Notes or Contemplations of Estonia*, Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2000)
- *Sümbiootiline kultuur* (*Symbiotic Culture*, Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2005)
- *Tõrjumatu äär* (*The Irrefutable Border*, Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2005)

## Essay books in translation:

- *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis* (trans. by H. L. Hix, Toronto: Guernica, 2005)
- *Un enfoque simbiótico de la cultura postmoderna. Reflexiones desde U*  
(trans. by Sonia Bravo Utrera, Granada: Comares, 2009)
- *Una crida a la simbiosi cultural. Meditacions des d'U*  
(trans. by Josep Carles Laínez, Valencia: Institució Alfons el Magnànim, 2009)

## Translations

- Ramón Gómez de la Serna, *Gregeriid* (Tallinn: Loomingu Raamatukogu, 1974)
- Mario Vargas Llosa, *Kutsikad* (Tallinn: Loomingu Raamatukogu, 1975)
- Gabriel García Márquez, *Kadunud aja meri* (Tallinn: Loomingu Raamatukogu, 1980)
- *Tormese Lazarillo elukäik* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1983)
- Onelio Jorge Cardoso, *Mulle meeldib meri* (Tallinn: Loomingu Raamatukogu, 1985)
- Francisco de Quevedo, *Valik luulet* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1987)
- *lidse lootuse tagasitulek* (poetry by E. Diego, F. Jamás, R. Fernández Retamar, F. de Oraá; Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1988)
- Baltasar Gracián, *Käsioraakel and arukuse kunst* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1993)
- Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Elu on unenägu* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1999)
- Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Suur maailmateater* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2006)
- Tirso de Molina, *Sevilla pilkaja and kivist külaline* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2006)
- *On the Way Home: An Anthology of Contemporary Estonian Poetry*, translated with H. L. Hix (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2006)
- H. L. Hix, *Kindel kui linnulend* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2007)
- Carlos Vitale, *Kohaühtsus* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2008)
- Jordi Cervera, *Ära puuduta mind* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2010)

## Edited Books

- *Mehhiko novell* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1981)
- Ivar Ivask, *Tähtede tähendust tunda* (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2003)
- Juhan Liiv, *Meel paremat ei kannata / The Mind Would Bear No Better*, translated with H. L. Hix (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2007)
- Juhan Liiv, *Tuulehoog lõi vetesse* (Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2007)
- *Ameerika luule antoloogia. Poe'st, Whitmanist and Dickinsonist XX sajandi lõpuni* (An Anthology of American Poetry in Estonian; Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2008)
- Ivar Ivask, *Hetked igavikust* (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2010)
- Fernando Pessoa, *Sõnum. Valik loomingut* (with Ain Kaalep; Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2010)
- Juhan Liiv, *Oh elul ikka tera on. Mõttesalmid. "Killud"* (Tallinn, Tänapäev, 2010)

# Russians

## in Estonian Literature

b y R u t t H i n r i k u s

**Andrei Hvostov** was born in 1963 and graduated as a historian from the University of Tartu. In 2008 he was declared the best Estonian journalist; he has also written a novel, plays and short stories. In the introduction to his collection of short stories published in 2008 he writes: *Is a person born and raised in Estonia a stranger to us? I am not so much interested in the history of the Estonian nation as the history of Estonia, and this is the sum total of all the nationalities and human destinies of those who have lived here.*

At the beginning of Estonian literature, there was a schoolmaster-writer named **Suve Jaan** (Jaan Sommer 1777-1851), who wrote a book about the War of 1812 – popularly known as *When the French Went to Moscow* – titled *Russian Soul and Russian Heart* (1841). Suve Jaan was the first to introduce Russians into the budding Estonian literature.

Estonian literature has tackled the history of the people more than the history of the country. The Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg* (*Kalev's Son*, 1861) attempts to link the people and the country, but **Fr. R. Kreutzwald's** work is a well rather than a spring. It was inspired by the idea of giving people their history, their epic and thus their past – and then they might have a future as well. The epic deals mostly with three groups: Finns, Russians and various evil sorcerers who symbolise everything bad, including Germans. From Russia, the epic hero acquired building materials, and relations with Russia were purely

commercial; with Germans, on the other hand, he had old accounts to settle: his dealings with sorcerers in the epic are central to the epic.

Until becoming independent in 1918, Estonia belonged to the Russian empire. There were about 90 000 Russians in Estonia, whose nationality was not really significant. In 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, Estonians and Russians go about their own business and meet only occasionally. The same is true in early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature.

Some Russian characters can, for example, be found in the second volume of **A. H. Tammsaare's** epic novel *Truth and Justice*. The book describes the famous and controversial Treffner private grammar school in Tartu (Tammsaare himself studied there as well). The school had some Russian students and teachers. Between the two World Wars, a number of Russian exiles settled in Estonia after the Russian Revolution, and were described in literature. The short story *Tagahoovis* (In the Back Yard) by **Oskar Luts**, for instance, has several Russian characters, 'little people' who have found a quiet corner for themselves and are depicted with genuine sympathy.

The attitude towards Russians changed after 1940. This is vividly reflected in memoirs describing the Soviet troops arriving in Estonia after the enforced treaty allowing military bases in 1939. Locals laugh at the peculiar behaviour of the strangers; making fun of them makes them somehow smaller and the threat they pose less fearful. The authors of numerous memoirs

collected in recent decades emphasised the same details about Russians. A man born in 1923 remembers:

*The day in October 1939 when the Red troops arrived here was truly autumnal, cool and overcast. We were standing, desolate, in the Narva–Tallinn Road, waiting for the soldiers coming from the direction of Narva. The wind was from that direction too, so before we actually saw anything we heard the roar of the engines and a particularly unpleasant stink of fumes filled our nostrils...*

*Soldiers in grey uniforms sat in several rows in open lorries (a total of 20 men in each) facing one another; between their knees they had their rifles, which they clutched below the bayonets. A political commissar sat next to the driver, a red five-pointed star on his sleeve*

*Six months later, various anecdotes were going round about the wives of the Russian officers who thought the nightgowns bought in Estonia were fine evening dresses. And if they wanted five white rolls from the bakery they dutifully visited the shop five times. Obviously this was what they were used to. The memoirs were written in 1998. (Nobody in the Soviet era would have been so open and nobody would have offered or published such a text.) Perceiving the alien quality of newcomers is a normal process, a kind of defence mechanism that helps to strengthen self-identity.*

The ideological educational work that began in Estonia in the same autumn of 1940 did not achieve its aim quickly, not because of the Estonians' fierce national sentiments, but rather because of the aggressive nature of the propaganda, which evoked a negative reaction. The political repressions of 1940/41 and the violence of the Soviet power turned all Russians into enemies, most often seen in exile Estonian literature (e.g. Arved Viirlaid's novels). In Soviet Estonia, it was of course required to depict the 'historical friendship' between the Estonian and Russian peoples. A positive main character was obligatory, especially in books appearing right after World War II. The Finnish literary historian Pekka Lilja analysed the roles of Soviet heroes

in his research paper *The Arrival of the Hero in the Soviet Estonian Novel* (1980).

Nationality was not essential in this type of hero, although his past – his social origin and a spotless biography – were. Between 1944 and 1953, only seven novels were published in Estonia. All the well-known writers had fled or were silent in "internal exile". The situation gradually improved only in the 1960s. The leading writer then was **Osvald Tooming**. The plot of his *Pruuni katku aastal* (*In the Year of Brown Plague*, 1950), one of the seven books, takes place in a prison; the hero Maamets and the Russian ideal hero Kaplõgin are confident in their social role, i.e. maintaining faith in Comrade Stalin, who will lead his people to certain victory.

Besides prose, we can also find positive Russians in poetry, particularly in the poems of **Juhan Smuul**, the long-time chairman of the Writers' Union. Smuul was a singular talent who had a hierarchical world-view and a need to admire someone. His written portraits of Russians and simplified pictures of Soviet life are sincere, but not really convincing. One of his poems contains a chapter titled *Venelased* (Russians), where the Russians are described as follows: "What used to be mine is now ours, is what you said back then – when you had so little, but helped us still." Smuul's poem *Mina, kommunistlik noor* (I, a Young Communist) has a section titled *To Stepanov*, which extols a man severely wounded in the war who works long hours as a tractor driver although he suffers great pain. The measure of a hero is selfless work, and his strongest feeling is a sense of duty to the Communist Party, its leader and homeland, which form a kind of Holy Trinity.

The first post-war Russian character who was recognised amongst Estonian readers and almost became famous crops up in **Lilli Promet's** novel *Primavera* (1971), written in the form of a travel diary. The room-mate of the main character is Fevronia, an operetta-like comical type, who evokes great joy of recognition in readers. Almost everyone has met a super-active, aggressive, comical character

trying to establish primitive ideas. Fevrona distributes wooden spoons amongst hotel staff.

An attitude towards Russians is inevitably expressed in many memoirs about life in Siberia, as well as in books about deportations. Russians are not linked to the repressive Soviet authorities, quite the contrary – there are frequent kind words about the Russians who helped others to survive, saving them from starvation, while being nearly serfs themselves. At the same time, the writers emphasise different temperamental and cultural dissimilarities; strangers are measured against the familiar – oneself.

Trying to cope with the long forced labour in Siberian camps, the Estonians are desperate to keep their children from becoming Russians. They nevertheless adopt plenty of Russian traits and, once back in Estonia, they are treated differently, as aliens. This topic was tackled, for example, by **Tiia Kriisa** in her short story *Tüdruk* (Girl).

