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The return of Jakob Hurt

or how to get a shaman to use a smartphone

by Valdur Mikita

One hundred and twenty-five years have passed since Jakob Hurt (1839-1907) encouraged people to collect and preserve ancient folk heritage. Hurt's collections gradually developed into the Estonian Folk Poetry Archives and the Estonian National Museum. There is no doubt that Hurt is among the people who have most influenced Estonian culture. He lived at the edge of a cultural breakthrough: Estonians were emerging from serfdom and becoming free peasantry, and written culture was gaining ground over the old oral culture. Hurt was lucky: people had recently learned to write, and the old oral heritage was still alive. There was plenty to record, and enough people to do so. The legendary Hurt collections were thus born.

Although the changes during the awakening period were immense, the cornerstone of ancient peasant culture – people's stationary way of life – remained. This helped to maintain a unique place memory, already quite rare in Europe, and archaic heritage. We are now once again crossing a significant cultural border. There is an interesting analogy between today and Hurt's era. We have become a leading digital nation, just as 150 years ago we had become a leading European nation in literacy. We still have a large number of people stuck in the dim analogue-era, who carry place memory and oral heritage in themselves. We have people to record, and we have people to record them.

Hurt managed to preserve the tail-end of the old culture. Our changes are even more radical. One phrase is enough to describe them: a stationary way of life. One hundred

years ago, the most important person in Estonian culture from the point of view of heritage was the folk singer, whereas now it is people living in the country who have stayed put for the best part of their lives. These are people with the magical cycle of life still intact: they are born and die in the same place. Today the last generation is living that carries this several-thousand-year-old wondrous tradition of Estonian culture. Our children live in a totally different world.

Such genuine country people may well become unique from the point of view of European culture, just as Hurt's collections made our 19th century folk singers world famous. This argument rests on purely cultural-theoretical reasoning. Hurt's collections recorded the oral culture that was gradually being replaced by written culture, whereas the current cultural breakthrough is linked with the triumph of the digital era.

If we somehow managed to document this change, as did Hurt, we would have a totally unique database describing two significant breakthroughs on the basis of one culture.

What is remarkable here is that the Estonian culture has maintained a large number of elements of archaic culture. When written texts meet the computer, the change is not that enormous, but when a native messes with a computer motherboard, things get crazy.

Place memory is the fastest fading type of memory in Europe. We still have thousands of people preserving traditional place-lore. On the whole, everything that cannot be Googled is valuable today. Place memory is organically connected with the heritage of natural sacred places, which is singular in Europe. It survived here for millennia for the simple reason that people were stationary. Place memory is a kind of Estonian cultural speciality, something that most other nations no longer have. The singularity of the national epic *Kalevipoeg* lies in the fact that the story seems to proceed within ancient language landscapes, wandering aimlessly along archaic heritage and real locations of folk tales. Estonians are lucky to live between the covers of their epic.

There are few nations in Europe with such strong topographical identity. I think this aspect, along with runo songs, is among Estonia's most striking cultural achievements. It seems even more important today as the old runo song heritage has nearly vanished.

Crazy huts and stolen faces

Genealogical research in Estonia should perhaps slow down a bit; after all, church registers aren't going anywhere. The most endangered type of memory is oral heritage. We should instead compile digital family archives that record oral heritage. There are people all around us who are walking Estonian National Museums. The first thing to do is to record the memory and ways of thinking of people living in the magical cycle of life.

We should also have more faith in an intuitive manner of gathering heritage. The best results would come from leaving enough space for the collector's individuality: a fact supported by numerous large-scale memory-gathering projects. The true value of information becomes clear in extensive compilations of data. If we record a great mass of information, we will probably manage to capture essential elements that do not seem important to us at the moment.

We should therefore hurry up and do a Jakob Hurt or a Johannes Pääsuke the photographer. This could become a later database for language researchers, ethnographers and folklorists. In ten years' time, it will be far too late to catch this layer of memory, because it will simply fall off the edge of the world.

What then should this 'Hurt's click' be? We should primarily photograph and record everything that will disappear in the world of

Valdur Mikita (Photo by Jaan Tootsen)

the future. Things we do not really think about disappear. Some might have heard a weird legend about the native Amazon tribes, namely why they are wary of white people. They happen to believe that whites steal their faces. Faces do vanish.

Faces get duller, and the natural diversity of facial expressions fades. Most of today's people spend their time inside, wearing sunglasses and accepting similar ideals of beauty; this creates new, anonymous features. About twenty kilograms of Garnier face cream slapped onto our faces during our lives leave a mark, and in the end all people have more or less the same faces. In old photographs, people seem different, more diverse, more expressive. That's why photographers are so keen on native peoples.

Another example: what crazy houses the Estonian village people live in! Beams from old barns, with the boarding done by President Päts in the 1920s and 1930s, and the nails hammered in by Leonid Brezhnev, who was the last to invest in Estonian villages, as a part of the Soviet food programme. Now the elderly sit on their beds, wearing their felt boots and watching the telly, while history crumbles away all around them.

Digital archives could perhaps preserve something of this wild architecture for coming generations.

Magical collections of Hurt

Although Hurt's words fell on fertile soil, the practical peasant mind one hundred years ago thought: why the dickens should I, after a punishing day of farm work, waste time recording the ramblings of frail old women? A hundred years later, people are carrying out world-level research on the basis of the ramblings of frail old women. The general public still thinks it's a waste of time.

The people who think that Hurt's collections have been sufficiently researched are wrong. Each cultural change endows old materials with new meanings. If we managed to massively document the current cultural changes, the content of Hurt's collections would change as well. They have a much wider meaning than just documenting Estonian culture. Hurt's collections are a bow to all ancient peoples, of whom only a handful remain today. In future, a new layer of culture could be recorded, and a new cultural breakthrough could happen one day. Hurt's collections thus keep expanding over time.

Besides our own culture, the meaning of Hurt's folklore collections could open up a much wider perspective.

Firstly, we should consider Hurt's collections from the perspective of Estonian and Finnish culture. *Kalevala* is one of the most compact systems of magical thinking ever written down; *Kalevipoeg* is a mighty geo-epic and Hurt's collections preserve major documents of oral world culture, feeding Estonian and Finnish cultures for decades to come.

Secondly, there is the significance of Hurt's collections for Finno-Ugric culture.

And thirdly, Hurt's collections form a part of world culture. They are probably among the best archives of a native people's oral culture.

The law of conservation of animism

Estonian culture is a miracle, an island in a vanishing world. Although the two dominant factors of our culture, i.e. runo songs and natural sacred places, both hundreds of years old, have largely disappeared, quite a bit still survives.

If for no particular reason some half-wit cuts down a tree in a cemetery with a blunt saw, we do not even bother to condemn him: everyone knows that it is only a matter of time before the half-wit will be struck down by a horrible revenge of Nature. Crimes against trees are still crimes of the first order in Estonia.

This purely shamanist belief dates from the Neolithic era and still influences people's view of the world. Estonian natural law is essentially animistic. Besides Facebook, modern Estonians' social network also contains trees, dead people and all manner of weird creatures.

The conservation of animism is therefore alive in Estonia. Our indigenous culture and nature both survive. This is quite a rare combination today. The essence of Estonian culture is best revealed against the background of a concept that we ourselves often forget: Estonians are an indigenous people.

Indigenous peoples are those who have been living in their country from the 'beginning of time'. Only a few such peoples remain in the world today. Hurt's collections thus represent a few thousand indigenous peoples whose voices are no longer heard.

Hurt's manifesto or digitalising rural pensioners

What then is important in Estonian culture? The answer is simple: we should try to preserve what we consider our native culture. The problem is that we are not quite certain what Estonian native culture actually is. It is not primarily material culture, nor

written culture, nor contemporary culture nor folk culture in its usual meaning.

The uniqueness of Estonian culture is its genius loci, the topographical manifestation that has lasted for centuries, through the power of oral archaic culture, in a blend of indigenous culture and indigenous nature. This is a layer which largely originated in the era of shamanism.

What then is the 'genuine' Estonian culture? The traditional division into high and popular culture is not quite suitable. Estonian culture could instead be divided into visible and invisible parts.

Invisible culture is rarely expressed in an artwork; it is more a belief or a way of thinking, which mostly lacks a visible form. It is thus easy to miss: the most unique part of culture is quite elusive.

Digital family archives could perhaps capture and preserve culture's invisible layers, which have been disappearing at tremendous speed during the last one hundred years, whereas the visible part has increased just as rapidly. Culture in most countries consists of high culture, the 'centre', and mass culture, heaped at its foot, whereas the edges have totally worn out. In Estonia, it is the other way round: the centre is not that brilliant, but the periphery is huge. There is something about Estonia that produces and accumulates the peripheral.

Let me point out a significant change that has occurred in the world. One hundred years ago, collecting ancestors' intellectual heritage had primarily historical value, whereas now it has become a magical treasure trove for future ways of thinking, models and ideas. All of a sudden, the peripheral has become existential, Estonian culture is a refuge for lost worlds, and Hurt's collections have turned into a mighty paradigm. Estonian culture is seen in a totally new light, although the perception is somewhat blurred.

We are still largely living according to 19th century cultural norms, which mainly valued authorial culture. Tribal culture has always been a hanger-on. The world cultural history of today has changed beyond recognition.

Perhaps because of this strange swing between centre and periphery, Estonian culture, for the first time, has a chance to establish a dialogue with ancient cultural traditions of the world, thanks to our magical trinity: indigenous nature, culture and language. These mark our existence as an indigenous people.

Our most valuable treasures today are people who have lived in the same place for generations, who still have some archaic beliefs deep in their souls: a magical amalgam of place memory and animism, the oldest parts in our culture; this is in fact traditional, indigenous culture. This magical blend can no longer be captured by collecting ancient objects or songs.

Our grandparents no longer make wooden figurines or tell ancient myths. The only bridges to the old culture are strange flashes, such as the above example of a crime against a tree.

Hurt's up-dated manifesto could well consist of only one sentence: an unprecedented plan is spreading amongst people to digitalise our pensioners! We face the following task: linking the digital resources in Estonia with traditional culture. How can we unite the oldest cultural layer with the newest? How can we sneak a smartphone to a shaman? Anyone who can solve this problem will go down in history.

Time is running out: the magical opening might be available for a dozen or so years, and then the gates will close.

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Kaupo

Pärnu journalist and cosmopolitan poet

by Veiko Märka

Kaupo Meiel (38) has published four collections of poetry with very different structures. Each has a specific concept, distinctive from the others. As an example of form, *Polügrafisti käsiraamat* (A Printer's Manual, 2006) indeed uses a textbook of the same name for printers that was published in Tallinn in 1979. The poems, too, often focus on the magic and prosaic nature of printing. What will essentially change if, instead of one copy, one thousand are made? The question extends from printed products to all branches of human activity, for example art history: *Dead art / Is no longer art / Baroque is not art / Rococo is not art / And a Doric column is not art / Only packaging is art*.

