

Estonian Poetry: The Seduction and the Toil of Thinking in Rhymes

Jüri Talvet

Abstract Estonian poetry is still very little known outside Estonia or the community and the diaspora of Estonians abroad. In part, it is because literatures of smaller nations, created in their national languages, on the whole tend to be neglected by the mainstream of world literature, which relies on literary creation in major international languages. However, trans-cultural dynamics in poetry has its specific difficulties. They are very much present in the case of Estonian poetry, which during the scarce two hundred years of its existence has predominantly resorted to end-rhymed stanzas, by no means easily achieved in the Estonian language itself.

Key words historical and comparative poetics; Estonian poetry; Western poetry; rhyme problems; philosophy; translation

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In his “Foreword” to *On the Way Home: An Anthology of Contemporary Estonian Poetry* (2006) Mohit K. Ray, a renowned Indian literary scholar, claims that “[t]he poems in the anthology secure for Estonian poetry a permanent niche in the world poetry for their range and depth, richness and variety of form, as well as the substance and quality of the vision” (vi). The editor of the anthology, American poet and philosopher H. L. Hix, in his turn describing Estonia’s poetry as “a little jewel” (4), has provided each of the thematic groups in his selection of the work of ten contemporary Estonian poets (Hando Runnel, Andres Ehin, Paul-Eerik Rummo, Jaan Kaplinski, Juhan Viiding, Ene Mihkelson, Jüri Talvet, Mari Vallisoo, Hasso Krull, Triin Soomets) with thoughtful meditations in the background of Estonian (cultural) history and the present day, including a number of inspiring parallels with American and British poetry.

Yet it must be admitted that the above-mentioned anthology is a rare exception to the wall of silence which generally faces attempts of smaller nations, working in minor languages, to project their poetry to the wider world. Even if such projections in the past have occasionally been materialized, they still reflect above all a wishful imagining from the “inside” of a small culture, according to which the world would immediately recognize the talent and stature of their native poets, once some translations into the major languages have appeared.

The reality looks much bleaker. As is well known, the major task-force of the present-day literary and cultural science has been attracted by more popular fields

than poetry. The small minority of international scholars still working in the poetic area are largely restricted to the poetic work created in major languages. Translations from minor languages are rare, not only because of the lack of interest on part of publishing houses and the extremely limited translating capacity. One must admit the historical fact that even poetry created in major languages – especially lyrical poetry and all poetry originally relying on strict metrical or rhyme patterns – has always been slow to transgress language barriers. The attempts to translate Dante Alighieri's *Divina commedia* into Estonian started quite early in the 20th century, but in the year 2011 the process still remains unconcluded. Of the total of 366 poems of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* by the year 2010 only a dozen had appeared in Estonian translation.

In the absence of critical reviews and discussion from “outside”, from international comparative contexts, the canon of Estonian poetry has been constructed almost exclusively from “inside” Estonia. Especially in a small nation the canon-building has largely been dependent on the aesthetics and the ideology of a handful of influential writers and critics dominating the cultural scene. Thus at the start of 20th century, within the cultural movement “Young Estonia” (Noor-Eesti, 1905 – 1915) Friedebert Tuglas, a fiction writer and essayist (1886 – 1971), quite early established his strong authority, with a marked preference for symbolism and realism. Tuglas founded in 1923 the monthly literary journal *Looming*, which has been published almost without interruption since. With some fellow-members of “Young Estonia”, like the linguist Johannes Aavik, Tuglas advocated poetry relying on controlled and regular rhythms and rhymes, as well as clarity of thought. Since the 1930s Ants Oras (1900 – 1982), a translator and critic, with his taste preferences oscillating between classicism and romanticism, not only was the main introducer of English literature (with his translations of Shakespeare's plays, the poetry of Shelley, Keats, Byron, etc.), but also contributed importantly to establishing the work of Marie Under and the poetic group “Arbujad” as an ideal model for Estonian poetry.

Under the spell of Oras's lavish dedication to these poets, the author of a recent bulky monograph of Marie Under's life and work, Sirje Kiin (referring to the opinion of Aleksander Aspel, another influential literary scholar who like Oras worked after the war in exile in the US) has claimed that Under meant for the common sensibility of the Estonians the same as Goethe for the Germans, Cervantes for Spaniards or Molière for the French (Kiin 5). Partly because in the first two postwar decades in the Soviet Estonia the poets of the “Arbujad” group were largely neglected, whereas Oras had become a persona non-grata, their work and opinions, as a kind of a counterweight, are still very much being venerated at the start of the 21st century, in the newly independent Estonian Republic. It is symptomatic that Oras's strong preference for rhymed poetry was not put into doubt from within Estonia itself, but was first questioned by Ivar Ivask, a poet and critic belonging to the younger generation of exiled Estonians. In a letter to Marie Under (1966) Ivask vividly manifests his disagreement with Oras: “Our greatest critic Ants Oras, however, declares that authentic poetry is and will always be the one created in regular verse meter and with end-rhymes!”¹ (Olesk 17).

A small country (45,000 square km) with an even smaller population (about a

million people) on the shores of the Baltic sea, Estonia has been for centuries an exemplary “borderland,” open to all kinds of cultural influences from West (Germany), East (Russia), and North (Sweden, Finland). A direct Southern link has been less significant, since Estonians (like Finns, Hungarians and many smaller nationalities in the northern regions of the European part of Russia) speak a Finno-Ugric language unrelated to the languages of the other East-Baltic nations, Latvia and Lithuania. However, Estonia does share its recent historical fate with the latter, since all three Baltic states, politically independent between the two world wars, were torn from the West by the joint action of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Thousands of Balts were forced to flee their home countries in the turmoil of the World War II, finding refuge in Sweden, the U. S. , Canada, and other Western states; of those who stayed, tens of thousands were deported by the communist regime to Siberian prison camps. From there, thousands never returned. After the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1991, the three Baltic states regained their independence, and since then not only have been restored to the world political map, but are gradually (re-) emerging culturally into the consciousness of the outside world.