In her novel *Ära* (Away, 1995), set in the 1960s, **Maimu Berg** explains: “The reality was dreadful. More Russians arrived all the time”, and adds: “Everything was still so close in time; Estonia had only recently been ruled by Estonians, and the alien power had just invaded and destroyed people.”

The characters Tamara and Enn from the novel *Away* wish to flee from that depressing reality, believing that the FAMILIAR is somewhere outside, as STRANGERS rule at home.

Enn says that the Russians in St Petersburg were totally different: they seemed to be in their rightful place. It was so easy in childhood; there were two sides: the Russians, who killed Estonians, and the Germans, who fought the evil deceitful Russia. The FAMILIAR people were the Estonians, who had to manage between two big raptors like a tiny defenceless swallow. However, it becomes clear in the novel that AWAY does not automatically mean paradise. Tamara never gets used to life in a foreign country and, by losing touch with their home(land), Tamara and Enn lose themselves and each other.

Maimu Berg's next novel, *Ma armastasin venelast* (*I Loved a Russian*), was partly inspired by Tammsaare's *Ma armastasin sakslast* (*I Loved a German*), without the latter's historical, nation-disparaging connotations. The other inter-text is Nabokov's *Lolita*. The narrator in Berg's novel is a girl who grew up without a father and whose search for him acquires an erotic undertone and becomes passion.

“Perhaps even back then I did not quite correspond to the general image of a 13-year-old schoolgirl, just like he did not correspond to the image of a 40-year-old Russian.”

He is a doctor, the son of an officer of the Russian White Army, who has adapted to Estonia. The story is intensified by the time period: the grey Soviet era without any sensations, where false morality and piety flourished. The love affair is distorted by ideological and political accusations: the Russian nationality of the paedophile casts a shadow over the entire Russian nation and damages the inviolable friendship between the Estonian and Russian peoples.

The author does not avoid complexity in describing the particular time. For Berg, the possibility of love is a universal litmus test of the hostile era. Concerning the Russian, it is essential that he is not a Soviet Russian, but an adopted Russian, a White Army officer. This Russian is a romantic stranger, better than the others.

Besides this different Russian, there are various Russian characters (in the novels and short stories of Enn Vetemaa, Kaur Kender, Eva Park, Tarmo Teder and others) in the last few decades of Estonian literature. In most cases, they are identified by their jobs and locations, but also by their appearance and behaviour, in a rather similar and simplified way. Russian men are either businessmen, often specialising in shady dealings, or de-classed unskilled workers; women are cleaners or prostitutes. Their lifestyle includes excessive alcohol and drunken brawls, and they are associated with ugliness and filth. It is difficult to ascertain whether they are changed by the milieu or whether they spoil the milieu by heedlessly destroying and defiling it. They live on the outskirts, in derelict houses, ugly and bleak places, but despite the

dirt and unhealthy conditions they are paradoxically strong and vital.

A new aspect is presented in **Mari Saat's** short novel *Lasnamäe lunastaja* (*Redeemer of Lasnamäe*, 2008). In Estonian, the title can have two meanings: the Redeemer is from Lasnamäe (genitive) or he/she redeems Lasnamäe. This is the last of the huge dormitory districts in Tallinn built during the Soviet era, a stone desert, which served as an efficient migration pump for Soviet ethnic policy. The refrain of one of the most popular songs during the Singing Revolution of the late 1980s, repeated like a mantra, was 'stop Lasnamäe'. The majority of the district's nine-storey houses are inhabited by Russians who arrived rather late and suddenly found themselves face to face with radical changes and a totally different world-view. Lasnamäe is thus a symbol and a bundle of problems.

Mari Saat's seemingly simple tale has two protagonists who are quite atypical of Estonian prose: two Russian women, the mother Natalja Filippovna and her daughter Sofia. Still pretty in her forties, in a buxom Slavic style, the mother loses her job. The daughter, in her late teens, studies at an Estonian grammar school, whose name means wisdom. The unravelling events involve Sofia's future, as a large sum of money is needed to pay the dentist. The dentist explains that if they do not immediately have the painfully expensive braces put on Sofia's teeth, her whole appearance could be deformed and her future thus destroyed. Natalja has to sacrifice herself and agrees to replace a woman whose illness prevents her from carrying on her 'job' – sleeping with men whom her taxi-driver husband brings home. Sofia, too, gets a job, replacing her wealthy classmate who has to read out books and newspapers to her grandmother. The banal situations still offer something nice: one of the 'clients' falls for Natalja. However, the crime-plagued Lasnamäe is very much alive, and the man is attacked by Sofia's contemporaries, two drug addicts, whom Sofia tries to redeem.

Who redeems and who is being redeemed? Reading carefully, this little pious tale of two women acquires different dimensions and

describes sacrifices, crime, redemption and hope, referring to, besides real Estonian life, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. Who then redeems Lasnamäe? According to Saat, the redeemers are mostly from the lower classes, bearing their crosses and prepared for sacrifices.

From the four stories in **Andrei Hvostov's** collection *Võõrad lood* (*Strange Tales*, 2008), one, *Sinised mäed* (Blue Mountains), received the annual short story award. Hvostov's story starts like this: "Once upon a time there lived in Sillamäe a small girl called Julia", who lived her vivacious child's life in a big ugly house in an industrial region. Her father's drinking plays an inevitable role in their daily survival. The playground is a place called Sinimäed, where bloody fighting once took place, of which practically nothing is known. The ending seems like an epilogue and offers the author's interpretation: "After graduating from secondary school, she went to study in Leningrad. She never returned to Sillamäe or Estonia. *Sinised mäed II* (Blue Mountains II) describes the battles fought at Sinimäed from the point of view of a German in a tank brigade and ends with a vision of children playing on the battlefield, one of whom is a girl, "a joyous child of peacetime".

The critic Jaan Undusk has claimed that "Estonians fended off the aggressive Russians and Russian ideology in literature by providing them with a grey background or the role of weird characters, thus making clear who mattered and who did not, who was master both in life and in mind."

Estonian literature placed Russians in a rather marginal place until 1940, and with the exception of a few writers, such as Juhan Smuul, who represented the required attitude, this kind of position persisted throughout the Soviet era.

Examining the borders of the 'familiar' and the 'alien' on different levels of psychological and social-cultural life, we see that the Russian topic in Maimu Berg's novels constitutes a denial and rejection of the entire Soviet way of life and a flirtation with Russian romanticism, by which the Russian (in *I Loved a Russian*) is betrayed. Mari Saat sought redemption, but Hvostov stated it briefly: "the Russian goes away".



# Andres

## Beyond the Empire of Signs<sup>1</sup>

*japan is far*

*estonia is further still*

*say the winds*

*(Jüri Üdi)*

**Looking at literary relations between Estonia and Japan and the total number of translated works, we can agree with the poet that Japan is far, but Estonia is for some reason even further from Japan.**

Since 1890, when the first book introducing Japan was published in Estonian<sup>2</sup>, about 50 Japanese works of fiction have appeared here, most of which have been translated from the original since mid-1960. During that time, just four works of Estonian writers have appeared in Japan<sup>3</sup>, all translations from Russian or English.

Such a difference should not come as a surprise to anyone because, as the poet Fujitomi Yasuo said while describing his visit to Estonia in 2005, the Estonian population is about the same as the population in Nagasaki Prefecture on Kyūshū Island. What's more, the railway station in Andres Ehin's hometown Rapla reminded him of the Wild West. In the same article the poet talked about the well-preserved Estonian nature: alvars, lady's slipper orchids and cornflowers, incredible stacks of firewood and Muhumaa ostrich farms, where he finally

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to the title of Roland Barthes's book *Empire of Signs*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1983. Translated by Richard Howard.

<sup>2</sup> *Japani rahvas ja nende evangelist Niisima*. 1890. Tallinn: A. Michwitz

<sup>3</sup> Aino Pervik. *Mōrabāsan no chōnōryoku (Kunks-moor)*. Tōkyō: Dainihon-tosho, 1991., Jaan Kross. *Kyōjin to yobareta otoko. (Keisri hull)*. Tōkyō: Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 1995., Jaan Kross. *Marutensu kyōju no tabidachi (Professor Martensi ärasõit)*. Tōkyō: Bensei, 2000., Andres Ehin. *Sitikas suudleb kuud. The Chafer kisses the Moon. Koganemushi ga tsuki ni kisu suru*. Shichigatsudō, 2008. English translations by Jim Kacian, Japanese translations by Natsuishi Ban'ya.



# Ehin

23

b y T a i m i P a v e s

was able to try out his ostrich language, which he first used in the prose poem *Ostrich* (1985).

Another speaker of ostrich language seems to be our prominent surrealist poet Andres Ehin, the translator of Fujitomi's poems into Estonian. How else but by 'transcending reality' has Ehin managed, without knowing Japanese, to become a major player in the literary relations between the two countries.

Ehin has translated both the classical and modern poetry of Japan. Ehin's free verse poems and haikus have been translated into Japanese by Fujitomi Yasuo, one of the most versatile and acclaimed modernist poets, and also the co-author of the collection *Kuitund* (The If Hour) published in 2010<sup>4</sup>, as well as by Natsuishi Ban'ya, a professor of literature at Meiji University and the president of the World Haiku Association. The latter has published Ehin's haikus in the journals *Ginyu*<sup>5</sup> and *World Haiku*<sup>6</sup>, and published Ehin's three-language collection *Sitikas suudleb kuud* (A Chafer Kisses the Moon) in 2008.