The second book, *Eesti elulood* (Estonian Biographies, 2008) is a collection of very brief poems (often 1-2 lines), or rather plays on words. In most cases, these cannot be translated at all, for technical reasons and due to the foreign reader's lack of background information. The reader, for instance, needs to be well informed about Estonian film and literary classics, music and even proverbs. The structure is based on the alphabet: every poem is about a representative of a profession: Astronomer, Botanist, Electrician, Journalist, Photographer... Plus some non-professions: Alcoholic, Blind Man, Coward, Hindu. And some areas of activity that might be or might not be professions: Alpinist, Anti-Semite, Conspiracy Theorist, Father Christmas, Runner... One of the poems, for example, is about an IT specialist:

IT Specialist
my voice range is
Ctrl+Alt

Meiel

His third collection, *Mu sokid on terved* (My Socks Are Intact), was published in 2010, i.e. at the time when the European economic crisis had struck Estonia the hardest. It maps social predicaments. Already the first lines are documentary and dismal: *every morning / walking to work / down empty Rüütli Street / with its shops gone broke / with its sales assistants / now living / below the poverty line / because the newly opened department store / in the city centre stole their / customers and faith and dignity / I feel ashamed / that I don't mend my socks*.

During the writing of this book, another disaster struck the author's home-town of Pärnu: flooding, which claimed 'only' one human life, but caused enormous damage. Several poems describe this. For example: *the receding water took away / the old woman's / coffin money / the kroons and dollars / as well as decayed roubles / she had / kept / in a tin box / kept / from spending / kept / away from her drunkard son / kept / in her mind* …

As in his first book, the third features longer texts with epic content. Personal memories of childhood and his younger years appear as new themes. His social criticism concentrates on more than the economic crisis. The poet is also keen on global trends: printed books are less read, and they are becoming elitist values, almost like before printing was invented: *it's only for the successful / that books are made today / and the poems are read on tv / only to the successful* …

His fourth and latest book, *Pursata Vesuuvile* (Eruption to Vesuvius, 2013) is no longer pure poetry, because the author has added a longer prose text to several poems, explaining why and how they were born. These bear the common title "Author's comments" and considerably expand the book's content. Reaching middle age forced Meiel to ponder personal problems and anxieties, an experience that everyone goes through. For example, bringing up children in an urban environment: *kid we make you out of glass / and take you to nursery school / where the teacher Auntie has a hammer / in the evening we return for the bits and pieces / and glue them together back at home // at the weekend we're given the hammer to take home / the family has to be involved in the education / to break and to glue / to break and to glue*.

Several of Meiel's poems are not expressions of emotion, but logical constructs. For example, *The Wall* consists of 66 names, mainly of well-known people, which contain the word "stone" in different languages: Albert Einstein, Aleksis Kivi, Brian Epstein, Sharon Stone, Rammstein, Rolling Stones, Stone Roses, Roy Lichtenstein, Gertrude Stein, the Flintstones, Frankenstein ... All nicely in alphabetical order, with the stones forming a wall.

I look at the poor because I am sad today

Meiel's poetry has always revealed his profession. He is a journalist. And not your

usual hack, but the head of the opinion page at *Pärnu Postimees*. A fairly high position, on the one hand and, on the other, a daily contact with people's deepest worries and problems. Hence the peculiarity of his authorial position, uniting personal comfort and social empathy. On the one hand, it displays sincere sympathy with people working in shops in the main street of Pärnu who have lost their jobs and, on the other, he expresses the view that there is no point saving on socks and mending them because of a sense of solidarity. This phrase sums up his credo: *I look at the poor / because I'm sad today*. This, indeed, could be Meiel's slogan.

He also distances himself with dignity from the victims of the flooding: he lives on the fourth floor...

I ask Meiel who is more useful to whom: poet-Meiel to journalist-Meiel or the other way round? And do they sometimes clash?

"The writer Meiel occasionally lends the journalist Meiel a poetic touch, which is not really suitable for the press, and the journalist Meiel introduces topical motifs to the writer Meiel. In daily life, the balance of power tends to be in favour of the journalist, which is also true of the body. Who provides bread for the body? Yes – the journalist, and not the writer. It is not a clash, but a dictatorship!"

A journalist writing poems is a rare phenomenon in Estonia. As a journalist writing poems and residing in Pärnu, Meiel is unique. Still, his poems, even those dealing with Pärnu, observe society in general. The old woman in the above example could have lost her savings somewhere else, for instance in a fire. And shops going bankrupt could be seen all over Estonia at that time: in my home street in Tallinn the flower shop was turned into a pawnshop. Meiel has also tackled politics, ridiculing the increasingly common habit of people in power trying to please "the people" through populism: rappers are invited to the president's reception and the guests listen to them in solemn silence, like listening to Christmas carols. Meiel can also move in the seemingly opposite direction from crucial day events, without losing topicality: *in the beginning God created / an event / The Creation of Heaven and Earth / then God created / the heaven and the earth*.

In one poem, Meiel lists vastly different ways to use a newspaper: build a fire in a stove, put it under a cat, into your shoes to keep warm, under the sun etc. It is in fact quite impossible to distinguish where journalism ends in his poems and where pure poetry begins. (Hopefully there aren't similar problems when reading his newspaper articles!) Sometimes he is open about his profession, without adding any poetic spice: *As a rule, the person whose question finds its way into the column "A Reader Asks" has never read anything*.

He admits that he has had only a few moments in his life that have forced him to write a poem. However, it once happened in central Pärnu, when he was sitting with a bottle of good wine (probably at a street cafe), it was drizzling, a pretty old house was on fire in the next street, and some young musicians were playing Mozart and Vivaldi at an open-air concert. Meiel sums up this intense poetic experience as a true journalist: *7 lines, 16 words, 106 characters with spaces, 97 characters without spaces*.

If we try to define Meiel's poetry as a whole, we could compare it with an equilateral triangle. The first side is purely language-focused wordplay, the second is social criticism of Estonian life, and the third side, especially evident in the last two books, is pushing the myths that belong among the global, everlasting foundations of world culture towards the absurd. A typical example is *Resetting Jesus* (2010), where Jesus returns to the contemporary world and starts annulling his previous deeds and words: money changers can go back to the temples, the healed sick, paralysed, madmen and lepers are ill again, etc. The author poses a new challenge to Jesus: get a bank loan, a normal job, find a wife, have children and die at 83 of arteriosclerosis. Because that is so much harder.

He equates the seven levels in Dante's *Inferno* with cycling and skiing. The protagonist successfully gets through the seven circles of Inferno and Purgatory, but during the sixth

circle of Paradise he is lapped by the leaders and must quit the race.

On the basis of the closing lines of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *For never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo,* he composes no fewer than fifteen very sad stories set in our present day.

Meiel writes: *It's just not so simple in these times of tense toughness, when the bees and butterflies are being written about only by uninspired graphomaniacs of kitsch without even the most basic knowledge, to add a bit of sincerity to poems otherwise slipping towards narcissism and often into factual inadequacy, which is, though, quite skilfully veiled with arrogance and assurance.*

Thanks to the above-mentioned triangle, Meiel himself has certainly succeeded. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his claims and world-view. At a time when we are all getting huge loads of information from the Internet, information of drastically uneven quality, sincerity is among the few criteria that can be trusted. There is probably also a means of escape for poetry in the labyrinth of Internet texts without proper beginnings or ends.

Daniil Harms and Tiger Lillies

The dates of the collections of poetry testify that the author was over thirty when the first appeared. What did he do before?

Kaupo Meiel's life has always been linked with Pärnu. He was born there and lived there until he graduated from secondary school. As have most Estonian writers, he ended up at the University of Tartu, where he studied literature and folk poetry. He started his literary activities by writing lyrics for his band. In the only Soviet Estonian humour magazine, *Pikker* (Thunder), he discovered the influential Russian classic of the absurd Daniil Harms, whose style and topics (the life of famous writers) Meiel later used himself.

Meiel has been a journalist since 1992, from 1999 onwards at *Pärnu Postimees:* initially as a cultural editor, and later as the opinion editor. Both in Pärnu and in Tartu he formed various punk bands, playing rhythm and bass guitar. His poetry has frequent musical references and is influenced by music. He makes no secret of the fact that one of his favourite bands is the English group *The Tiger Lilies*, whose music is a mixture of surrealism, punk and classical cabaret. He is no longer involved in music-making, although during his mid-life crisis some of his friends have suggested returning to punk. Under the fictitious name Allah Pugatchova (after the famous Russian singer Alla Pugatchova), he is involved in a group interested in virtual art that displays their poster-format work at pugatchova.blogspot.com.

Hasn't he considered moving to Tallinn or Tartu, "closer to culture"?

Meiel does not give a direct answer, but refers to his journalistic career: "I cannot answer this. If I said that I have never been offered another job somewhere else, it might seem that I am no good whatsoever. If I said that jobs have been offered, it might seem that I am sitting here because I'm some sort of a Pärnu patriot."

He has no plans to move: "It's quite nice here and there are many interesting people."

If Kaupo could choose a time to live in, when would he choose and who would he like to be?

"The moral of Woody Allen's magnificent film *Midnight in Paris* was incredibly simple: the era where you find yourself never seems the golden age, but it becomes a golden era for a later generation. I do not share this view. I live in a golden era and am its typical representative. However, if I had to choose – considering my anarchist soul trapped in my bourgeois shell – I would be Emperor Flavius Romulus Augustus. More precisely, the literary character Romulus the Great, based on him, as he is in Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play of the same name."

Literary club named after a top communist

Despite the ridiculous wish of Pärnu people to be different from the rest of Estonia or seem original, it is a perfectly ordinary Estonian town.

Thus Meiel portrays the general Estonian, and not just someone from Pärnu: *an Estonian drinks 76 litres of beer in a year / an Estonian adds salt to food exuberantly / an Estonian spends the most on books / an Estonian surfs in a computer stolen from Finland …*" This resembles the lines of the Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet from 1962: *Estonia / is the smallest socialist state / reading the most poetry per person drinking the most vodka* …

Pärnu is the third largest and most important Estonian-speaking city in Estonia. More or less the same can be said about the importance of *Pärnu Postimees*. Culturally, however, the town has never been competitive with Tallinn and Tartu. The money is in Tallinn, as is the headquarters of all creative associations and most of the homes of their members. Tartu has the university, with academic traditions dating back to 1632. Culture is learned in Tartu, and the knowledge is practised in Tallinn. Most people associate Pärnu with summer and the beach, and a few with summer concerts and film festivals. Definitely not with literature.

Still, nothing is permanent. Meil has certainly contributed to the recent network of poets in Pärnu; they even published a joint book, *Sõnaga näkku* (Words into Face). Over ten authors are represented, including some much younger and older than Meiel. The key word of the book is "punk". The underground, not totally up to scratch but sincere, might offer Pärnu the best opportunity to find its place in the sunshine of Estonian culture, next to Tallinn, where brains and money flourish, and the academically spiritual Tartu. Meiel has not thought of himself as a punk for a long time. In his latest collection, Meiel again reveals a new side: he has taken the most primitive anonymous Internet comments about Estonian politicians and amplified them to extreme ridicule.

Since one of the most prominent writers, Kivisildnik, has settled in Pärnu, publishing is booming, especially in the field of modern poetry. Kivisildnik's publishing house JI (Divine Revelations) has issued all of Meiel's books.

We should mention here that the place where Pärnu writers gather is named after the best known Pärnu poet, who also made quite a career for himself: the Johannes Barbarus Centre of Counter-culture. After the Soviet Union occupied Estonia in 1940, Johannes Vares-Barbarus became the first Soviet Estonian prime minister. In 1946 he committed suicide. Just like Meiel, he was not a professional poet, but instead a doctor.

I ask what kind of Estonian government Kaupo would lead.

"In my younger years I dressed as a punk and considered myself an anarchist. Now I dress properly and no longer regard myself as an anarchist, but due to those distant times I completely lack any desire for power. I would, however, be prepared to head the Estonian government if it were the last government ever. The government that ends all governments. The result would be not only the disappearance of the state, but of governing itself. To be honest, in my nice outfit today I might actually be a bigger anarchist than when I had a Mohawk hairdo and a leather jacket with rivets."

