

# For a First Glance at Estonian Literature

Jüri Talvet

It seems clear that at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the world of letters is oriented by mainstream phenomena whose source mechanisms are Western economic and political centers. Little if any attention is paid to literatures of the vast periphery which includes literary creation not only by tiny nations such as Estonia (located on the shores of the Baltic Sea, and with a population of scarcely a million people), but also by much bigger communities, especially of what has traditionally been called the third world.

However, in the world cultural process, classifications like first, second, and third have no real value. If we apply them, we only demonstrate our great cultural ignorance. Peripheral cultures in which contact with nature / the biosphere is inalienable, always provide room for sudden creative explosions?. To a greater extent than centres, the world's immense periphery has characteristics of the semiosphere, an ideal space for artistic creation imagined in the late work of Yuri M. Lotman (1922 – 1993), the renowned semiotic philosopher who himself spent the greater part of his lifetime in the dark European periphery. He taught (mainly Russian literary history) for more than forty years at the University of Tartu, in an Estonia which in those times as part of the Soviet Union could not project any visible identity as a state, nation, and culture in the eyes of the wider world.

Yet the world is in constant change. Though the delay has been long, some historical injustices done to peripheral cultures are being remedied. The canon of world literature is sporadically modified and expanded, depending in the first place on new talented translations of the works, in parallel with philosophically minded criticism, capable of illuminating a work differently than in the past. Thus, one of the greatest Estonians of all time, Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803 – 1882), the son of serfs, spent forty years of his life as a medical doctor, curing simple village people in a tiny provincial Southern-Estonian town. Despite acting in an even more obscure periphery than Lotman, Kreutzwald created an epic in twenty songs, *Kalevipoeg* (1861), a vigorous testament to the ideal of his people's freedom. It became the founding work of Estonian literature, both in the philosophical and aesthetic dimension. In the year 2004 a complete French translation of *Kalevipoeg* was published in Paris by Gallimard, and a second complete English translation of the work is to appear soon. Literary criticism, too, is gradually overcoming the exaggerated postmodern fear of grand narratives and entering a constructive phase of refreshing new comparative interpretations of the literary works of the past. Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg*, which by today has become a stem text of the Estonian nation, has a place in such interpretations, with the huge number of intertextualities departing from it and running

through the cultural creation of posterity.

However, one should not idealize the potential contribution of smaller cultures to the canon of world literature. It is also true that a significant part of the literary creation and the literary criticism from the vast cultural area remaining outside the dominant international languages (English, French, German, Spanish) follows the example of the fashions originated in the centres. The imitative principle is even more visible in the field of literary criticism, in which very few scholars outside the centres reveal a capacity for independent thinking and elucidating phenomena from the viewpoint of their own existential situation, of historical cultures beyond the mainstream patterns.

For that reason, comparative literary studies are more important than ever. In Estonia, we publish in Tartu since 1995 *Interlitteraria*, an annual international journal for comparative literary studies. Over the years it has dedicated significant space to literatures of the peripheral and border areas of Europe as well as other parts of the world. The aim is to establish a mutually enriching dialogue between centres and peripheries and attempt to shed light on the literary processes taking place beyond the mainstream.

We welcome an analogous initiative coming from one of the greatest Asian cultural centres, China, as embodied by *Forum for World Literature Studies*. Responding thankfully to its offer to give in its pages a short introduction to Estonian literature, instead of providing regular overviews of the main genres of literary creation, we have preferred to centre the following articles on poetry and literary reception. Even though postmodern literary scholarship has driven poetry to the periphery of its interests, it is probably still the core of all literary creation of any nation, as well as the main source of originality, in view of the fact that, more than other genres, it is deeply involved in the natural language, the mother tongue of a nation. In my own essay I try to characterize the historical origins of Estonian poetry and present-day poetic developments. My younger colleagues Lauri Pilter and Katre Talviste, in their respective articles, review attempts to project Estonian poetry into the currently most important international language, English, and show how the literature of the most stable and vital Western cultural centre, France, has been received in Estonian culture and literature.