Ehin's poetry readings and sound poetry have attracted listeners all over the world; as

an honorary member of the World Haiku Association, he has performed in Japan several times: at WHA conferences in Tokyo and at the author's evening in the Museum of Contemporary Poetry, Tanka and Haiku in Kitakami. Ehin had the unique opportunity to read aloud one his most appreciated haikus: *kuused on kõrged/ kuid upuvad ometi/ lindude laulu* (fir trees are high/ but drown nevertheless/ into birds' song) directly to Her Majesty Empress Michiko of Japan during the royal visit to Estonia in spring 2007.

Although mainly through English, Ehin has with apparent ease managed to wade through the occasionally mysterious network of meanings of an alien culture and language, tightly interwoven with Buddhism and beliefs in nature, without getting too much entangled in it. He has of course also been lucky to find other poets and translators who think along similar lines, and enjoy humour and playfulness. Politely enquiring and attentively listening, he has not rushed to express his opinions, but has felt serious fascination with Oriental philosophy and literature, and has developed his intuition enough to avoid getting 'lost in translation'. Under Ehin's seemingly tranquil surface, a bright spark constantly glows, often bursting into high flames and lighting the poet's eyes and

<sup>4</sup> Andres Ehin, Fujitomi Yasuo. *Kuitund. The If Hour. Shiroi hi*. Tallinn: Estonia Ajalehed AS, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> *Ginyu*, No 13. Japan: Ginyu Press, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> *World Haiku*. No 3. Shichigatsudō, 2007.

incredibly nuanced voice with a special power and splendour. Ehin has perfectly mastered the art of existing in the moment, and is able to share this with his readers and listeners. Why else would Fujitomi decide to title *The If Hour* in Japanese *Shiroi hi* (White flame)? Ehin has the fire of the white northern nights in him!

Fujitomi calls Andres Ehin a pagan poet who creates fantasy and not reality. Ehin could hence be considered a surrealist, but I agree with Fujitomi that Ehin's surrealism is not the French kind. Ehin paints magical poetic images, such as 'deep below ground'<sup>7</sup>, 'apartment made of dog'<sup>8</sup> and 'moist-eyed'<sup>9</sup>. In his own words, he likes to depict moods and states of the soul, which indeed can only be expressed in poetry. Ehin claims to follow Thomas Aquinas's definition of art: 'Art is a game and magic', well knowing that if the game becomes magic, it is no longer just a game. In the poem 'eternity in the bathroom', Ehin has even 'domesticated' eternity, but in a way that does not even try to create any illusions about anybody else being master in that house.

<sup>7</sup> deep, below ground, breathe

birds  
buried in dirt  
if you dust one clean  
her cornflower plumage  
will luminously shine  
such birds are  
moose beetle swallow  
ultramarine mole-eagles  
with these birds  
Estonians play at being Cherokees  
Cherokees play at being Estonians  
but these birds will allow  
only the indigenous  
to pluck their feathers so blue  
we Estonians and Cherokees hail  
from the land of tri-coloured dogs  
and underground birds  
but where are we headed

*Translated by Patrick Cotter*

<sup>8</sup> Dog Apartment

Imagine an apartment made of dog  
Three rooms of bark, a bathroom of snout  
The cold tap dribbles, the hot tap slobbers  
An apartment made of dog with floors  
Which howl at ceiling lamps at night as if they were moons

Imagine an apartment made of dog  
Which detests the very scent of cat  
An apartment made of dog  
Whose sofa hairs bristle  
At the spraying of even distant moggies.

*Translated by Patrick Cotter*

<sup>9</sup> MOIST-EYES

in spring  
sorrow  
long-limbed sorrow  
appears on the city streets from the great forest

it sometimes happens  
that she has the calf of sorrow with her

the head of sorrow  
is tired from carrying those large antlers

police cars surround sorrow  
force her through an archway  
and from there to a courtyard  
surrounded by grey stone walls  
where sorrow is shot with a tranquilliser dart

several uniformed men  
hoist mother-sorrow deep asleep  
into the back of a lorry

now the policemen dare  
to come up close  
to the moist-eyed calf of sorrow

slices of rye bread in their hands

*Translated by Ilmar Lehtpere*

The poems of both authors indeed abound in IFs (see Ehin's poem 'so canvases are covered with the flaming red blood of insects'<sup>10</sup>). IF is a supposition, a flash, which like a key lets fantasy out of its cage and wakes it from the mundane, and in order to see the mundane. IF is constantly searching, inciting philosophical discussion and touching the deepest and most mystical back-grounds of existence.

It is difficult to realise while reading the poems in *The If Hour* when the poems of one author flow smoothly into the other's. You just suddenly notice that, at one end of the world, Estonians play American Indians and American Indians play Estonians, whereas at the other end a character is sitting in a pub, legs crossed like a Chinese monk, and smoking.

We certainly have to smile at getting lost in the reflection of a mirror<sup>11</sup> or at a director whose balding head in a flower vase suddenly sprouts roots when the secretary happens to be out<sup>12</sup>. Jokes in such pictures are quintessential and are clearly part of our life. Fujitomi's

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<sup>10</sup> **So-So Hour**

so canvases are covered with the flaming red blood  
of insects  
so a cat's wail rips the heads off ants  
so the horizon stops being an imaginary line  
and turns into a wide frothy stream  
so shadows assume their own lives  
and bodies become shadows  
so twigs start to sing psalms and  
play dominoes  
so crayfish start to infest the streets at night  
so near an old farmhouse two huge fish  
raise up their tails in the earth  
so a crowd of people stand on a bridge  
as if looking at the sunset  
but really they look into their own eyes  
and so it all lasts an hour  
so we call it so-so hour

at so-so hour the ground is white and the sky is  
black  
and a lot of small little so-and-sos shine in the black  
sky  
and one round full-so that is the brightest  
but when the so-so hour is finished it begins to but  
so-and-sos start to pale  
the sky turns white and the ground turns black  
a great but rises into the sky  
its rays make the warm shadows numb with cold  
and drive them back to their bodies.

*(Andres Ehin. Translated by Patrick Cotter)*

<sup>11</sup> **Dressing table with three mirrors**

Facing three mirrors, a woman was laughing  
inwardly while behind her a hidden man was  
peeking. The peeping man was also reflected in the  
mirror. "Uh, oh, this won't do," thought the woman,  
combing out her hair. "Uh, oh, this won't do," thought  
the man, too, and was going to just walk past. But,  
curious, he was about to look in the mirror again  
when, tagging along from behind, another man was  
reflected in the mirror. The woman was applying  
make-up so intently that she didn't know who she

was. Well, how many men and women were there in  
the mirror within the mirror within the mirror?

*(Fujitomi Yasuo. Translated by John Solt.)*

<sup>12</sup> **A VEGETATED DIRECTOR**

with his head thrust into a vase among flowers  
and feet almost to the ceiling  
the general director had to spend  
half of his workday  
after a while  
an exaggerated fear haunted him  
that someone might take advantage  
of his helpless state  
loosen the strings  
of his crocodile shoes  
and take them

then a much graver worry  
developed in his mind  
my head has been under water for several hours  
why don't I get choked  
have I really grown gills

a quarter of an hour before the end of the workday  
the secretary who had left under mysterious  
circumstances  
returned  
seeing her superior in such a position  
she was very frightened  
and called for help  
together they pulled the director's head  
from the vase  
as he was being pulled out  
the director saw himself  
mirrored in the window

he saw that his hair and beard  
had turned into thin roots  
on the leg hairs  
that could be seen between a sock and a cuff  
flowers were blooming

I am vegetated thought the director  
this didn't prevent him  
from flying to Brussels the next morning

*(Andres Ehin. Translated by J. Talvet and H.L. Hix)*



Andres Ehin (Photo by Scanpix)

ancient wisdom clothed with Oriental ease and Ehin's magic words creep deep into the reader's soul and cause a state of mind that surpasses language. The entire perceptible space is suddenly filled with laughter! There is an apt Japanese proverb: 'When the Zen monk laughs, the world trembles.' Perhaps you have noticed that the monks indeed laugh quite often.

Ehin has said that all poems actually contain a haiku – traditionally only a 17-syllable form of poetry, which should be able to address us within one breath.

Andres Ehin has said that he mostly writes 'ordinary poetry' and only occasionally haikus, but it is his haikus that have led me to the discovery of his wealthy world of free verse.

Either consciously or subconsciously, Ehin has recognised the essence of haikus, which for him seem to constitute the hallmark of all other arts.

*Sitikas suudleb  
kiirelt kahanevat kuud.  
Suu saab tal kuldseks.*

*A chafer kisses  
the diminishing moon.  
Its mouth becomes golden.<sup>13</sup>*

The moment captured in this haiku reaches much further than a witty observation or an unexpected association between things. It seems to contain a compact story, a fairy-tale or legend, plus a kind of spherical atmosphere, which embraces both the huge and the almost imperceptibly small. In this haiku, perception pushes its roots into both the micro and the macro world.

The haiku does not describe, nor can it be subjected to conceptual analysis. A haiku can only be explained through itself. The birth and life of a haiku takes place in our mind; it is a sudden realisation that expands consciousness. Buddhism does not, of course, treat this as a finite state, but rather as a result of a stage in training.

The haiku's ability to create unuttered associations and causal sequences is connected with silence. This certainly does not mean that haikus lack ideas and meanings – quite the opposite. The 'cutting words' (*kireji*) in Japanese, substituted in other languages by a perceptible pause, produce a momentary disruption that raises a question or a premonition (usually at the end of the first or last line), or mark an emotional culmination. Such silence is like the dominant tone in music, aspiring towards a solution and operating together with the reader. Using a photography metaphor, a poet exposes (places into light) and the reader develops the picture. Honesty is crucial in exposure – a good haiku cannot

imitate others (unless it is done in obvious parody<sup>14</sup>). Developing, however, occurs according to the reader's mood and earlier experience.