The associations between Meiel and Barbarus are only geographical, whereas much closer ties link Meiel with another Estonian cultural figure, Johann Voldemar Jannsen (1819-1890). Jannsen was the founder of the paper that has provided Meiel with his job, and he also gave the paper its name. Like Meiel, Jannsen was a poet besides being a journalist. (He even wrote the words for the Estonian national anthem.) Meiel's current workplace is next to Jannsen's monument and he was on the committee that selected the winner of the monument competition.

Tourist guides always need legends to go with various sights. Meiel has thought of one concerning Jannsen's sculpture. It goes like this: the person who strokes the relief text of the bronze newspaper the bronze Jannsen is holding will get only good news in the future.

Now we just have to wait until Meiel writes new words for the Estonian national anthem. Future generations will then have a reason to invent legends about his monument as well.

Poetry translated by Kalju Kruusa

Kaupo Meiel (Photo by Scanpix)

* * *

Once upon a time, an ancient man invented writing. He sketched down his notes and thoughts to spare himself from repeating them.

Then he heard Socrates and put down his stories.
Then he wrote *Capital*.

Meanwhile he set down the countless sonnets by Shakespeare, wrote S*entimental Education* and Tammsaare's *Collected Works*.

As Kerouac, he put down a line every day.
Now all this is meaningless.

The Use of Newspaper

In fish crates
In wet boots
In mushroom baskets
In berry baskets
In onion baskets
In ovens
In kitchen stoves
Under cats
In default of sand
Under the soles
Of filthy shoes
On top of the head
Under the sun

* * *

I don't watch
the morning show
nor the evening news

I see to it
I get
up in the morning
and sleep in the evening

you needn't
be Stephen Hawking
to see everything
vanish into a black hole
you needn't
watch
the morning show
nor the evening news
to see it –
to see it
you have to get up
and sleep

Electrician
I was
seen
in a bad light

Photographer
my kids
are pretty
as pictures

Waiter
can I
serve you
a purpose?

Stage Director
don't start
to create
a scene here

Animal Protector
let
barking dogs
bark

Missionary
I know
all the
positions
though

Sports Doctor
the time
is out
of joint

Zoo Keeper
he
is our true
elephant terrible

* * *

every morning
walking to work
down empty Rüütli Street
with its shops gone broke
with its sales assistants
now living
below the poverty line
because the newly opened department store
in the city centre stole their
customers and faith and dignity
I feel ashamed
that I don't mend my socks
I cannot find
any excuses for myself
I don't know how
I could learn though
I don't want
this is no argument
an Estonian artist Toomik once walked
through Prague
carrying a large placard with the slogan
My cock is clean!
in my hometown I have problems
with my socks
that are too new
and clean and free from holes
I have to go and visit
all those sales assistants
and their one-time customers one by one
to admit that my socks
have no holes
and I am happy about it
I am guilty before you
I have betrayed you
I have made my contribution to it
that you are doing bad
that you have no food to give to your child
that you have unpaid rent
that your roof is leaking
that you have no business
to be on Rüütli Street in the morning
where now I'm the only one walking
wearing my clean hole-free socks

HeadRead

a literary festival in Tallinn

by Jason Goodwin

The Estonian capital, Tallinn, stands on the Baltic at the head of the Gulf of Finland, barely 100 miles from St Petersburg. Once a constituent soviet republic of the USSR, the tiny country of a million inhabitants, speaking a language closely related but not the same as Finnish, has become a fully fledged EU country, and a member of NATO. Most Estonians will have used the internet in the last week. The most northerly of the Baltic states, Estonia has reasserted its traditionally open, Scandinavian links and manners.

Tallinn is about the size of Bristol or Lyon, but it carries more weight. It is the seat of national government and home to the nation's political class, to native and foreign diplomats, artists, doctors, lawyers, designers, architects, game developers, the money and the media. Because Tallinn is small, you get the impression that everyone knows everyone else. The delicious little mediaeval capital is more like Copenhagen than St Petersburg. It is in fact much older than the Russian city, with a unequalled set of city records going back to the 14th century.

It also has the most unfettered internet access, and the cleanest air, in the world. It has 52 museums, 18 concert halls, 7 cinemas and a zoo. Public transport in Tallinn is free for residents. An orthodox church is dedicated to St Nicholas. So, too, is one of the Lutheran churches. The Ukrainian Greek-Catholic church is dedicated to The Mother of God with Three Hands.

Tallinn has 51 protected trees and 48 protected stones, 30 or so publishing houses, and five daily newspapers, one published in Russian. The national airport is fifteen minutes from the centre of town. From it you can take the shortest airline journey between two capitals in the world: the twenty minute flight from Tallinn to Helsinki gives you just enough time to unwrap a boiled sweet. From the port at Tallinn ships ply all across the Baltic. In one sense, Tallinn's hinterland is not just the Estonian countryside but a ring of cities – St Petersburg, Helsinki, Riga, Stockholm. Yet it is small enough to walk round in an afternoon.

None of this quite explains what makes the HeadRead Festival so successful. In part, I suspect it's to do with the seasonal thaw. Estonians hunker down like bears for the long winter, when temperatures drop to twenty below, and the days are unremittingly

Jason Goodwin (Photo by Kärt Kukkur)

dark; but come Spring they are ready to chirrup like birds. Then comes HeadRead. It is a portent of Summer, when those who can will take off for the countryside.

Other festivals around Europe may be bigger, or more focused on genre, but none do quite so much to showcase the work of writers from different traditions, working in separate genres – or in none; writers from different backgrounds and countries, at different stages in their writing careers.

It's this mix that draws so many of the world's leading writers to the HeadRead festival, and explains why authors as popular and diverse as Boris Akunin and David Mitchell, Tom Stoppard and Jennifer Johnston, have all spent time at Head-Read over recent years. The line-up is always spectacular. Zinovy Zinik brought his unique brand of surreal penetration to the stage, sharing a topsy turvy story of mistaken identity and false memory. Rawi Hage discussed exile and taxi driving. Madeleine Thien bore witness to the dislocation of Cambodia. Simon Sebag Montefiore talked about Stalin with the PM. Christopher MacLehose described his career as a publisher of international fiction and memoir. M.C. Beaton reduced an audience to helpless laughter – and afterwards declared she had never met so many nice people in one place. Sofi Oksanen talked about recent history; xyz recalled the opposition movements of the post-War world. The list goes on – Nabila Sharma and Claus Ankersen, Indrek Hargla and Selina Guinness, Vincent Woods, Natasha Cooper, Marina Stepnova...

From the moment guests arrive to the moment they leave, every event – every talk, every interview – is a shared event. There is a genuine camaraderie among the visitors, built out of their shared experiences at the festival, out of the easy hospitality of their Estonian hosts and publishers, and out of an appreciation of the mysterious alchemy that has assembled them all here, in Tallinn, at the beginning of summer.

HeadRead puts everyone together, weaving the conversation between the writers themselves, and between them and their audience. The formal events punctuate a sequence of friendly receptions, parties and dinners, and conversation continues in the cafes, and in the lobbies. For many of us it epitomizes what time spent with writers and readers ought to mean.

So often at festivals a writer parachutes in, delivers his or her thoughts, and then rolls aside to make way for the next event: this is the production line model of a festival, the classroom model. Literary Fordism is an efficient way of promoting a book: title, name check, content. Add a signing session – and the job's done.

But HeadRead is a lot more interesting, for authors and their readers – it's like a fantastical weekend in a rambling country house, or a gathering of a Round Table. Needless to say Tallinn has its fairytale aspects, too – its spires and city walls, its lower and upper town, the cobbled streets, the promenade along the shore. Tallinn has an almost allegorical quality, to those of us who come from cities more sprawling and diffuse: where else would one find a playwright discussing freedom with a president, or listen to a talk delivered to an audience sprinkled with ambassadors and Cabinet Ministers? Here are writers, used to describing our world, or distilling a common experience of it, in conversation with the people who are shaping it. What that entails is a sharing of viewpoints, at the very least.

History has something to do with it, too, and the experience of language. Estonia, small as it is, exists through an identity expressed in a common language and a shared history. Always in danger of being swamped by larger and more powerful neighbours – Tallinn itself was re-founded by Danes in the 13th century – Estonians maintained their identity through culture, song and verse. The power of the written word was long ago enshrined in the advent of Protestantism, with its emphasis on written testament and the vernacular language. Where The Book mattered, books may, too: by the late 19th century, almost every Estonian was literate. The world's first farming newspaper, Tartu Maarahva Nädalaleht, was an Estonian-language publication begun in 1806.

Nonetheless this regional Finno-Ugric language was, at best, overlooked both by the German landholders and the Russian authorities, until in 1918 it provided the justification for an independent Estonian republic. The fragile state could not survive the power play of World War II, and the Russian annexation led to what has been called 'silent opposition'. It expressed itself in private as opposed to public conversation, in the home language rather than the official language of the Soviet state.

It expressed itself in listening, too. As the 'Soviet west', Estonia and the other Baltic republics were closest to the edge of the free world. Half Estonia could pick up Finnish tv. And when it came to listening to the signals from Moscow, Estonians were particularly attentive, poised to seize independence on the eve of the Soviet Union's collapse.

Since the 1990s, Estonia has developed into a European state, normal, integrated, facing the common variety of troubles and challenges; more than half the people of this young country weren't born when Estonia separated from the USSR. Estonians don't speak with one voice, or address themselves to one issue. But the voice is important – the need to speak, so often suppressed, the urge to self-expression, and freedom, and the telling of stories. Even as Europeans, language expresses who they are.

Writers may be in a good position to appreciate that experience, which echoes their own. Writers deal in language: it is what interests them. They create, and record, many voices, too – their own, the voices of others, voices of the past and of the imagination. In Estonia, it feels language still matters: freighted with allusions, accretions, rhymes and hidden echoes of the shared past. And with it remains the instinct to listen – to hear on their own terms the voices from elsewhere.

Last year, before the festival began, I had a chance to visit Hiiumaa, the second of Estonia's bigger islands, ringed with extraordinary lighthouses beaming out to sea. At night, in the silence on the edge of the Baltic, in that eerie crepuscular half-light of the Estonian summer, I listened to an astonishing sound I have rarely, if ever, heard before. A sound that has vanished from much of Europe, where perhaps there are few people left to listen to it. It was the singing of nightingales in the woods.

Estonian
culture and literature

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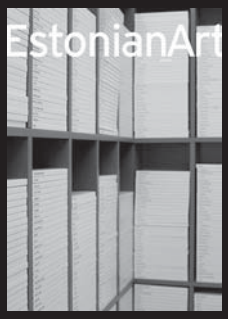

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Meelis Friedenthal

The Bees

Publishing house Varrak, Tallinn 2012

by Tiit Aleksejev

The protagonist of the novel *The Bees* is Laurentius Hylas, a Dutch scholar from Leiden University. The plot unravels in the course of six days in 1696 in Livonia, mainly in Tartu. On a hill that is crumbling, according to a poet. In fact, all of Livonia is crumbling. Apocalyptic events are in store: a famine is getting worse, the Great Northern War, plague, the destruction of Old Tartu, and the deportation of its inhabitants. *In the city is left desolation, and the gate is smitten with destruction 2*, says the prophet. He is right. Everything material surrounding Laurentius is destined to burn, get smashed or rot. The only way out is sublimation, finding your real home. This is exactly what the story is about.