*Luikede lennust  
muutuvad pilvevillad  
valgemaks veelgi.*

*The flight of swans  
makes white wool of clouds  
even whiter.*

*Talv tuli äkki.  
Lehtede langemist lumme  
kuulan ööd läbi.*

*Winter arrived suddenly.  
I listen all the night  
to the falling of a leaf into snow.*

These haikus are like miniature paintings, where you can feel the touch of the absolute and the silkiness of language.

Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), who was the first to use the term 'haiku' (instead of the earlier 'haikai' or 'hokku'), says that the haiku is visual, close to figurative art, especially an Indian ink painting. Another significant feature is the connection with a specific place and specific seasons (*kigo* – a key word typical of a season, aiming at opening up the reader's personal set of experiences). The haiku emphasises tiny details, an inward glance, which make the senses especially brisk.

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<sup>13</sup> Here and henceforth all poems in Jim Kacian's translations from the haiku collection *The Chafer Kisses the Moon*. Tōkyō: Shichigatsudō, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> As an example, I would like to present Matsuo Bashō's famous haiku: the ancient pond/ a frog leaps in/ the sound of the water (Translated by Donald Keene), and two witty poems created on the basis of it: ancient pond/ his ass jumps in/ the sound of water/ (Fujitomi Yasuo, translated by John Solt); a frog statue/ doesn't jump into the pond/ the sound of silence (Droc Drumheller, winner of the World Haiku festival Pécs, 2010).

*Aednik ei teagi,  
et ta kulmukaared on  
sirelilillad.*

*The gardener does not even know  
that the arches of his eyebrows  
have become violet like lilac blossoms.*

Although seasons and the changing of seasons are among the essential topics of haikus, numerous other motifs are used nowadays, including illness, solitude and homelessness. Such haikus, however, are not in the least gloomy, because the instability of life and mundane things are considered obvious. This, indeed, is the crucial difference between the Oriental and Occidental ways of thinking.

*Nii üürikesest  
elu peitusemängust  
laulab igavik.*

*Eternity sings songs  
about the ephemerality  
of hide-and-go-peek games of life.*

.....  
*Langenud lehti  
on kalmistul rohkem kui  
surnute hingi.*

*In the graveyards  
there are more fallen leaves  
than souls of the dead.*

Haikus contain sensitive language, but avoid too much emotion and forceful metaphors. It is normal to read a haiku twice – the second time as an echo. Reading it only once might allow the emotion caused by the poem to dominate. Echo, on the other hand, alleviates and stimulates depth and encourages the seeking of a wider meaning.

The haiku is nevertheless one of the most complicated forms of poetry. David

Cobb, a poet and the President of the British Haiku Society, has said: ‘One can *know* the main facts about Japanese haiku without having much feeling for them; and one can *feel* quite deeply about haiku without knowing many facts – intuition sometimes supplies important insights.’

There are innumerable haiku fans and clubs in Japan, where people are taught how to compose haikus, although genuinely amazing results are not often achieved even there. Having developed in the Japanese linguistic and cultural space, the haiku has become an international phenomenon, attracting both translators and poets. The President of the World Haiku Association, Natsuishi Ban'ya, greatly appreciates some Western haiku writers, such as the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer (1931-) and the Portuguese poet Casimiro de Brito (1936-). Andres Ehin should certainly be added to this list.

*Kuused on kõrged,  
kuid upuvad ometi  
lindude laulu.*

*Fir trees are high  
but drown nevertheless  
into birds' song.*  
.....

*Lahkumistunnil  
veerevad surnud linnud  
mäenõlvast alla.*

*The time of our parting has comeÆ  
dead birds rolling down  
from the slope of the home-mountain*

Estonia's four seasons and the Finno-Ugric perception of the world, plus the syllabic nature of the language, make it relatively easy to build a translation bridge between Estonian and Japanese, at least compared with other languages. In his haikus, as well as in his translations, Andres



Ehin has quite firmly stuck to the classical number of syllables and other principles, although form is quite relaxed even in Japan. What's more, haikus with free metre and form can altogether ignore the obligatory vocabulary and the number of syllables. What matters is capturing the mood, freshness and novelty of the poetic picture, and the harmony with nature. In order to achieve that, a poet must perceive the rhythm and sound of the poem, so that an inspiring whole emerges as a result of cutting words or a pause.

Ehin's language is curt, but precise and playful; his fantasy is plastic and full of surprises. His poetry displays excellent sounds and musicality. In addition, Ehin's experience of surrealism affords the texts a special magical dimension.

A successful haiku offers an experience that sharpens senses and perception. This could be more than the poet initially foresees. Ehin does not know Japanese, and unlike the representatives of the academic world, who often overemphasise the 'empire of signs', he mainly relies on his own intuition and language experience (he naturally compares different translations and, if possible, consults the authors and other experts). However, thanks to his excellent inner poet's ear, his haikus and translations ring true and are free of the Japanese classical poetry's cultural-historical burden and innumerable comments, which have inevitably accumulated in the course of several hundred years. This is especially true considering the Japanese special attachment to earlier precedents, which occasionally acquire mythological dimensions.

Andres Ehin's own haikus have been translated into the 'real haiku-language' mostly in free verse. For more conservative readers, this continues to raise questions, because the free-verse work of even their own haiku writers evokes quite a bit of

suspicion (rhythm and sound have apparently become so deeply rooted in Japanese consciousness that the new seems alien and unacceptable). If a haiku is a translation, it is not expected that all the principles of haiku will be followed. The certain distance of a translation liberates the haiku from prejudices and leads the reader to the most essential aspects: freshness, innovation and a perception of nature.

Natsuishi Banya, the translator of Ehin's haikus into Japanese, says in his introduction to the collection *A Chafer Kisses the Moon*: 'At its best, haiku writing surpasses the egocentrism in which most Western poets are unconsciously plunged. Through haiku writing, we build up a passage, a bridge between ego and meta-ego. Many of Andres Ehin's haiku illustrate this affirmation. A typical one:

*I am a striped squirrel  
on the fir trees of my nightdreams.  
Endless forests.*

This 'striped squirrel' is evidence of an ego; more interestingly, it is the meta-ego that reminds us of our radical and 'stripped' existence. In this haiku, ego and meta-ego are melted into a new and integrated dimension naturally and supernaturally.'

Ehin's haikus, and especially his free verse, lack a clear position of 'I', although this pronoun crops up in many titles of his poems. Ehin's 'I' contains a great deal of selflessness. His 'I' is blurred, indeterminate, as in the Japanese language. We could say that Ehin is a collection of many different 'I's. This is part of the self-reflective world, of the countless patterns of the universe.

The dissolving of Ehin's poetic self into the universe is close to Buddhist ideas and aims. The Heart Sutra emphasises that all dharmas are empty: form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Roland Barthes describes this via the





mirror: 'In the Orient, apparently, the mirror is empty; it is the symbol of the very emptiness of symbols. "The mind of the perfect man," says one Tao master, "is like a mirror. It grasps nothing but repulses nothing. It receives but does not retain". The mirror intercepts only other mirrors, and this infinite reflection is emptiness itself /.../. Hence the haiku reminds us of what has never happened to us; in it we recognize a repetition without origin, an event without cause, a memory without person, a language without moorings' (Roland Barthes. *Empire of Signs*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1983. p. 79).

Ehin's contact with the East is inner and deep. Without this contact, a person who translated via a third language would not be able to reach the undercurrents of the text. Ehin mostly can do this. When I showed Ehin's haiku collection *A Chafer Kisses the Moon* to a Japanese friend, he said he was very much impressed. He was amazed that

there could be something so genuinely Japanese in the European Christian cultural space. He called it a perception of nature, which reached him via *nn. kokoro no hanashi*, the language of the heart (the subconscious, or intuitive communication that occurs in a passive, relaxed state).

The Japanese, who truly appreciate a refined perception of nature, have mostly been urban citizens for several generations and their understanding of nature derives from texts, especially classical poetry and literature, rather than from nature itself. Reality does not enter the picture. For ordinary people, real nature seems rather alien and even frightening, with all its creatures and mysterious sounds and smells, annoying insects, sharp prickly plants etc. The nature that can be safely enjoyed is only in clean temple gardens (every branch there is obviously arranged by the human hand), in the world of texts and images.



Ehin does not have to observe nature as an illustration of a classic text or an idea. Ehin's senses do not need to be emptied; they already are, allowing him to experience beauty around him without endlessly associating it with various discourses.

To a Japanese perception of nature, Ehin adds some extraordinary, fresh and sweet-smelling sensitivity, which can be experienced in a forest and especially in a bog, where silence and peace halt time and thoughts, and thus sharpen the senses. Observing similar stunted pine trees in the bog landscape for decades, you learn to notice details in yourself and around you. The fact that Ehin wanders around in nature can clearly be sensed in his poetry.

*Sügiskuu paistel  
lõhnavad karukarvad  
hoopis teisiti.*

*Beneath the light of autumn moon  
hairs of bear smell  
totally different.*

There are very few who can smell a bear's hair in the light of an autumn month. There are still fewer who could say that this was different from the normal smell of bear hair. Is there anybody at all who has had the courage to smell? If anyone, then perhaps our distant ancestors, who used to celebrate bear wakes. A bear's hair exudes the call of the primeval forest, its might and magic. The wisdom of primitive peoples. This cannot be learned from any text.

# P Estonian literature in P r a e

b y R e e t K l e t t e n b e r g

The friends of Estonia and Estonians living in Hungary certainly cannot complain about a shortage of things Estonian. Of course, in this case we are not talking about Estonian black bread or other typical foods, but food of the mind. People are working hard in various places so that Estonian culture can find a place and leave its small marks in the abundant and colourful cultural life of Hungary. A significant role in enriching the menu of Estonian cultural food is played by various institutions: the Hungary–Estonia Society, which has introduced Estonian literature and culture, organised translation competitions and during the last twenty years enabled Estonian writers and social figures to perform; the Estonian Institute, which has been operating for over ten years; Szimplafilm, headed by Kreet Paljas; and study centres of the Estonian language in Budapest, Debrecen, Szeged and Szombathely.

For many years now, Estonian Week in spring has presented Estonian films. The week-long cultural programme was initiated and is organised and coordinated by the film enthusiast Kreet Paljas, focusing on short films and features, although it offers some space to other arts. Good ideas and initiatives always find one another. It was thus decided to start the 2010 culture week with an evening of literature.

Quite a bit of Estonian literature has been published in Hungarian, thanks to translators of the older generation: Gábor Bereczki, Győző Fehérvári and Béla Jávorszky. They have made a large number of Estonian literary classics available in Hungarian. It is by no means easy today to sell such 'exotic' literature, and beginners find it very hard to enter the market. However, one of the favourite subjects in recent years of the Estonian language classes at Budapest's Eötvös Loránd University is translating fiction. Since the 2006/2007 spring semester, this course can be chosen as a separate subject or cycle. Some enthusiastic young translators keep demanding new texts, which they can then turn into their mother tongue.

As for its translation policy, Hungary could serve as an example to Estonia: there is a Hungarian Translators' House Foundation, which issues grants to people translating Hungarian literature into foreign languages. A translator who has a contract with a foreign publisher to issue a Hungarian book can work in the small town of Balatonfüred by the Balaton, in the Translation House run precisely for that purpose. The house has an awe-inspiring number of mono- and bilingual dictionaries and provides a fertile atmosphere for intellectual work. As the place was familiar to me, I planned to take my translating students there, and devote the week-long seminar to short stories that had won the Tuglas Award.

In order to motivate the young translators and offer an opportunity to discuss emerging

problems with a more experienced translator, we invited the project manager of the Estonian Institute in Hungary, Móni Segesdi, to join us. She has translated into Hungarian Andrus Kivirähk's *Old Barney, Sirli, Siimu and Secrets*, Emil Tode's *Princess*, Jaan Kaplinski's *The Eye*, and a number of short prose works and films. The week in wintery Balatonfüred passed in a serious working atmosphere, leafing through dictionaries, reading the texts out loud, and translating them with a lot of discussion involved. No awkward phrase or sentence escaped Móni's sharp eye, and the translations slowly took shape. The young translators were prepared to repeat the intensive and instructive week again whenever an opportunity presented itself.

At that time, a month remained until Estonian Week, so that the two texts selected for presentation, Armin Kõomägi's *Anonymous Logisticians* and Ilmar Jaks's *Armer Adolf*, had time to rest and ripen. In due course, the fresh translations were sent to Estonian and Hungarian actors, to be presented in the Toldi cinema café, both in the original language and in Hungarian. The reception in the smoke-filled and packed café was enthusiastic. One member of the audience was an editor of a magazine. We got to talking and soon enough an idea emerged. The editor was keen to know how many texts we had and whether we also translated poetry.

The magazine *Prae*, under the leadership of its editor-in-chief Endre Balogh, has been operating since 1999. The editor of the Estonian issue is Péter L. Varga, who has been involved with the magazine since 2007 and, thanks to some Estonian friends, has taken an interest in things Estonian.

The magazine's name, *Prae*, comes from a novel of the same name by the Hungarian writer Miklós Szentkuthy. In 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian literature, the novel is a monumental, modern work of literature with elements of the avant-garde, and it has had



Translators at Lake Balaton

a mixed reception. The novel's experimental character and its turn towards non-traditional canons of the novel is also a significant aim of the magazine. Prae often tackles peripheral genres (for example science fiction, horror literature and cyber punk) and non-typical topics.

The first part of the magazine, which is published four times a year, is thematic, and usually offers articles on a specific topic, or in exceptional cases (as in the Estonian issue) fiction. The second part, subtitled *Permutáció*, is dedicated to recent Hungarian literature. The third part is called *Moduláció* and gathers articles and reviews; this may be connected with the first part, but does not have to be. The magazine ends with a small Coda, introducing the topics to be tackled in the next issue.

After a few meetings, the issue of the magazine was beginning to take shape. We decided to keep the choice of short stories we had made at the translation camp; these were short stories that had received the Tuglas Award between 2000 and 2009, and initially we had 20 texts. Everyone chose what they liked best. The final selection included Mehis Heinsaar's *Handsome Armin* (translated by Virág Márkus), Andrei Hvostov's *Blue Mountains* (Krisztina Lengyel Tóth), Ilmar Jaks's *Armer Adolf* (Nóra Mária Kőhalmi), Jüri Tuulik's *Tellicate* (Benedek Virág), Armin Kõomägi's *Anonymous Logisticians* (Judith András) and Jürgen Rooste's *Porn Film and a Bottle of Vodka* (Nóra Mária Kőhalmi). One of the translators, Krisztina Lengyel Tóth, had graduated with a degree in Estonian

language and had worked as a lecturer of Hungarian at Tartu University. Other translators are either in the middle of their Bachelor studies (Virág and Benedek), writing their diploma work (Judit) or working on a PhD (Nóra).

Jaanus Vaiksoo kindly helped to provide the Hungarian readers with a suitable background by writing an overview article about the chosen short stories. Jaanus has taught Estonian in Budapest before, and his literary courses presented as a guest lecturer have certainly influenced the enthusiasm of students who wish to translate Estonian literature.

Lauri Eesmaa, the editor-in-chief of the magazine *Värske Rõhk*, offered his advice in choosing poems; he made the preliminary selection on which the students relied in their work. The poets included Hasso Krull, fs, Kalju Kruusa and Maarja Kangro, translated by Virág Márkus (Krull and Kruusa), who in one text also used the help of a young Hungarian poet (Marcell Szabó), and Judit András (Kangro and fs). The poems were taken from recent collections, thus adding lots of fresh air to the whole issue.

We wanted the magazine to be Estonian through and through, and thus asked an artist from Narva-Jõesuu, the Hungarian-based Russian Léna Köteles, to produce the design. Her work is mostly inspired by Estonian landscapes and moods, and thus the texts are illustrated with her drawings of landscapes with firs, the sea, ships, summer holiday-makers, the beach, stones, fish and fishermen.

The magazine additionally mentions works of Estonian literature that have already been published, for example Kivirähk's *Rehepapp*, Tõnu Önnepalu and Lauri Sommer's joint collection, Sass Henno's novel for young adults *I Was Here*, and the literary almanac *Pluralica*,

which the compilers introduced in Estonia as well.

It took seven months from the initial idea until the appearance of the actual magazine, and during that time the translators found new ideas and enthusiasm for the future. Under the supervision of Móni Segesdi, we analysed all the prose pieces by the young translators in our seminars.

The publication of a first translation is always exciting, and we were all happy to see that a large crowd had gathered on 20 October 2010 to launch the magazine in the Műcsarnok (the Art Hall). The editor of the special Estonian issue, Péter L. Varga, invited several people for a chat: the lecturer of Estonian Reet Klettenberg, one of the translators, Virág Márkus, and Gergely Lőrinc, the editor-in-chief of the magazine *Pluralica*. The latter has done a lot in recent years to encourage the translation of Estonian literature into Hungarian.

It was admitted that Estonian culture was not exotic, but instead a very European phenomenon, to be promoted and understood abroad. Virág has said that translating Heinsaar can be compared with being in a trance, and that Estonian literature reflects its people's closeness to nature. Estonian literature does not have as much amassing of images as exists in Hungarian literature.

To establish the background atmosphere, Virág read out an extract from a short story and a few poems and, to demonstrate the sound of the Estonian language, both were presented in their original language. As a conclusion to the Estonia topic, the editor, actor and poet Levente Pál Dániel read a short story titled *Anonymous Logicians*.

Taking a stroll through  
the shelves of the

# History of Estonian Thought

b y P a a v o M a t s i n

The aim of the comprehensive series of books entitled *Eesti Mõttelugu* (*History of Estonian Thought*), published by Ilmamaa, is to gather and publish “the most valuable part of the Estonian history of thinking through the ages”. Fulfilling this incredible representative task also requires a monumental effort from readers, the people for whom the series is meant. There is no doubt that so far the publishing house has managed to achieve this nearly impossible mission. But how have the readers, the consumers, fared? Looking around in the homes of the Estonian intelligentsia of the younger generation, it is unlikely that you will see the entire mega-series on their bookshelves. However, by an unwritten rule, there are at least some books from the *History of Estonian Thought* in practically every home, depending on the inhabitants’ professions or hobbies.