The Bees has two dimensions. One is allegorical and alchemical. Here the author displays his knowledge of philosophy, theology and humoral medicine. All this can be summarized by the term 'spiritual science'. Laurentius's observations are also connected with the state of his soul. According to 17th century belief, the eye was the mirror of the soul, and the Livonian natural conditions probably influence the protagonist's condition in a very direct manner. Veering a bit towards mysticism, the main character's evil eye and the black bile fermenting in him may well have an impact on the fate of Livonia. As a result, the character of Laurentius Hylas acquires a totally different meaning.

The allegorical dimension bubbles and foams like Doctor Faustus's retort, but is kept under control to the end and provides the novel with depth. The author, a doctor of theology, writes about things he knows very well, where he feels completely at home.

On the other hand, *The Bees* is a genre-pure historical novel, a plausible description of a long-lost world. The historical aspect of the novel might not have been the author's

main aim – he may have preferred the allegorical dimension – but as the plot of *The Bees* is quite realistic, you cannot escape history.

The historical and allegorical dimensions are constantly in dialogue and, as always, an excellent method in a text loaded with symbols and meanings is to have the melancholic protagonist quietly losing his mind. Or the snapping of whatever shackles and harasses his mind, to choose a description more faithful to the era. Swarming out of the beehive.

Laurentius's journey takes him through 17th century Tartu streets and the lecture halls of the Academia Gustaviana. He meets Rector Below and other university lecturers, although his main effort is dedicated to the struggle with himself. Laurentius Hylas's earthly body is in fact a real alchemical battlefield, where a constant defensive struggle rages. Laurentius is helped by everything sparkling, resplendent and exhilarating. There is not much that is golden in 1696 Tartu. The colourful parrot Clodia, who brings relief to the protagonist, does not last more than one day in this barbaric forsaken place, disappearing down the throat of a starving Estonian. The soul of the bird reappears in the shape of a pretty girl, who has the same name as the parrot. Clodia indeed rescues Laurentius, through honey and bees, which once again has its own hidden meaning. This is all of the novel, and at the same time nothing, because Friedenthal's novel can be read through several types of glass, both sparkling and dark. I chose the kind through which we can observe the setting of the story and reflect on the unity of place.

The historical novel as a literary genre should not provide the author with an extra advantage. All requirements for a prose text still hold: the characters should be developed, the dialogue should be credible, and the text must flow, from one pause to the next. In addition, however, the author must know the chosen environment and the era, he must feel at home there and, even more, he should want to feel at home there. 'Place' is even more significant here than 'time'. It is possible to deceive the reader about your knowledge of the era, but not about your knowledge of the place.

The Estonian poet Ivar Ivask wrote about taking root and expanding, more precisely about one's home place and a homely place which is not quite your own, but where you feel good. I, for example, enjoy Venice. I know that's not that original, but this is how it is. I am thinking and writing about Venice, and this brings the lagoon, villas and canals closer with every line. The perspective changes, as happens when you take a water-taxi into the city. This kind of experience can be the same on the historical plane. Let us take 18th century Venice, which I mostly know thanks to the paintings of Canaletto and Guardi. I have stood in front of these paintings, examined them carefully, and allowed them to flow through me. I know what is depicted in them better than some real landscapes. Better than some towns I have passed through which have not had an impact on me. Unlike the Venice of Canaletto and Guardi. Which of these towns is in fact closer, that of the 18th century or the contemporary town? What is real is what matters to the viewer: this is an old truth.

But these are relics, says the reader; the creature has been dead for ages, maybe for millennia. So? Death is part of the story, maybe the most significant part. At the moment when we begin the telling, the story has mostly already ended. It is then completed. Clarified.

Now about the setting of *The Bees:* Tartu *anno Domini* 1696. This city has been lucky: the cloak of the Mother of God has been hanging over it. The town was, however, blown up in 1708, leaving only the remains of bastions, a few bits of wall and chimneys, and the skeletons of churches. The farmers in the neighbourhood arrived and dug up the town like moles, hoping to find hidden treasures in the cellars. The result was more or less total destruction.

Meelis Friedenthal (Photo by Scanpix)

However, the heartwood or core remained and is still there. What makes Tartu so resistant to time? The peculiarity of its urban space? The river? The hill? Cathedral? Bastions? Other towns have all of these too. A river circles Narva, with the Alexander church towers in the centre and even the bastions are still there. But the heartwood of Narva is gone. Narva is like a tree with a hollow trunk. It's true that 1944 practically finished the town off, but not more than the Russian troops did in Tartu in 1708. The way Narva was rebuilt after the war was a hideous crime. The landmarks in Narva, which are associated with the urban picture, however, survived. Landmarks around which urban noise gradually emerged again. Why does one town change beyond recognition while another survives? Is there even an answer to this question?

It seems that the key to a town is not in its buildings, but in its people and in memories of the town, which people carry in themselves. In the idea of the town, in its strength. After the war, native Narva citizens were not allowed to return to their home town. Tartu citizens stayed on, and with them, the idea of the town. It seems the unity of place is crucial here, as is not being disrupted, allowing the same group of people to carry on.

Maybe towns function like people: if memories survive, people survive. But memories are not necessarily true. We walk through historical Tartu and imagine that we are in a Swedish-era settlement. But we are not. The idea of Tartu is just as fictitious as Meelis Friedenthal's historical novel. As any historical novel. It is just as difficult to evoke pre-Northern War Tartu as it is Akkon during the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Maybe even more difficult. Not a single authentic panoramic view of 17th century Tartu has survived. Nor, in fact, one from the 16th century; the best known panorama, which dates from 1553, is actually a fantasy originating from the 18th or 19th century. We do not have a single engraving depicting an

urban view of 17th century Tartu. There is only a drawing of the location of houses in the Big Market. There are also a few detailed urban descriptions (unlike Akkon). We do have Erik Dahlberg's geometric plan from 1696. We have the configurations of 17th century fortifications, and an engraving depicting the siege of the town in June 1704. However, these are not nearly enough to get a good overview of Tartu. We have no idea what the town looked like, and we will never know.

The historian Margus Laidre,3 who has produced a thorough monograph on modern-period Tartu thinks that in the 18th century the town may have resembled Heidelberg, which also has a hill with a castle and a river. In any case, there were no wooden residential houses *intra muros*, as Friedenthal's novel suggests. All of the buildings within the town walls were of stone for military reasons. The suburbs were wooden, and were burnt down during every single siege.

The stone town Tartu, with houses squeezed tightly together c A thousand miles from today's town, full of green areas left from World War II. For us, these are associated with the essence of Tartu, its idea. They have nothing to do with historical Tartu. Or perhaps they do now, after 70 years. Has it been long enough for the story to become clear?

Reading *The Bees* I was reminded of Siegfried von Vegesacki's *Baltic Tragedy*, which describes pre-World War I Tartu. Von Vegesacki's recollections and Laurentius's impressions are amazingly similar. The Tartu of the Baltic German is dark, bleak and deserted. Members of fraternities race on sleighs along nocturnal streets and hurl wine bottles against walls. The burghers are too scared to appear in their windows c Black ruins on Toome Hill, with crows cawing above them. The only light comes from the houses owned by the fraternities, where uncontrollable drinking and humiliation of the first-year students is taking place. Compared with the 19th century fraternity members, today's members are mere choir boys. All truly horrible c And only about twenty years later we can read about Bernard Kangro's sunny Tartu, full of pretty girls in summer dresses who all smell of violets. In the first three books of Kangro's cycle of novels, the town is resplendent, sunny and mysterious. Just like Clodia. Later the tale becomes dismal and tragic. Like Meelis Friedenthal's.

Every town is a spiritual state. Friedenthal's Tartu is one of them. And Friedenthal's story, and possibly the story of Tartu, swirls around the soul. This is what the bees in the title actually mean. A hive of bees that leaves and then returns. Or returns to some other place. To some other time.

A historical novel must create a reality of its own, just like any other type of novel, except this reality should relate to the past: some bridges or at least bridgeheads should emerge. Friedenthal has successfully created these connections and, although reading with the eye of a historian some details in his Tartu descriptions can be questioned, the reality of his novel as a whole is credible. This is also true of his entire Old Livonia. The protagonist's journey in a stagecoach is splendid, as is his walk by the River Emaj?gi. Such episodes stick in your memory. It is quite possible that the 17th century Tartu described by Friedenthal will play the same role for Estonian readers as the 17th century Paris described by Alexandre Dumas. Historians have demolished that Paris. But readers remember.

Other Estonian writers, e.g Herbert Salu and Mait Metsanurk, have of course written about the famine in 1695–1697 and the fall of Tartu, but Friedenthal's Tartu has an immediacy that is missing elsewhere. One reason is the changed views of readers and the writing technique as compared to books written a long time ago. However, this is not about the advantages of a more modern approach. Sometimes it is not an advantage

at all, but a curse. When the author deals with the past, he can easily pick up the burden of others who have written about the same period or event. *The Bees* has no such burden: it is completely fresh.

We now finally get to the real strengths of Friedenthal's novel: background knowledge, skill in combining different perceptions and language usage. The first, which we briefly tackled at the beginning of this review, interests me the least. The author of a historical novel must know the 'domesticated' period; he must be able to navigate there, but it has to be perfectly natural. If the author starts showing off his knowledge, he will sacrifice his work. To the altar of history, as it were. But it is a poor sacrifice, because the result is not history and it is not literature either. I tend to think that there aren't many people who seek knowledge in historical novels. There are other texts better for knowledge. Friedenthal has managed to avoid this hazard; his protagonist is a scholar for whom philosophy, theology, medicine and optics are the normal environment. Each character remains in his element.

Now about perceptions. Here is where *The Bees* really gets interesting. Friedenthal successfully combines the visual, sounds and smells (stenches, to be precise). The sound track for everything is the splashing and dripping of water: it is raining most of the time, everything is seeping, soaked and leaking, and in that sense the atmosphere in *The Bees* resembles David Fincher's film *Seven*. Only the crime is missing, although something sinister is always in the air. Something has gone awry and the whole country is spoilt.

The result of the above-described is a multi-faceted perception, which seems like a gust of foul-smelling air. After finishing the novel, a literary friend remarked: 'when I was reading it I felt the smell of rot and it did not go away.' The same happened to me. Still, *The Bees* is not a novel about jumping into filth. What makes the book fascinating is the protagonist's progress through sordidness and squalor towards catharsis. The reader can expect an alchemical ending, changing elements; it would not do to explain here how all this happens. Some have complained that the grand finale of *The Bees* never arrives and that the boat full of symbols and allegories sinks before getting safely into harbour, but I disagree. *The Bees* does have a proper ending, although a bit out of the ordinary.

The Bees is written in a beautiful and cultivated language. The text lives and flows and is hugely enjoyable. It is all natural. It is obvious that the text has been carefully composed, but there is no visible effort. This, of course, could mean that the novel required a lot of effort, but let this remain the author's secret. Just like Laurentius Hylas's real role and meaning in pre-destruction Tartu. Secrets must remain secrets: a sign of good literature.

Andrei Ivanov

and the anti-hero of our time

by Tarmo Jüristo

"For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live."

Theodor Adorno

When the Cultural Endowment of Estonia announced its annual prize winners for 2011, a minor public row broke out in the Estonian press over the peculiar absence of one particular name among the nominees. The writer in question was Andrei Ivanov, whose new novel *Peotäis põrmu* (*A Handful of Dust*) had recently been published in Estonian, and had been very well received by readers and critics alike. In previous years, Ivanov had gained renown by being nominated in 2010 as the best Russian language writer in Estonia, and publishing a couple of novellas (in translation) to high critical acclaim. In addition, his novel *Путешествие Ханумана на Лолланд* (*A Journey of Hanuman to Lolland*) had made it onto the short list of the Russian Booker Prize in 2011. However, with *A Handful of Dust* there was a peculiar problem that proved to be a nuisance: since it was translated from the manuscript and never actually published in the original language, it did not fit into any of the existing categories of the annual literary prizes of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia. Although the translation was there for everyone to buy and read, it was as if the book itself never existed.

This somewhat silly and embarrassing situation revealed many thorny questions that had been lying dormant. Although Estonia has a substantial Russian-speaking minority from the days of the Soviet occupation, this has been next to invisible on the literary scene. Only in the last couple of years has there been an emergence of Russian-sounding names on the book covers produced by Estonian publishing houses, and with Ivanov establishing his presence this issue had become impossible to ignore.

Ivanov himself has repeatedly expressed his indifference towards the literature- and culture-taxonomical confusions around his person and his work, saying that he "just writes" in order to "unburden his heart". On the one hand, it would indeed be tempting to ignore the whole theme and read Ivanov as "just literature", without paying attention

to his person or the temporal or spatial contexts of his stories and novels. On the other hand, this kind of "innocent reading" would be quite complicated for various reasons.

Ivanov's works that have been so far published in Estonian are all separate and autonomous texts, which nevertheless unfold in the shared narrative world with relatively clear spatial and temporal boundaries. The temporal frame begins in the 1970s and extends to the present, although the focus is in one way or another on the rapidly changing 1990s and the relevant outcomes. Spatially, the action (or rather inaction) of *My Danish Uncle* and *A Journey of Hanuman to Lolland* mainly takes place in Denmark; *Ashes* and *A Handful of Dust* mostly deal with Tallinn. Or rather a town called Tallinn, which contains familiar places and features, but is not quite the real Tallinn. Something is wrong here, not as it should be. This is especially evident in *Ashes*, where houses in the street at the edge of the marshland in the Pääsküla area quietly slide down the slope, inch by inch.

Against this weird and dislocated world, the central characters of his works also have a common contour and, although Ivanov has avoided specifically emphasising this unity, there are too many interlinking motifs to go unnoticed. It is equally difficult not to notice similarities with Ivanov's own biographical facts, something the writer has admitted himself: "autobiography is the ground upon which I establish the gardens of my fabrications." Ivanov's short stories and novels are deeply personal, both in form and content. As for identity, their first-person narrators have also "fallen between two chairs": a Russian man without citizenship, born in Tallinn, who left Estonia in the 1990s and spent years in Scandinavia, unable to settle anywhere. As a result, Ivanov's work is pure *littérature mineure*, where the individual theme becomes "all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it." („Kafka: toward a minor literature", trans. Dana Polan, Univ. of Minnesota Press 1986, p. 17.) Through this other story, the reader sees a world that did not exist before, together with people who up to now were invisible, and in the centre the first-person hero of Baltic-Russian extraction, "whose collar is buttoned up and whose heart is flowing over with contempt." This world is futile and bleak, with leaden-grey skies, it stinks and makes you vomit, it oppresses and frustrates, and it is a world where the past has been lost and where children remain unborn. The protagonist of Ashes describes his own relationship with this world as follows: "I have been looking at the world with the eyes of someone who has risen from the fire and the ashes as a phoenix, having previously been dragged through copper pipes in the form of faeces. I have seen a world where I was hunted with dogs, lured with hookers and money, injected in lobbies and public toilets. A world where I have been shot at, nearly frozen to death, chased, beaten, betrayed that has tested my resilience. A world that I did not invent, a world that was not invented for me, a world where I am a stranger."

Alienation and being an alien are central themes for Ivanov, running through all his works. His protagonist is never at home anywhere: he is an illegal immigrant in Scandinavia, returning to his home town he fails to recognise it: "everything has shifted, as if … some mischievous illusionists had put up carnival mirrors everywhere". His relationships fall apart, he feels estranged from old friends, and people in the street cast suspicious glances in his direction, ready to grab their mobile phones from their pockets and make calls where necessary. But he has no way out as "they have divided up the entire world, nowhere to hide any more, firms everywhere, affiliated companies, bureaucrats." There are people everywhere with their own incomprehensible lives and things to do, and Ivanov's protagonist does not fit in.

Andrei Ivanov (Photo by Scanpix)

Another motif linked with alienation is suffering. “Suffering – this is the only reason for consciousness,” says Dostoyevsky in his novel *Notes from Underground*, a shadow of which runs through Ivanov’s entire *oeuvre*. The protagonist of *A Journey of Hanuman* and *A Handful of Dust* even suffers physically. He has headaches, ulcers and gallstones, his feet rot in cheap Polish shoes and he feels queasy. However, suffering also has a deeper, a Dostoyevskian dimension in Ivanov’s books. It is not just a symptom or a reaction to the external environment: it is the above-mentioned essential disharmony and alienation, which cannot be cured or eased. Nor can it be escaped or resisted - as this resistance itself would be a farce. This is something that has been woven into the texture of Ivanov’s world and which constitutes the conceptial starting point of his texts.

Ivanov’s internationally best known and most acclaimed book, *Hanuman’s Journey to Lolland*, describes the adventures of two deadbeats in Denmark – where something is always rotten – in what seems to be a picaresque novel. The title clearly refers to the Ramayana, an epic tale of a prince forced into exile and his years-long journey with his faithful companion, the monkey king. In Hindu mythology, Rāma is an “ideal person”, an avatar of the god Vishnu, who has adopted the shape of a mortal in order to demonstrate *dharma*, the right and virtuous life. The same question is faced daily by the heroes of all Ivanov’s books: how to remain human in the world out of joint which is anything but humane – a world that denies his humanity, in a world that does not allow them humanity.

The fundamental problem of Ivanov’s heroes is aptly summed up by Theodor Adorno’s famous remark in the 18th fragment of *Minima moralia*: “There is no right life in the wrong one.” Just like Adorno, Ivanov understands the impossibility of moral life in today’s world. The characters of his stories drift through life, “moving against the current, trying to halt the world.” They desperately try to find any kind of foothold, which however keeps slipping away from them. Their best intentions come to nothing, their aspirations turn out to be pointless, and they are stuck in the same place, without getting anywhere. The ensuing hopelessness is not ennobling, and does not lead to the intellectual emancipation and the sense of absurd of novels by Sartre or Camus: this is Bardamu’s anxiety in Céline’s novel *Journey to the End of the Night*.

In the foreword of *A Hero of Our Time*, Lermontov says:

"*A Hero of Our Time*, my dear readers, is indeed a portrait, but not of one man. It is a portrait built up of all our generation’s vices in full bloom… You will say that the cause of morality gains nothing by this book. I beg your pardon. People have been surfeited with sweetmeats and their digestion has been ruined: bitter medicines, sharp truths, are therefore necessary.”

Ivanov offers the reader precisely such bitter medicines and sharp truths. The heroism of his first-person narrator is not in victories and achievements, but in defeat, personal desperation and misunderstanding. He is destined, like Ahasverus, to wander aimlessly without finding peace, although his suffering has nothing to do with anything he might have done himself; there is no “guilt” except that he is what he is: a non-human, semi-fabricated product. He suffers for and instead of us, walking on his endless road amidst everyday stifling stupidity. His guide is Hanuman and his hell is other people. Like Pechorin, his portrait – or rather his reflection – shows the evils of our generation in full bloom.

In his work, Ivanov naturally talks about something much wider and more general than the trials and tribulations of an illegal immigrant in Denmark or about the Estonian Russians’ problems in Tallinn. He is not moralising, does not point his finger or

choose sides, but because of this his books contain criticism that concerns us all. In *A Handful of Dust*, Leonid has a job in an international telemarketing company, but it is just as empty and pointless as Potapov's efforts in *Hanuman's Journey* to sell the rubbish he has dragged home from a garbage dump. Both struggle to live, but their lives are bleak and without purpose. They are like "crabs who crawl backwards into the future", but they at least feel discomfort, they suffer. They are alive the way how Scandinavians in their safe and comfortable existance are not.

Despite its overwhelming pessimism and desolation, Ivanov's narrative world is nevertheless not irrevocably lost. This is most evident in *A Handful of Dust*, where the final scene resounds with the same unearthly calm as in the last words of *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, which inspired the novel. Borrowing again from Adorno, we could say that Ivanov's novels are "the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption":

Adorno, *Minima moralia*: "Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption… all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with the objects – this alone is the task of thought."

Such a perspective, according to Adorno, assumes a location that is a bit further away from the field of existence, whereas every possible perception has to be "torn by force from that existence…." This is precisely the unique position from which the heroes in Ivanov's stories address us, and also a viewpoint he offers us. His perception has been "torn by force from existence", and there are many losses in the process. He has no comfort zone, no tranquil bourgeois life, which he can see many people living around him. His existence is steeped in a sense of failure; there is nothing certain and secure there, and very little that is pleasant, but this is exactly why we can see, through him, something we cannot or would not see in ourselves. The kind of alienation, exclusion and rootlessness Ivanov describes is no longer only a problem of the Russians in Estonia, and it is not a problem that only people in Estonia have to face.

Ivanov is most certainly not an easy and happy read. His texts are elegant and ironic, they can occasionally even be funny, but in the end they always leave a sense of bristling unease: they are "the axe for the frozen sea inside us" (Kafka). In an interview, Andrei Ivanov noted that it did not matter to him if he had many readers now, instead he wished to continue to have readers for a long time to come. Considering his work so far, we can certainly say that he deserves both.

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Short Outlines of Books by Estonian

by Brita Melts, Rutt

Janika Kronberg
Travels with Six Guides
(Rännud kuue teejuhiga)
Tallinn: GoGroup, 2013. 248 p
ISBN 9789949941841

The literary and cultural-historical book *Travels with Six Guides* is not an ordinary travelogue that reflects the traveller's subjective journeys and impressions. Janika Kronberg (b. 1963), a literary historian and the director of the Estonian Literary Museum, travels in an unusual way. On his journeys, he is primarily a hunter, following in the footsteps of prominent Estonian writers abroad. This book contains eight journeys with six writers-guides. All of them are acclaimed classics of Estonian culture, and mainly exiles. Friedebert Tuglas, the founder of professional Estonian prose and literary criticism, travelled extensively during his years in exile in 1905–1917 in Europe; Kronberg follows him through Spain. The founder of the Estonian historical novel, Eduard Vilde, sought material in 1904 among exiles in the Crimea, and Kronberg repeats the same journey one hundred years later. The poet Ivar Grünthal, who lived in exile in Sweden after World War II, went to America in 1963, and forty years later Kronberg meets the same people in New York. He follows the poet Henrik Visnapuu's journeys through Germany, Austria and New York. Two writers are his companions on two journeys each: Karl Ristikivi took Kronberg first to Rome and then on a longer road trip to Greece and Italy. The most exotic destinations were realised thanks to the colourful life of the diplomat, politician and writer Karl Ast Rumor. Kronberg followed his footsteps to Brazil and then to India and Sri Lanka.