The series indeed offers reading material for people with vastly different backgrounds. Besides presenting Estonian statesmen and ideologists who probably interest a wider circle of people (Jüri Vilms, Jaan Tõnisson, Jüri Uluots, Ants Piip, Villem Reiman, Jakob Hurt and Peeter Põld), the series also, for example, introduces the theological thought of several centuries (Eduard Tennmann, Johan Kõpp, Uku Masing, Toomas Paul, Georg Müller, Endel Salumaa and others). Then there is, of course, the literary group (Karl Ristikivi, Ilmar Vene, Gustav Suits, Ivar Ivask, Paul-Eerik Rummo, Ain Kaalep, Hando Runnel, Jaan Kaplinski and others), philosophers, from distant Baltic Germans to current university lecturers (H. von Keyserling, Alfred Koort, Ülo Matjus and Tõnu Luik), outstanding people in music (Karl Leichter, Rein Laul, Eduard Tubin, Herbert Tampere and others), art (Mart Laarmann and Jaak Kangilaski), theatre (Karl Menning, Mati Unt and Lea Tormis) and even sport (Georg Hackenschmidt). We should not forget numerous prominent Estonian men and women from science and the humanities, e.g. the Orientalists, linguists, folklorists, researchers of the universe, jurists and mythologists.

It is quite likely that, in such a huge, almost unfathomable galaxy of thought (a Borges-like library), one might forever keep cataloguing, grouping, comparing and shifting books from shelf to shelf like a crazed librarian. Moreover, the authors in the series often move outside the boundaries of their speciality, to more general areas – a theologian on economics, a psychiatrist or physicist on literature – and thus the borders between various fields become rather vague. One such author, for example, is Madis Kõiv, a physicist by profession, who has written philosophical essays, but also plays and memoirs. There are also a number of authors whose place should be on different shelves for several reasons, not least because of their biographies: consider Prof. Emeritus Jaan Puhvel of the University of California, whose treatment of comparative mythology has become a textbook in Estonian universities, or one of the internationally best known Estonian scholars of the humanities, Arthur

Võõbus, who has examined Christianity in the Orient, especially Syria. However, from the point of view of Estonian culture, they are not only seen as prominent representatives of their fields, but also people who settled in exile. Besides the “shelf of the academic world”, they could thus additionally be placed in the catalogue box entitled Exile Estonia. Quite a few different library rooms are necessary when we try to differentiate the books in the series by genre: there are essays and collections of articles, sermons, speeches, scientific works and research papers, and even quite intimate correspondence.

Still, taking a stroll along the imaginary streets of the *History of Estonian Thought*, every reader chooses his own favourites. A book might attract the potential reader with its academic sparkle, or he might be intrigued by the fact that a book cannot be easily classified and placed on a certain shelf. Maybe works like these are indeed most characteristic of the whole series.

The author without whom the series would probably be inconceivable is the theologian and writer Uku Masing (1909-1985), considered by many to be the most intellectual Estonian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was a poet and a polyglot with legendary erudition, whom the Soviet occupation forced into silent inner exile at the very beginning of his academic career. His two collections of articles published in the series bear meaningful titles: *The Reason of Pessimism* and *We Have Hope*. Masing's essays and other larger works usually circulated as copied manuscripts or were published, like his collections of poetry, outside the Soviet Union, e.g. in the journal of the theological department of Prague University in the 1960s and 1970s. Masing's impeccable erudition seemed to cover everything, from ancient exotic languages and Bible studies to botany and science fiction. His central wish was that man aspire to become more perfect. According to international custom, authors who have chosen similar maximum heterogeneity secure their teaching by lecturing to a narrow circle in a “back room” academy. Masing indeed directly or indirectly influenced a large number of



Estonian writers, who visited him at his home. The development of Masing's own religious-philosophical ideas is linked with Kant, Schleiermacher, Bergson, the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna and others. Masing's literary output was also remarkably plentiful: plays, a novel, numerous essays and superb poetry. Quite a few contemporary Estonian writers (e.g. Jaan Kaplinski and Lauri Sommer) have, in their work, depicted this colourful and diverse creator as a literary figure.

Haljand Udam's (1936-2005) collection of articles would be a perfect shelf-neighbour to Masing's works. Udam defended his MA thesis on Sufism, Islamic mysticism, in Moscow in 1971, and translated from Hindi, Urdu, Uzbek, Tajik, Persian and Arabic. He was also

interested in the 20<sup>th</sup> century traditionalists René Guénon and Julius Evola. As a superb essayist, he was one of the few people in Estonia who was able to examine and evaluate mystical traditions from ancient Central Asia to the modern New Age. Udam was fascinated by the relationship between East and West and the issues of the decline of traditional culture and its possible renaissance. His collection of articles in the series, entitled *Oriental Journey*, contains his deepest and most demanding treatments, for example on Iranian and Tajik literature and the intellectual legacy of Uku Masing.

The psychiatrist-writer Vaino Vahing (1940-2008), a restless soul, did not really fit into any framework. We could thus reserve a special



room for him in our Borgesian library, where he could entertain all the companions of his notorious literary salon in Tartu. Vahing worked as a legal psychiatrist and lecturer, and acted in films and in his own plays. However, as an excellent playwright, he primarily acted in his daily life. He did not like compromises. Vahing also kept a diary, where he, with startling candour, described the youthful foolish acts that he and his friends, today's prominent cultural figures, once committed, and their intellectual search under the dismal conditions of Soviet everyday existence. Despite protests from many people he described, he nevertheless published his diaries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and scandals erupted. *The Myth of Mental Illness*, published in the series *History of Estonian*

*Thought*, gathers his articles and essays from 1969-2003. It contains art, literary and theatre reviews, as well as observations on the relations between psychopathology and creative work. Typically, the rather exhibitionistic Vahing wrote the introduction to the book himself, where he talks – naturally – about himself.

Our brief overview of the *History of Estonian Thought* has now reached the newest part of the Borgesian library, which is still being put together. We could ask: who are missing in the series? Who has been left out or not yet published? Who could we recommend to the compilers and editors of the series? Who deserves to be singled out by the first-rate library of the publishing house Ilmamaa, now quite an institution, a choice which would elevate the author straight to the Estonian Olympus? All readers would naturally wish to see their own favourites there ...

It seems to me that if the series indeed has a gap it might be in authors linked with esoterics. A brilliant example here would be the most famous healer in Estonia, the freemason and author of books on yoga and various esoteric books, the legendary Gunnar Aarma (1916-2001). Having grown up amongst the economic and cultural elite in Estonia, he acquired the education of a Western economic psychologist and found his teacher, his guru, in Paris. As a journalist, he interviewed Hitler and Chamberlain, and advised Ernest Hemingway during the Spanish Civil War. He was unable to escape grim years in Siberian camps. After Estonia regained its independence, he published various collections of essays and travelogues. Aarma always relied on his own experience: all knowledge from books had to be tested with perception. He also possessed great linguistic skills, a gripping narrative style and an impressive knowledge of occult disciplines, which are a natural part of culture in the West, whereas in Estonia they are somewhat marginal, perhaps due to the Soviet legacy. Each year about 2000 people visited him seeking help, including numerous journalists-interviewers. By including Aarma, we would add many new readers to our Borgesian library, who would think along with the history of thought.

# Barn Music

## at St Donat's Castle

b y P h i l i p G r o s s

**It was several years since**

**I had last visited Estonia...**

**so Estonia came to visit me.**

Call it coincidence or call it serendipity, but I had just found myself writing poem after poem about my father. He was a wartime refugee from Estonia now in his nineties is losing his hearing and speech. In amongst the ruins of all of the four or five languages he once spoke there were hints and traces of his history, which kept reminding me how much I myself had been unconsciously formed by these things, spoken and unspoken.

Born in Cornwall, a far-flung part of England where there was no other Estonian within a hundred miles, I never heard my father speak the language until I had long left home. But silences, in a child's life, leave as deep an impression as words. All of this was implicated in the poems which, suddenly, I could not stop writing. (They will appear in November 2011 from Bloodaxe Books as a collection called Deep Field.

At this point, I had an e-mail out of the blue — from John Metcalf, organiser of the Vale of Glamorgan Festival of Contemporary Music, asking if I would like to be involved.

This year's festival was going to have a strong Estonian connection, including anniversary tributes to Arvo Pärt, and the Estonian cultural attaché in London had whispered in John's ear that there was a prize-winning poet, one with a history of working with composers, in South Wales, not a stone's throw away from where this well-respected international festival was being held. Would I like to work with a Welsh composer, Gareth Peredur Churchill, to produce a piece for performance by the Estonian ensemble Resonabilis?

E-mails are only black and white marks on the page, but I'm sure John saw my response bouncing up and down with excitement. Oh, yes, please...

So I worked with Gareth, and a small selection of the poems round my father's language were set in haunting, challenging arrangements with the unusual resources of Resonabilis in mind: Tarmo Johannes on flute, Aare Tammesalu on cello and Kristi Mühling deploying the traditional Estonian *kannel* in exciting and exploratory new ways. Add the voice of Welsh mezzo-soprano Siân Cameron, and the Estonian soprano Tui Hirv, with a new piece by Helena Tulve (who was present) and work by Pärt, Dai Fujikura and others, and I had some extraordinary music amongst which to weave my poetry.

The concert took place in a Welsh castle. The words alone might set you imagining a fantasy of Romantic Welsh-ness. You would be both right and wrong. St Donat's Castle is indeed a dream of a medieval stronghold by the sea — the dream, in this case, of American newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, who in 1925 acquired and spent a small fortune (since he had a huge one) on renovating an only partly restored ruin. His celebrity parties here were famous. After one, Bernard Shaw is said to have remarked that this was what God would have built if He had had the money. These days the castle is an international sixth form college, with a beautifully situated arts centre in the old tithe barn. For all Hearst's fantasy (he *was* Citizen Kane, remember) the barn is a real working space. And that is where we read and played.

Ancient / modern; functional / fantastical... Paradoxes like these followed us through the project. The next night the ensemble performed again, at another, smaller castle, Fonmon — one of the very few still to be used as a family home. This was (as castles go) modest, very elegant and real. It also lies under the flight path of Cardiff International Airport. This kind of juxtaposition is exactly what I like: it feels like life. And you might see traces of these paradoxes in the poem printed here.

I did not set out to write a poem as a memento of that anyway memorable evening. It was the sight of Kristi Mühling's fingers doing their accurate teetering dance across the strings of the *kannel* that transfixed me. Add the space of the tithe barn itself, now full of music in which the singer's voice stretched to the edges of what voice can do; include the high doors where the laden carts would have rolled in and rolled out... and the sense slowly surfacing (when did I learn this? did my father tell me as a child?) of the meaning of the Barn Swallow in Estonian sense of time and place and home.

Somewhere under the surface is the memory of visiting the site of the small farm where my father grew up in South Estonia. The farmhouse is gone, destroyed in the war, but I found where it had stood. In a hastily-rinsed jam jar I brought my father back a handful of the soil from the spot, and another from the ploughed field nearby. Only when I got them home did I notice that one handful was darker — could it be with traces of the ash, still, from the burning of the house and barn?

None of this is explicit in the poem, nor does it need to be. I hope that the words communicate as music does, as a world of their own — as a greeting and tribute to everyone whose different artistries came together on those evenings... and as a resonant space, like the barn which might be — no, *offers* itself to be — haunted by the echoes of our different and shared histories.

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Such a long way we've come  
to find ourselves here: us,  
in the ancient instrument.

(as a small nation's soul  
might be plucked on the pulse-strings  
of the Internet.) Her fingers

touch-test the *kannel*: part Braille,  
part dowsing — as if voices  
had been buried in the soundbox,

here crisp, here silky, here  
a séance whimper. Or the sigh-  
creak of stroking the length of a string.

Her hands: a weightless skitter now,  
*en pointe*, across the ballet floor,  
or still, to tease a single

note out as you might  
a splinter from your child's skin.

(I, too, almost have to look away.)

•

Such a long way, maybe centuries,  
to lose ourselves  
like this: how the voice, or the flute,  
or cello, sidestep-slip

into each other, or beyond, into clicks  
and pocks, bare bones  
of sound, its levers, its machinery  
displayed

(as graceful pale manipulators, black-  
clad against black  
drapes, might lay down their marionettes  
to take a bow —

*Look, we are nothing, with nothing to hide*  
— at the end of their show.)

•  
Such a long way to bring us, breathless,  
to the borders of pure breath —  
breath still audible  
just, because  
impure

with a trace of *us* in it, our work,  
breath-threshers, word-  
winnowers, sounds  
of our primitive  
tools,

the sound-smell of the toil of it, making  
/ unmaking ourselves, our bodies  
and each other; the hush-  
chafe of sweeping  
the barn

or the barn burning down, an almost gentle  
crackling rush, as the barn-swallow  
swoop-staggers out into sky  
with smoke behind it,  
too late

or early for migration, but it's history;  
there's nowhere else to go  
but history, and history,  
if nothing else,  
says *Go*



# Short Outlines of Books by Estonian

Urmas Vadi

***Kirjad tädi Annele***

(Letters to Aunt Anne)

Pärnu, Jumalikud Ilmutused, 2010. 240 pp

Urmas Vadi (1977) has written more than ten books. He has written short stories and drama texts, has been a drama producer, and has even seen the development of one of his scripts into a film, *Meeting with a Stranger*, made by Jaak Kilm.

Of all Vadi's works, the public has been most enthusiastic about the musical *Georg*, the libretto of which covers the life of the Estonian singer Georg Ots. Ots was very popular and much loved in the post-WWII decades, the sound of his voice still echoes in the ears of the audience and Vadi takes him nearer to new generations of theatre-goers.

However, Vadi felt that something was still missing in his writing career, and that



Urmas Vadi (Photo by Seampix)

# Authors

b y B r i t a M e l t s a n d R u t t H i n r i k u s

something was a novel. *Letters to Aunt Anne* contains eleven letters, written by the first person hero Urmas Vadi about the writing of a novel. The first two letters are followed by a selection of short stories and other short texts, alternating with letters, under the title of *The Anatomy of Foxes*. The writing of a novel proves to be hard, its progress is slow, and it is helped neither by the decision not to cut his hair nor by other attempts at self-flagellation. The letters in themselves do not attempt to be deep confessions in the epistolary genre but, rather, they mostly are commentaries, explanations or simple remarks.

The book is set in 2008. The first letter explains the origin of the idea of writing a novel: “The years are passing by ... but I am wasting myself doing god knows whatever superficial things instead of writing the work I am meant to write – a novel.”

While the first two chapters of the novel are about the author’s childhood and the novel seems to have actually started, the next instalment the author

sends to Aunt Anne is only a short story. The following instalments are short stories as well: *Death of Tartu* is a story of the misunderstood writer E, and *Not to Melt as a Snowflake on a Warm Mitten* is a story about the meaning of life. To melt or not to melt?

But when you meet beautiful Lizett on your path of life – and life is commonly understood as a journey on a path – it is no longer important when or where you meet the death of Tartu.

*Auditor* and *Wood Worms* are even better short stories; all kinds of contemplations on truth, the autobiographical self and other issues add to the author’s scope, tie together the science-fictional and real universes and show the possibilities of finding radiance in everyday life. These forked stories do not develop into a novel, and the book is not even a handbook for writing a novel. Instead, *Letters to Aunt Anne* is an original and unexpected book, a small mystical laboratory of stories, wrought for the reader’s pleasure. **RH**

Lauri Sommer  
**Kolm üksiklast**

(Three Recluses)

Tallinn : Menu Kirjastus, 2010, 197 pp

Lauri Sommer (1973) is a writer and musician. He is a member of the literary group Erakkond and of several singing groups (Liinatšuraq and others). He has had poetry and translations published.

*Three Recluses* is his first longer work of prose, containing three different, sensitively written stories. The three heroes of these stories come from different space-times. One of them is a woman, two are men, one is a foreigner, two are Estonians, and each of the three has had a different education. At the same time, there is something similar in all of them – an illiterate Seto healer, a talented university professor and an English singer – they all are observers of man's inner psychic processes, and the story of each has been determined by his or her character.

Together, these three stories have been called a triptych, and this triptych has also been called a novel. Its first part, titled *A Gift*, is about Darja, one of the author's relatives from his mother's side. "It so happened that she stayed apart from the others. She was guided by voices." Darja is a healer and also a singer of songs. She is different from the others, which is why she always remains alone. She does marry, but only her daughters, especially one of the three, are close to her. A described meeting with a collector of antiquities helps us understand that the story is set sometime before WWI. Here, the author also changes the point of view and the close-to-the-characters-narrator is replaced by the know-it-all author, who comments on Martin, the collector of the antiquities, just as if he was reading a textbook: telling us exactly what Martin is like and that Martin divides the women he likes into two types – holy muses and low whores. Darja is more like a pious recluse than a temperamental singer. The text is delicately

framed by the author's attitude towards Darja, and towards the family blood that will be passed on to new generations.

The second story, *On an Inner Borderline*, tells us about the singer and musician Nick Drake, who has died a too early death. He flees into a dream world, often spending his days in a drug haze. He hates clichés and is searching for a real human touch. "A wish to tell his story was growing within him, but there was no-one there to tell it to."

The third and most intriguing story, *Late Love Leaves*, offers an episode from the life of Uku Masing, a philosopher, poet, religion historian and inner exile, relating the text and the reality of his time by using photos, giving

Lauri Sommer (Photo by Scanpix)



exact dates etc. Sommer knows his subject well, since his Master's thesis, defended in 2002, was titled "The spiritual, temporal-spatial and biographical background of Uku Masing's manuscript *Messenger from the Magellanic Clouds*". This is a love story, but also a story of endless loneliness, presented as a flow of consciousness, a reminiscence that seems to start somewhere far away; it moves nearer to the pulsating core, and departs again. Literary history is full of similar works that have been inspired by the lives of well-known persons. Uku Masing, who is more and more becoming a luminous legend, also appears as a character in Jaan Kaplinski's novel *The Same River*.

Sommer narrates his story with a feeling of piety, sensitively and with a hard-to-define precision. His way of telling a story has been compared to painting a picture: he starts by marking off a background, then fills it, and his characters step into the foreground, and again merge into the background. The number of contemporary people who knew Masing and remember these events, people and feelings is small and diminishing. Sommer's ambivalent, sad and unforgettable story paints for the reader a picture of a man who calls into the forest and listens to the answering echo until everything that surrounds him turns into poetry, and a dream. **RH**

Indrek Hargla

### **Apteeker Melchior ja Oleviste mõistatus**

(Pharmacist Melchior and the Mystery of St. Olaf's Church)  
Tallinn, Varrak, 2010. 310 pp

Indrek Hargla

### **Apteeker Melchior ja Rataskaevu viirastus**

(Pharmacist Melchior and the Ghost of the Wheel Well)  
Tallinn, Varrak, 2010. 286 pp

Indrek Hargla (1970) is a favourite of many Estonian readers and one of the most

popular authors of Estonian fantasy fiction. Since 1998, Hargla has published numerous short stories, more than ten novellas and eight novels. He has repeatedly received the Estonian science fiction award "Stalker" for an original book, novella or short story. He also received the prestigious Friedebert Tuglas short story award in 2009.

Besides fantasy, detective stories and horror, Hargla's more popular books deal with alternative history. The most renowned among them is a trilogy about the adventures of two characters named "French" and "Koulu": *French and Koulu* (2005), *French and Koulu in Tarbatu* and *Travels of French and Koulu* (2009). Koulu is an arrogant poet and magician, but also a spy from the country of Maavald (meaning "Ancient Estonia") and French is Koulu's slave of French origin.