The texts of the traveler with six guides thus always oscillate between two parallel times: in the writer's own time, i.e. today's landscapes, and in the time established by the writers' biographies and archives, capturing the inspiration experienced and recorded by these six writers. However, this kind of parallel structure and creative blending of landscapes involve more than literary journeys. The gaze of Kronberg as a 'hunter' is broad and notices everything of interest. His descriptions therefore include the necessary information about the relevant countries' history, politics, geography and history of culture, along with imagological notes, and hints at the writer's own biography and personal fantasies, so that the book creates a sort of interdisciplinary labyrinth. At the same time, the author has skilfully avoided amassing eclectic facts. Most of the travelogues that follow particular narrative journeys are fascinating for several

Authors

reasons. Firstly, the reader experiences sensory perceptions: the enjoyment of smells, sounds, memories and imagination diverges into factual chains of association, as well as into invented forays. The book naturally also contains mappings of tastes on trips: more than once, the author emphasises the significance of tasting local food, although he does not really explain the tastes to the reader. Secondly, trying to be documentary while using historical material, Kronberg quite liberally sprinkles fantasies into his travel notes and thus approaches fiction. Poetic licence occasionally rules over reality, and this is intentional.
The author of *Travels with Six Guides* thoroughly and with pleasure sinks into everything alien with all his senses. Being a vagabond and an archivist adventurer, the journeys in the book simultaneously take place in different times and spaces, and even in literary works: besides his guides, Kronberg occasionally teams up with characters from books! The landscapes he travels through thus become part of literature, his creative work is supplemented with factual reality, and this symbiosis enriches the reader.

Janika Kronberg (Photo by Scanpix)

Helen Kallaste

Kogutud hetked

(Collected Moments)
Tallinn: Verb, 2012. 78 pp
ISBN: 978-9949-9281-6-3

Collected Moments is a collection of poetry distinguished by its masterful language and spicy word-play; it is witty and inventive, but also private and emotional to the core. However, its subjective, fragile and sentimental world is entirely open, not closed in like private (confessional) poetry often tends to be. This is a terse book from a mature and skilful author, gathering the poems written during a relatively long period of time, mainly 2002-2008, and some later ones. For

Collected Moments, Helen Kallaste was given the 2013 Betti Alver award for a remarkable debut work, as well as an alternative award, Siugjas Sulepea. This award is annually given to the best work of the previous literary year that is in danger of going undeservedly unnoticed. But Helen Kallaste's book of poetry could not remain undeservedly unnoticed because, quoting the jury of the debut award, the author has systematically proved her ability (not randomly and temporarily) to expand her literary thoughts. Let us hope that she will persevere.

Actually, Kallaste is no longer a fledgling young author: she started publishing in the late 1990s as a member of the literary group Tallinna Noored Tegijad. But her debut collection came out more than a decade later, and for a good reason: we only rarely see a debut work of such maturity that, at the same time, displays the author's path of trials and development. Kallaste's associative and pure lyrics are often presented in the form of rhythmical texts, using alliteration and end rhymes, thus being related to classical poetry. On some pages, the author also shows her mastery of free verse. Kallaste brings together the traditional features of Estonian women's poetry, which started with Marie Under and Betti Alver: youthful exhilaration and a deep thirst for life, together with passionate bravado and playful lightness, which collide with philosophical intuition, memories, women's worries and seriousness, mysticism, and changing and noble feelings that range from love and empathy to painful nightmares. The collection unleashes a truly complex lyrical world, where we meet dancers and tightrope walkers, shapers of dreams, angels and ghosts, werewolves and soulful white cranes.

Here "the dreams become nightmares", "fever welters on pillows,/ a long-nailed fever, /the greedy one, my last lover", and the dreams leave behind visible welts and "the net of memories, in tangles around her feet/ catches her, sends her astray". Such images alternate with simple views of slums, of an old woman on the street, of descriptions of everyday interiors and snapshots of autumn in the town. There are also poems describing the author's bus trip to Greece, and a simple, cute lullaby. Kallaste plays with routine details of everyday life, weaving them into phrases of exalted words, and with womanly charms and faces, but at the same time, we get glimpses of colourful fantasies, folkloric motifs and even philosophical questions and problems of identity: how can one and the same body possibly contain a woman, a child, a mother, a common person, a person who is about to depart and "the thirst for revelations of a quiet madwoman"…

Kallaste has said that the reason why she writes poetry is her need to interpret, contemplate and experience events and emotions: poetry is a means of clarifying one's private world and putting it in order. This can also be seen in Kallaste's sensitive language and the convincing tonality of her poems. The poet knows, "Each of my stolen heartbeats/ becomes a chain of the truth, the act and the effect." The deeply private perspective of Kallaste's poetry leads to emphatic generalisations about human errors, guilt, temptations, yearnings, passions and fears, which all spring from a deeply experienced source. In poetic language, this is "the yearning to be human." BM

Eda Ahi
Gravitatsioon
(Gravitation)
Tallinn: Verb, 2013. 56 pp
ISBN 9789949947324

As a contrast to the socially sensitive and self-centred and the free verse that has established itself as the mainstream of Estonian modern poetry and rarely strives for more than mere oscillation between self-centred pain and vanity, a remarkable poetry debut emerged a couple of years ago. It has even been called an homage to classic rhymed and rhythmical poetry. This talented

newcomer is Eda Ahi (b. 1990), whose first collection of poems, *Maskiball,* won the Betti Alver award for best debut work. Critics have said that by choosing the rhymed and rhythmical verse approach, Ahi has identified herself with some different and far-away, even outdated cultural space. However, Ahi is, without doubt, a modern poet who pours the details and moments of present-day life into the lively images of her fascinating poetic language. Another poet, Jürgen Rooste, has written that Ahi is not a social poet in the sense of daily politics, but she surely is a humane poet in the sense of "daily poetics". Due to her gracious language and good sense of form, Ahi deserves comparison with the golden era of Estonian poetry in the first decades of the 20th century, and especially with Estonian women poets, from Marie Under to Doris Kareva. Kareva has remarked that what is remarkable in the precise form and supple rhymes and rhythms of Eda Ahi's poetry is just "how naturally she does all this, what dancing steps and turns and smiles full of plenty of meanings her texts contain." Ahi creates these steps and turns with her passionate choice of words, colourful images and cross-cultural references.

Eda Ahi (Photo by Scanpix)

Eda Ahi's second collection of poems, *Gravitatsioon,* continues the elegant theme of role play or mask play, introduced in her first collection. The lyrical self that in her poems participates in masquerades with playful ease represents the darker sides of the *femme fatale*. But one of the carrying forces found in Ahi's poetry is the juxtaposing of opposites as equal temptations: warm and irritating attitudes, and an atmosphere that balances on the edge between good and bad. She reaches out for both the edges and the core of the world, and thirsts for both good and evil. For example, from the poem "To Faust": "I do not wish to hope that I'll recur/ behind your glances. but I hope. // to realise the horror of your embraces/ I do not want to want. but I want."

Such quivering and continuous yearning for ambivalence preserves the grand balance between peacefulness and wisdom, and cleverness and sentimental playfulness. The lyrical self is slightly arrogant and haughty, undoubtedly wilful, charmingly feminine and extremely self-confident; she can find nourishing vitality and the truth and power of life in the otherwise watery "sea of life", thus defying "eternal longing" and fate. Here and there, Ahi associates fateful moments with characters known from Russian literary classics and conveys dramatic tension through generalised images that are above the private and personal. Ahi has completed her study of Italian language and culture, and her master's programme focuses on European Union–Russian studies. As a result, she can bring a natural-looking international dimension to her poetry, using Russian literary classics, but also classical and romantic literature, with allusions to Mediterranean

cultures. This again displays a yearning for opposites: on the one hand, the poet firmly holds to Estonian classics of poetry and the signs that shape the Estonian frame of mind but, on the other hand, she states: “but in my veins, instead, there is stirring / the sheer Mediterranean Sea.”

In such a way, Ahi creates a visionary mixture of several different cultures and eras, where an important role is played by strong sensuality (tastes, smells, sounds, emotions and bodily pleasures), leading to a lyrical synthesis that supports the classic features of her poetry. Hers is a far-reaching and vital poetry; as a creator, she knows her limits and opportunities, she boldly answers the challenges and she makes her choices with wise persistence, knowing that “we are still so terrifyingly young./ our options have not yet been closed./ but in all taverns, roads and rooms/ which at present do not seem to be interconnected,/ we already are on our way to history.” BM

Mehis Heinsaar
Ülikond
(A Suit)
Tallinn: Menu Kirjastus, 2013. 160 pp
ISBN 978-9949-495-73-3

Mehis Heinsaar (b. 1973) is one of the most original figures in modern Estonian literature: he is a bohemian who has illegally occupied the flats he has been residing in, he communicates with people in semi-mystical art-related salons, he roams as a vagabond through dusky streets or escapes to thick forests in northern Latvia to walk around as a solitary hiker, and he sits in cafés and, in an old-fashioned way, uses a pencil to write in his notebook. All in all, he gives off the aura of a pure type of writer in the classical sense. He is a cult writer whose works were discussed at a special literary conference when he was only 35 years old, and he was given a prestigious literary award even before he had published his first book. Heinsaar has published six books of prose and a collection of poetry and he is mostly appreciated as a master of the genre of short stories, having been showered with recognition and given several literary awards.


Mehis Heinsaar (Photo by Scanpix)

Heinsaar has been characterised as a writer who traces the rhythm of being: his characters move in a dream-like way, sometimes coming to a point and achieving something, but in other cases only aimlessly wandering in the rhythm of being. The main idea of his stories is the discovery and sharing of a variety of matters and moments of the world, conveyed in a supple and poetic style. His language creates sensational experiences, his choice of adjectives is more than creative, and his sentences support and carry on the same cosy and magical atmosphere that is found in his plots.

The collection of short stories *Ülikond* contains 14 stories, written in 2003-2013, which are of entirely different tonality than his previous book *Ebatavaline ja ähvardav loodus* (*The Weird and Scary Nature*) (2010), where, compared with the rest of Heinsaar’s works, the author seemed to have got lost in a gruesomely grotesque thicket of the erotic, entirely alien to the Heinsaar we are accustomed to. *A Suit*, however, shows the characteristics of the

Heinsaar long established in our literary canon: these are stories of dusk and twilight, where the characters are carried by a fairy-tale-like breath and landscapes, and magical interiors are described in great detail and clarity. Heinsaar has stated that the inspiration and impulse behind his stories usually stem from very definite geographical locations: his short stories are always geographically very specifically grounded, but time in these stories departs from reality and vaguely floats, or has even stopped.

The fictional worlds of Heinsaar's stories vibrate between the realistic and fantastic; everyday life is inseparable from the fabulous, magical realism and surrealism. But compared with Heinsaar's earlier works, the fantastic element has been greatly reduced and now his stories are primarily existential. In the best cases, existentialism is expressed by the overcoming of angst and mental barriers in emotional or spiritual life, and not all of his stories, despite their fabulous nature, have happy endings. His stories can be quite dark and pessimistic, illustrated by this passage: "There will still come a time when you suddenly discover that your best friends have betrayed you, your wife has a lover, your organism has been penetrated by an unknown virus that looks like it's going to cause long-time, unpleasant and tiring after-effects, your work proves to be a disappointment to you and you will never achieve the things that you were once hoping for and looking forward to. There will come a time when all the wide and inviting roads that were in front of you prove to be dead ends, so that one day you find yourself scowling at the world like a wounded animal, surrounded by lies and only able to grind your teeth in powerless rage and sadness."