Hargla has worked hard in depicting the country of Maavald and has created a world with its own state, people, language, culture, economy, military organisation and history. This mythological world would, despite some witty allegorical moments, still remain somewhat abstract, as anti-utopias often do, if it were not enlivened by a couple of heroes of an almost classical nature. In these stories, written in a humorous picaresque style, this pair of heroes fights against numerous and varied evil forces.

*Pharmacist Melchior and the Mystery of St. Olaf's Church* marks Hargla's successful debut as an author of detective fiction. The novel is set in the Tallinn of 1409. The protagonist is the first and only pharmacist of Tallinn at that time and, surprising to all, a very smart man. The gallery of characters includes secular and clerical dignitaries, Dominicans, members of the Brotherhood of Black Heads, musicians and beautiful ladies. The book opens with a mysterious killing of an Order knight and more murders follow. The pharmacy plays a central role in the town life, as it is where people meet and share information. The protagonist, Melchior, is a relatively young man; his seemingly cheerful and carefree disposition hides a

deep fear, caused by a curse on his family. By the end of the book, Melchior solves the mystery of four murders committed in the town.

The gallery of characters is enjoyable; in addition to the human characters, medieval Tallinn plays an important role in the book. The town space is depicted credibly, colourfully and in great detail. The story is thrilling, taking the reader deep into a bygone era; the successful protagonist continues his adventures and detective work in Hargla's next half-gothic crime stories.

Hargla's next novel in a similar vein, *Pharmacist Melchior and the Ghost of the Wheel Well*, which deals with solving murders in medieval Tallinn, is more complicated and multilayered. The book is again set in the Tallinn of the early 14th century but, in this case, the author has here and there dropped some intertextual hints which will amuse readers who recognise them, relating the local cultural space to a wider European context. The mood of ... *the Ghost of the Wheel Well* is heavier than in the first Melchior novel. A mysterious ghost appears, and those who see it soon die. The different characters are enjoyable and, although the intrigue is not very smooth, the end ties everything skilfully together.



Indrek Hargla (Photo by Seapix)

Hargla is a resourceful and witty narrator and the theme of medieval Tallinn is attractive. Hopefully, the smart pharmacist Melchior will continue his detective work. And perhaps, one fine day, genetic research will discover that some remote ancestor of Hercule Poirot once lived somewhere on the shores of the Baltic Sea. **RH**

Carolina Pihelgas

### **Metsas algavad hääled**

(Voices Start in the Forest)

Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 2010. pp 84.

Carolina Pihelgas (born 1986) is an outstanding young poet who has published two poetry collections. Her debut, *Sõrmemuster* (Finger Pattern), appeared in 2006 and certainly differed greatly from the general picture of young poetry, offering peaceful, lyrical, quiet, intellectual and beautiful poetry, which seemed unusually mature for a debut. *Metsas algavad hääled* (Voices Start in the Forest) is her second collection. Pihelgas is not just a talented poet, but also a good translator, and has translated poetry from Norwegian, English, German and Spanish.

The trend in current poetry is the poet's personal relationship with the city as an environment where he or she lives, and as a socially sensitive nerve. Carolina Pihelgas, however, is an exception – she mostly captures the peripheries and exotic distances where she has travelled. *Voices Start in the Forest*, as the title suggests, focuses on nature, and displays vivid details and original observations about the environment. The book also contains travel poetry that was published in her first collection, but is here expressed in a more confident voice: people move around in nature, travel through the familiar and the unknown, the poet walks in diverse landscapes and sails on alien seas – and all this is expressed harmoniously. A



poet and world traveller with an open mind has put her experiences into poetic form, supplementing external general impressions with personal sensations, instinctive opinions, reflections and special apprehensions.

There is much more here besides nature and travel. Pihelgas's poetry has a thematically wide scope, which blends into an excellent whole: in a manner similar to her first collection, there is deep insight behind her words and her texts focus on perception. We see meaningful early-morning silence, observations from everyday life, references to cultural contacts, human relations and closeness, reflections on life, depictions of home, and signs of the present or of history. However, she does not deal with the torment of history, but prefers optimistic truths (e.g. "This history is just as far / as the Roman emperors or Russian tsars // It is like fairytales, strange stories / easy to consider, but difficult to imagine"). She also reveals a peculiar strong-mindedness, which helps to intellectually and positively overcome what is normally considered traumatic and tormenting.

This, indeed, constitutes one of the main qualities in Pihelgas's poetry. The simplicity and beauty of her poems contain something classical and, what's more, there are no social problems – what a relief! Unlike the main trend in modern poetry, where irony and social criticism abound, her work contains no aggressive sarcasm, anxiety or pouring out of her social dissatisfaction. *Voices Start in the Forest* is conflict-free, it does not bother too much with disharmonies in society, and it wanders along tranquil paths of intellectual reflection and of nature, where human beings are present and at peace – seeking and finding balance. With its tranquil and sincere spirituality, her poetry lies outside the cynical world and distances itself from everything negative. It thus achieves a clearly original quality, which is quite rare in young poets. Her poetry could

thus be called "pure"; we sense that the poems were created for the sake of poetry, and the text is just good lyrical poetry, without aggressive critical attacks or acute problems.

Pihelgas's style is laconic, which ensures sincerity, directness, precision, simplicity and tranquil beauty. Words are not wasted here, but instead are used to create a strong poetic impression and depth. The poems form a genuine whole, if this can be said about poetry. The sensations described in the following seem convincing: "Freedom flows through rivers / never too quickly / never flowing away. // Freedom is simple – / it is now and here. // On your hand / and behind your back." **BM**



Carolina Pihelgas (Photo by Scanpix)

Andrus Kasemaa

## **Poedirahu**

(Poet's Peace)

Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2008. 64 pp

Andrus Kasemaa

## **Lagunemine**

(Disintegration)

Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 2009. 135 pp

Andrus Kasemaa (1984) is a young poet who has received a great deal of critical acclaim in recent years. His two collections of poetry (*Poet's Peace*, 2008; *Disintegration*, 2009) were reviewed in all the Estonian literary magazines and cultural newspapers, which is more than a young poet should ever hope for. Why is Kasemaa's poetry so attractive? There are three clear reasons: Kasemaa has created his own peripheral poetry location and named it *Poet's Peace*, the style of his poetry is free of poetic exaggerations and is fully based on simplicity, and the relationship between the author's self and his poetic self offers interesting opportunities for analysis. Even a fourth aspect could be added: the relationship between the lyric self and location. Let us examine these reasons.

Kasemaa's poetry is heavily location-centred and totally contrasts with city poetry. His poetic environment is informed by the most authentic periphery: a remote country village, based on the author's real home and its surroundings. Kasemaa bends these rural surroundings into a special and private poetry location, names it *Poet's Peace* and starts to shape and establish it in his poetry. *Poet's Peace* is partially a fictional space, but it is largely based on real landscapes and his personal sense of location – this is one of the most vivid examples of location-based and location-centred poetry.

The second aspect that has found merit with critics is the poet's 'lazy' style. Kasemaa's poetic method of building his poetry world is, foremost, through simplicity, and he carries it out in a way that ensures the originality and strength of his work. Such a method has not been so firmly used in Estonian poetic landscape for a long time. Kasemaa uses



dynamic and close-to-colloquial-speech free verse, but his poems are still elliptic and even laconic – he does not bother to over-poeticise or decorate his poems. Such a poetic method, based on lightness, thinness and even scarcity, has been called ‘zero style’, ‘thin style’ and ‘neo-simplicity’. This simplicity (together with frankness and directness) can be found in the content of the poems as well. However, the content is not lacking in tension; tension is guaranteed by an emotional charge and open personal attitude, presented in an extremely simple, even lazy and direct wording. The matter of lazing around and doing nothing has a deep significance in Kasemaa’s poetry and it can be connected with location-centredness. As such lazing around is, in this case, a clearly spatial activity, it supports the creation of a location, which is one of the sincere aims of Kasemaa’s poetry. This is the very Poet’s Peace as a back-country village in its pure peace and simplicity. Kasemaa’s poetry is overtly personal and seems pulled straight out of everyday life. Thus, the relations between the author’s empirical and literary selves become highlighted – the margin between them is extremely blurred and Kasemaa’s poetic self is, actually, the manifestation of the highly unique aspect of his personality (as is stated in the lines “I do not want to become/ anybody else but myself”). With his original stylistic simplicity, Kasemaa purposefully shapes both the location and his self-portrait or his poetic self. In such a way, Poet’s Peace, created in poetry, enables the poetic self to identify itself, as well as to manifest its distinctness, and to merge with the location. This is because the lyric self found in Kasemaa’s poetry is deeply embedded in a location, in its living environment, merging with it, and this is offered to the reader with the simplicity of colloquial speech, without any sparkling metaphors or rhetorical stylisation. When reading the poems, we can really hear the poet’s voice talking to us.

Kasemaa touches upon different subjects in his work, but the centre of gravity of his work lies in stories from village life, the past of the location, private activities and related conditions, feelings and ideas – all shaped into a seemingly separate world, framed by Poet’s Peace. The pronounced peripheral state of this location and its natural openness offers solitude in peace and silence. Here, this is the lyrical self’s most preferred way of existence. Kasemaa’s poetry also contains its share of darkness and seriousness, showing the threatening gloom above Poet’s Peace, although the poetic self persists in its inner peace and simplicity. **BM**



S o f i O k s a n e n ( P h o t o b y S c a n p i x )