Ülikond, with its "hours of dreaming", depression, internal and surrounding darkness and torturing memories, is in a strange kind of accord with Heinsaar's only collection of poetry, *Sügaval elu hämaras* (*Deep in the Dimness of Life*) (2009), which expresses loneliness, fear, pain, angst and human suffering. Still, the magical worlds of this collection of stories not only contain darkness, but also offer us mischievous adventures and even some tips on how to outwit Old Age. BM

Kaja Kann
Eratee
(The Private Road)
Hea Lugu.Tallinn 2013. 95 pp.
ISBN: 9789949489916

Quite a large number of original books are published each year in Estonia to which the critics usually pay absolutely no attention. Often these books are authored by women. Mostly, women write about relationships and about fictional colourful lives. In general, these books are quite popular among the public. The number of books containing life stories and memoirs is even larger. Such works are even more widely read, especially when written by some local celebrity.

Kaja Kann's (b. 1973) book does not belong to any of these groups, but it can still be called a life story. If we search for page numbers in the book, we see that there are none. Time seems to be missing, and the same days, evenings and mornings are endlessly repeated. The pages are filled with the same chores and events. We can open the book at any page, and it is always the right place, just as a random meeting can take place at any time. Somebody is talking and you may listen or not listen. The moment the voice penetrates your consciousness and you start listening to it is the very beginning.

Eratee seems to be searching for an answer to the question of whether real life, a common routine happening right now, contains the qualities of dullness or sublimity. Will everyday chores take us nearer to permanent values or are they simply a waste

of time? *Eratee* does not directly reflect on these questions. On the contrary, the author is a carefully impartial and matter-of-fact describer of things and events. She seems to believe that she has found the right path. But the reader may ask: for how long? The book is presented as a diary of a woman. This woman has had connections with theatre: she was a performance artist. However, she reminisces very little about that life: she started her diary when she moved to the country, and she records her everyday life. The table of contents lists: Spring. Summer. Autumn. Winter. Spring. Daily routine.

The author first writes down a description of how she fills the potholes in the road to her house with stones. She tells us that when she bought the house six years ago, she had no idea that the road would cause so much trouble. She talks about finding a man as laconically as about finding the house. The past can be guessed at, but the narrator does not elaborate on it; she only describes her days and activities. The man is in Finland, and the woman is in Pardimäe, Estonia. There are repetitive activities: drinking coffee, heating the sauna, repairing the road, gardening, some practical conversations with neighbours etc. The woman only rarely talks about her own life, and treats the people in her life as passers-by. “When I was renting this flat in the town with my daughter, I did nothing to make it better for the future. This flat did not feel like my own place.” Now, she is creating her own place. The text is laconic, without any embellishment or deep philosophical undertones, nothing showy. Everything is plainly described: no metaphors, no symbols. Is it fiction at all? In order to answer this question, we need to ask another one: does the reader read it as notes from reality, the story of a woman, without questioning its trueness to life?

All right, but why should we read it? There are other writers in Estonian literature who write repetitively about the same dull daily routine. Some of them are more poetic, or more nightmarish than others. Usually, they have more to say and more events to describe. However, Kaja Kann’s book is a healthy and refreshing read, it is consistent and polished in its own way, and its minimalism seems to hold a secret. The author says on the back cover of her book that she decided to create only permanent values. She went to live in the country. She writes about this private road that connects her to the world. Each night she takes a photo through her window: this is her view of the world. The book provides a frame for this view. RH

Kaja Kann
Eratee
(Private Road)
Kaja Kann and OÜ Hea Lugu 2013

A woman who has moved from the city to the country spends a year, from spring to spring, mainly in the company of her rural retreat, her diary and herself. Other people come and go swiftly, as in a kaleidoscope. They leave a bright but fleeting impression in the rural solitude. Friends and family visit and leave again, leaving a trace of themselves more as voices on the phone, as they live in town or abroad, in a word elsewhere. The mistress of Pardimäe, however, has come to stay. She planned to live with someone, but the book depicts her life alone. The woman is thoroughly fed up with the fashionable term “value added”, but there are no added values in Pardimäe: here you need to deal with permanent values.

What then is the heroine of the book doing, and what kind of permanent values is she creating? As with other characters in the book, everything is only hinted at, leaving readers the joy of deciding for themselves what the author has left between the lines: it is not easy to guess what these permanent values could be. Her days are filled with wine-drinking, gathering firewood, smoking, heating the sauna, cooking, rescuing

preserves from the flooded cellar, knitting a jumper, mowing the lawn, shovelling snow, but not a word about permanent values. Maybe all these little jobs so necessary for country life have in fact become permanent values?

People who spend a lot of time writing reports and filling in application forms are not really interested in anyone creating permanent values, although this might be true only in the imagination of the diarist. The former urban dweller living a rural life has cut herself off from her previous friends, but the cut-off cannot be final. Toiling in the vegetable garden has lost the aura of the olden days: growing your own food is no longer the only way to stay alive, and income can be earned in other ways.

In the course of reading *The Private Road*, there is a growing impression that the text primarily concentrates on the heroine's complicated relationships, although she keeps describing her solitary existence with ceaseless energy. The book is inundated with relationships or their fragments. The sisters live their own lives, the grown-up daughter is impatient to get as far away from home as possible, her mother and father seem to be keeping away from each other and the rest of the family, and there is a husband from somewhere in Finland who has returned there. The rural house was bought for him, but he disappears before the reader can learn anything about him. Most of the time the man exists outside the book. It turns out that he will not be coming back until the end of the book, but the fact that the rural retreat will be the home of one person instead of a happy couple is vaguely evident even in the first pages. Solitude is something that is dominant over complicated relations and seems inseparable from Pardimäe.

At the same time, the house is a place to observe the world, as the narrator claims. Solitude is not the same as tormenting spiritual emptiness, as time and her soul are filled with nature. The protagonist's life in the country is devoted to plants and animals. A cat with kittens joins her at the beginning of spring, thus confirming the protagonist's conviction that home is here, and it is not easy to give it up.

Kaja Kann (Photo by Scanpix)

The annual cycle of the narrator's life passes without a sequence of dramatic events, and her days are filled with mundane work. Nothing special happens on most days, but this book is indeed about something else: something that has lasted and should continue in the future.

Besides the text, there are also photographs, taken daily of the same place: the garden, neighbouring houses in the distance and the changing seasons. This is an ordinary view from an ordinary house, easily confused with many other views across Estonia. There are hardly any people about; someone occasionally glimpsed disappears in the next photograph. Only Pardimäe is the same, although nothing much is seen of the house either. Even the road beyond the gate is not visible. This is a private road – for only one person, not others – and thus it cannot be revealed.

One day, however, this gate could lead back to the wider world outside. However, first it is necessary to wait and see. The protagonist waits for the spring water to disappear from her cellar. Her mother reminds her that not everything depends on her daughter. This proves to be true enough: the next spring the water disappears from the cellar in a week. Other problems might get solved when people realise that a single person cannot always control the world, nature does not depend on people, and people cannot influence the decisions of others. Sometimes you have to just watch almost everyone near and dear leave. Country people go to town, and townspeople go abroad.

Someone, however, needs to stay in the country. Not everyone can live this type of life: each person must make his own decisions, as you can exist only by making your own decisions. Maybe one of the permanent values that can only be created in Pardimäe is understanding your own wishes and following them. All of us may have our own Pardimäes. MV

Andrus Kivirähk

Maailma otsas. Pildikesi heade inimeste elust

(At the End of the World. Scenes from the Lives of Good People)
Eesti Keele Sihtasutus.Tallinn. 2013. 390 pp.

Andrus Kivirähk (b.1970) is the most productive and most popular contemporary author in Estonian literature. He tops the best-seller lists, but has also harvested more literary prizes and awards than any other author. He may not be the number one author for the whole Estonian population, but he at least places in the top ten. He has written in all genres except poetry, or at least he has not published poetry. Kivirähk debuted in the mid-1990s and he has, in two decades, published more than thirty books. He is an extraordinarily skilled and enjoyable narrator, and he uses natural and colloquial language and plenty of direct speech: his heroes are often characterised by their speech. The garrulous characters talk incessantly, without listening to or understanding others. Thus, their speech at times consists only of unrelated monologues.

Kivirähk always writes about the same subject: average Estonians with their endless prejudices, common beliefs and patterns of behaviour, their deep distrust and general caution in dealing with the world. Book by book, he has built a small world, taking only rare excursions to other areas and among other types of characters, such as actors (*Liblikas* and *Voldemar*) and children (*Lotte*). Some of his books use more extravagant material and more noticeable colours (*Rehepapp* and *Ussisõnad*). His tumbling and fantastic world is funny and positive, and most of his characters are sure that life is fine. The darker side of life, the despair that settles into the core of being, does not become tragic or elevated in Kivirähk's treatment, but rather becomes more or less grotesque. The grotesque is Kivirähk's natural element; his grotesque is not horrible, dark or cruel, but usually funny. His world looks like ours, but it is slightly different, and inhabited by a species slightly different than us. We are

shown their fussy and bustling (and sometimes incomprehensible and puzzling) everyday life. We truly believe that we are not like that.

Maailma otsas is a book about "small people". We meet a whole gallery of characters whom we may even have met in real life: the mother Malle with her various phobias, her middle-aged son Eevald, whom she bosses around in various ways, and many others. These people are connected by the old wooden house where they all reside, and by different small activities that fill their days and sometimes give rise to hopes or dreams, which need to be controlled with the help of the bottle. People meet and drift apart, they have common friends and acquaintances, and everything has already happened and is constantly repeated.

One of the characters who plays a more central role, Ülo, owns a bar called Opossum, which offers only one course of food, which varies from day to day. The people who visit the bar and whose paths cross there are also one-course-per-day-people. They are not pretentious and only rarely do some of them wish for something unexpected, such as a trip to the end of the world. But maybe they all already are at the end of the world and they should try to find out how to escape from this end, where Madam Aino summarises her cultural thirst each time after having bathed her dog: "I like it when everything is done in a cultured way." This and several other chapters of the book can be treated as independent short stories. (The jury of the Friedebert Tuglas short story award should pay close attention to them.) The story about Malle and Kalju's visit to the graveyard and their talk about the screen version of *The Lord of the Rings* particularly resembles a short story.

Kalju is presented as nothing more than a very friendly simple-minded chap. But we need to be careful: Kivirähk's text is no innocent and straightforward description. When he tells us that such friendly chaps are very obedient, we cannot know whether somebody is going to give them the signal for action. And if such an opportunity turns up at the end of the world, we can only hope that we have correctly understood the point. RH

Robert Kurvitz

Püha ja õudne lõhn

(Holy and Horrible Smell)
Tallinn: ZA/UM, 2013. 240 pp
ISBN 9789949330638

"Charlottesjäl. This holiday resort near Vaasa swallowed the four Lund girls. Together with their small bones and skin showing bikini borders, a whole era vanished." These sentences open the debut novel *Püha ja õudne lõhn* of the musician and scriptwriter Robert Kurvitz (b. 1984), a member of the group ZA/UM, which draws together writers, artists and photographers. On the title page, the book is described as a prologue to a cycle of novels. It seems to be a film-like thriller, constructed in episodes and taking huge leaps in space and time; as a result, it is probably quite hard to make sense of it. However, despite its fragmentation and the avoidance of linearity, the novel has managed unusually seamlessly to merge time and space. The author has called his book a kind of "geopolitical dream" that is not exactly magical realism or fantasy, but something in between. In simple words, the book is a monumental fusion of the realistic and the fantastic. *Püha ja õudne lõhn* stormily mixes together the features of several different literary genres, including elements of crime fiction, science fiction, geopolitical dreams, futurist temptations, psychological rummaging, psychedelic experiments and realist motifs between the same covers.

The thoroughly jumbled plot of the narrative has, in a laconic and seemingly simplistic way, been summarised on the back cover of the book: "On the last day but one of the summer

holiday, the four daughters of Minister of Education Ann-Margret Lund go missing on a public beach. A newly consecrated cruise ship goes missing on her virgin cruise with a thousand and five hundred passengers on board. Three classmates of the girls have not given up the investigation of their disappearance even twenty years later. The world is falling into ruins, but the hope of finding the Lund girls is still not yet lost." The book is about the search for the girls who went missing without a trace a couple of decades before (every now and then, new bits of information emerge about this mysterious case); each new episode is accompanied by the horrible and inevitable foreboding of the end of the world: not only people and vehicles go missing, but somewhere, even a landmass loses one sixth of its total area. One of the sentences often repeated in the book is: "The whole world is a zone of immediate enthroponetic catastrophe." To render all this, the author has inserted crazy fantasies between quite realistic details. With a suggestive and dynamic style and rich language, the author constructs a complex and strange, but enjoyably active alternate world, where tensions are stretched over endless gaps and episodic pieces of the story end up with uncertain solutions, because nothing is ultimately solved. Perhaps this is an intentional aim of the "prologue": "Sometimes, the solved disappearance is the saddest one."

Readers may be at a loss when facing the crazy plot and flaming style of the novel. Critics are divided as to whether it is a very good or a very bad book. But Kurvitz has constructed a truly convincing alternative world, adding sensual ecstasies to its already actively humming space-time: in describing different bouquets of smells and tastes, pleasures and enchantments, extreme passions and physically experienced magic, the author releases his words in an intense and baroque flow. *Püha ja õudne lõhn* is a novel of a new generation. Its plot and form are almost over-designed, but one does not dominate the other. Kurvitz has admitted that, as a musician, he has haunted his public with a "wall of guitar sounds and crazy ambition". A similar desire to haunt can be found in his book, and the result is aesthetically enjoyable. BM

Ülo Mattheus

Tema salajane palve

(His Secret Prayer)
Tallinn: Tuum, 2013. 208 pp
ISBN 9789949948246

The prose author and journalist Ülo Mattheus (b. 1956) has published his works with long intervals between them: *Tema salajane palve* is only his seventh book of fiction published during his more than thirty-year-long literary career. He debuted in the 1980s with intellectual Borgesian short stories inhabited by strange characters; they are full of mysticism and resemble true myths by bringing out the irrational in human life. He has continued these themes in his novels, where the often unspecified milieu is full of Buddhist feeling. Mattheus is able to create atmospheres where the real and the imaginary, the temporal and the eternal are mixed to such an extent that if differentiating between them is not downright impossible, it is at least totally unnecessary.

The plot of *Tema salajane palve* moves in an intermediate region between reality and the imaginary, where both space and time have been fragmented: the present, past and future can all appear in the same space, and in the daily life of the same protagonist. This novel of philosophical and mythical texture has been divided into two parts: the first part is set mainly in present-day Estonia, and the second part develops mostly in the dream-like silence of the Himalayan slopes. The characters are able

to travel geographical distances, but also cross between the worlds of the living and the dead: the boundaries between life and death are hazy. The opening sentences of the book warn the readers that different lines of life and time are mixed up: “The living intermingle with the dead, time and memories are mixed into an inseparable bundle, continuously creating new links and connections.” Memories of the past and the future appear simultaneously. The plot is surrounded by a thick ring of irrationality, but such uncertainty between two worlds can hide some unexplainable clarity or even emotional lucidity. The characters are strange, even supernatural figures, and they are characteristic of Mattheus’s works: shamans, Tibetan sorcerers and demons. The most remarkable among them is the Tibetan sorcerer, active all through the book, who “has just exited from his body and now roams everywhere, in the real world and dream world, in the earthly world and heavenly world, in his real body and in his spiritual body”. His appearance is announced by a repulsive odour, he continually mutters mysterious prayers and he thinks that the protagonist is an incarnated lama.

The protagonist of the book, a journalist, falls in love with a woman who has slipped into a coma after a traffic accident; in his imagination, he enjoys pleasures during his search for a path to spiritual perfection. His journey embodies sightings of miraculous things and events, and he tries to capture the exaltation of being that would give meaning to his life. Similarly to Mattheus’s earlier books, *Tema salajane palve* is also carried by a strongly Buddhist world-view; the Buddhist philosophy is presented in a sophisticated way, having an almost wordless effect on the readers and avoiding domination or lecturing. The philosophy of time is a unique feature of the novel. Reflections on the meaning and the subjective perception of time develop into the framework for the whole book, presenting four definitions of time in four chapters: 1) time is in one moment, 2) time is not real, but imaginary, 3) time is change, and 4) time comes to an end. This develops into the realisation that a moment, frozen in the air, can contain the whole world and all of life. The novel ends when a man in monk’s robes, reading mantras by the bed where the comatose woman is lying, suddenly realises that “…he knows that time will come to its end; it is just as long as you perceive it to be. A second can be as long as an eternity if you sense it that way, and all of life can be only one second long if you look back at it at the moment of departure.”

When enchantment, love, the despair of loneliness, Nordic crispness, existential questions, the philosophy of time, Tibetan beliefs, the bleakness of life and luxurious passion are presented all together in a single vortex, this can only result in a strangely impressive and unique book that will make its readers reflect on life and death, time and eternity, feelings and values of life, and their fragile and transient boundaries. BM

Ülo Mattheus (Photo by Scanpix)

Dantelik auk

(Dante-like Hole)
Ed. by Kajar Pruul, Ill. by Kirke Kangro
Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, Tallinn, 2012. 142 pp

In this book, Maarja Kangro (hereafter MK) shows herself to be a European to the core, without giving up her national identity: starting with the opening page of the book, the text is full of foreign loan words and foreign-language (Italian, German and English) expressions. She tells us about the perfective aspect of the verb, in passing mixing it with parallel realities and entropy. Within the limits of imagination, everything is 'incrustable', 'opaque' and 'transcendent'!

The plots of this collection of short stories are carried mainly by female narrators, denoted simply by I, S. or Z. The main tonality of the stories is established in the title story of the book, where the first-person narrator, accompanied by the eco-orange boy Marco, whom we can see on any supermarket counter, travels in the land of geysers, Iceland. They arrive at a boiling pool that oozes sulphuric vapours; one of the travellers believes that this is the historical "Dante-like hole", but the other one thinks that this is only "a small hell-hole, stinking of rotten eggs" (p. 8), from which shines out the destructive glow of the "sun of black rays" (the Rumanian Emile Cioran).

The rays of the sun in the sky, however, take on an ever brighter orange hue. That is because an angel from an invisible hell has meanwhile slipped out of the hole. It penetrates and inhabits the narrator's body and also peels the orange. I am sure that the "opaque and transcendent" Marco has nothing much against this. We are not going to meet him again, but throughout the rest of the book, the orange sun is shining in the sky and all of the pages are full of the smell (even if synthetic), segments of oranges and pieces of orange peel. Even the images on the cover of the book are similar to reddish slices of oranges. We meet for the last time with the "beautiful glowing blood of oranges" (*Klaasnuudlid*, Glass Noodles, p.93) when somewhere in a writer's residence we see the mushy remains of somebody's over-salted dinner in a rubbish bin. "It was delicious" mutter all the proper and well-mannered members of the party (p. 85). These are the same people who think that the fact that the Nobel Prize was given to Herta Müller (a woman writer) was simply *uzhas* (a horror, in Russian).

We should note that the angel of hell who had slipped into the world from the "Dante-like hole" was not any old angel but the fallen archangel Lucifer, banished from heaven. It is clear that it's Lucifer, because who else would know that God, when looking at his creation, "ultimately pities the poor himself" (p. 69) and that "the unmentionable name of God could well be a BS name" (p. 2)? On page 10, the ex-archangel gives an almost imperceptible hint that this is already his seventh visit to the earth. And since this, MK's second, book of prose contains just seven stories (written in 2011-2012), we can conclude that Lucifer is present in all of them.

In the middle of a peeled orange, the Prince of Hell discovers the post-socialist (or post-colonialist) Eastern Europe, where everything is almost the same, whether in Slovenia, Estonia or Belarus. Although people feel love even in these places and women "want to go crazy for somebody and tell them lusty nonsense" (p. 29), their men tend to be "impassive jerks" who are all full of the "*postajannaja* [my italic – A.O.] s***" of the near past (p. 31). This, in turn, explains MK's verbal invention "intelligiibel". This is a Russian-language compound word (*интель* = intelligentsia (a derogatory general term); *гибель* = doom, destruction), clearly indicating the doom or destruction of the intelligentsia, or a dead intellectual.

The north-gazing, short-tempered "Dane of the South" (*danese* = Dane in Italian) Giulio Danesi tries to see Lithuania, which

has barely escaped "the decline of the West", as *Mitteleuropa* and almost as Germany ("Giulio ja Leedu küsimus", "Giulio and the Problem of Lithuania"), but he himself exhibits a serious "*intelligiibel*" tendency. For him, Königsberg is a Lithuanian city and Immanuel Kant's native language was Lithuanian. For such a sacrilege, he is punished by the Old Man of Lake Ülemiste, who sends him an allergy-inducing virus, which causes an upper respiratory infection.

We can see that there is a book inside the book: between MK's texts, her sister and artist Kirke Kangro has inserted her own book of drawings, whose pictorial messages help to interpret the messages of the texts. On page 97, just before the story *Chick lit ja tõlkekristused* (Chick Lit and Translation Christs), there is a full-body portrait of MK. Actually, she is this very "translation, publication and reading Christ" (p. 103), three-in-one.

This same story develops a new type of *Silvergate* between the author (or the female writer Z, similar to the author) and one of her ex-lovers. Namely, the critic Silver voices his opinion at the presentation of Z's new book that all women's writing is actually *chick lit,* striving to become best-sellers. The term is used in English in the text, denoting something like 'enlightened chick lit', whose ideal would be the well-known TV serial *Sex and the City*. As far as MK goes, she is definitely a writer and an enlightened woman, but by no means a chick or the author of chick lit.

This untranslated English phrase *chick lit* could in this context well be coupled with the French-language word *jouissance* (here, a woman's joy and pleasure, often with a sexual undertone). Adding here a healthy dose of the salt of poststructuralist feminism, we can see that a couple's serving of food that is delivered to a single woman in the story *Homaarid kahele* (*Lobster for Two*) actually symbolises homage to two great French thinkers: "*hommage au Jacques Lacan et Hélène Cixous*."

In Estonia, the literary world is still mostly led by men, and sometimes this may take quite a strange form. In the story *Zürii* (*Jury*), a group of functionaries, assumed to be connected with a literary competition, arrive at an author's home. They start a quarrel, steal things and beat up the owner. Although another (the true?) jury allegedly exists somewhere, the main prize of the competition is given to Paul Kass, the man who was beat up by the 'jury'.

In the closing story of the book, *Saluut* (*Salute*), the male writer Rebane goes to a village library to meet his readers. On his way there, having just been given a speeding ticket, he suddenly notices strange fireworks (which may actually be the signal fires of hell, lit by Lucifer, who was temporarily residing in the library girl Helen and who is now preparing to leave the earth, and intends that only Rebane see this). But Rebane is unable to see a symbol in the 'salute'. At his destination, his only listener dies on the spot and Rebane feels strongly out of place. He could be the driver of the hearse, but the angels of hell do not need such services. Lucifer leaves Helen behind and slips back into the Dante-like hole. Until the next time.

In conclusion, I should say that MK's short stories do not follow the classical form of the genre, but they definitely are short stories, and they are interesting and sometimes even impish pieces of literature. AO

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