The cultural discovery of Estonia by the rest of Europe belongs, above all, to the late eighteenth century, and is mainly explicable in the background of German culture. Germans had been the principal landlords in the Baltic territories since the late Middle Ages, when Teutonic crusaders forced the Baltic people into Christianity and occupied their native lands. They continued as the lords, in practical terms, of the native Estonian peasant population even during the following short Swedish reign in the seventeenth century and the long Russian tsarist domination that started at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

German Lutheran clergymen learned the language of the peasant people, i. e. the Estonian (called by the peasants themselves *maakeel* or, the ‘country tongue’) and some of them, like Rainer Brockmann, even managed to write, as early as the start of the seventeenth century, verses in the autochthonous language, being influenced, in their turn, by such innovators in German poetry as Martin Opitz and Paul Fleming. That coincided with the foundation by the Swedish king Gustav Adolf II in Tartu (Dorpat) of the second oldest university in northeastern Europe. Brockmann wrote his poem “Carmen Alexandrinum Esthonicum” (1637), the first known poem in Estonian, in alexandrines, the verse pattern that was borrowed not long before by the Germans from the French. In the later Estonian poetic tradition, however, alexandrine verse has been seldom practiced.

At the start of the nineteenth century, when the Russian Emperor Alexander I, after wars, re-inaugurated the university in Tartu, Friedrich Maximilian Klinger, one of the leading figures of the German pre-Romantic “Sturm und Drang” movement — at that time a high-ranking military officer in St. Petersburg — was named a tutor for the university, while Kristian Jaak Peterson (1801 – 1822), being among the first native Estonian university students, praised in his poems the beauty of the Estonian language. Peterson, who like his coeval John Keats died unjustly young, is generally considered the first important native Estonian poet.

Peterson’s verse is a curious phenomenon, especially against the background of

conservative rhymed poetry that since the second half of the 19th century, the so-called “national awakening” period, was overwhelmingly adopted by Estonian poets. Peterson was above all influenced by German pre-romantics, especially Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, who imitating ancient Greek verse patterns abandoned rhymes and centered his odes and hymns on the expression of religious-philosophic thoughts. The young Estonian Peterson created his poems often on pastoral themes, not numerous at all – including “The Moon” (Kuu), his best-known single poem, a vigorous praise of the Estonian language and a manifestation of the poet’s faith in the future of his homeland. It claimed the cultural equality of all nations, great and small, thus directly expanding Johann Gottfried Herder’s revolutionary-romantic cultural philosophy.²

The Moon

Doesn't the wellspring of the song
in the cold Nordic wind
soak the senses
of my people with its mist?

If here in the snowy North
a pleasant-smelling myrtle
in a windy valley
can beautifully bloom;
cannot, then, the native tongue
that like a quiet creek,
without knowing its beauty,
is running peacefully
across the meadow,
in the golden fire of the sky,
or with a sounding voice,
without knowing its might,
with the heaven's thunder,
when the sea is loudly calling:

cannot, then, the native tongue
rise in the wind of the song
to the heavens
and seek for it eternity?

Then I will sing to you,
the stars of a clear
blue sky, looking with joy
from the earth
to the high fatherland:

then I will sing to you,
 king of the night, the moon!
 You who in the lap of clouds,
 like a flower from its bud
 with a merry white face,
 rise under the skies,
 where hot stars
 are falling to the earth
 from before you
 into the black and gloomy mist. –
 Thus you, human spirit,

are swimming in the mist,
 as your thought is seeking
 God from below the stars. (Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix)

Even though Estonian “cultured” poetry (as well as conscious literary creation, on the whole) is young, Estonians feel proud of having a great and extremely varied treasury of folksongs whose beginnings reach at least to the Middle Ages, if not to times long before the Christian era. Some examples, along with Latvian and Lithuanian folksongs, became known to Europe, as mediated by the main ideologist of the German Romanticism, Johann Gottfried Herder, in his influential book *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1778/1779). No doubt Herder’s “Baltic interests” derived from the fact that in 1764, as a young man, he worked as a pastor in the Latvian capital, Riga.

The role of that ancient lyric tradition, with its rhythms and poetic means considerably differing from the patterns of “learned” poetry that mainly derived from German culture, has in modern times remained somewhat ambiguous. It is true that Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald—the “Father of Song,” as he is popularly called—created in twenty songs his national-heroic epic *Kalevipoeg* (1861), following the great example of the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, in the traditional Finno-Ugric folksong meter. That means abundant use of alliterations and final rhymes of archaic artificial suffixes, untranslatable into modern languages. Kreutzwald’s epic has been echoed throughout later Estonian culture, but its wider (Western) reception has been slowed, on the one hand, by the translation difficulties and, on the other hand, by the negative opinion in some Estonian literary criticism, arrived at by contrasting *Kalevala*, as a genuine collection of Finnish traditional epic songs, to *Kalevipoeg*, as predominantly Kreutzwald’s own poetic invention, though with borrowings from Estonian traditional songs and legends.

Despite the early grudge against Kreutzwald and his *Kalevipoeg* on part of such leading members of the “Young Estonia” group as Tuglas, Aavik and Ridala, and despite the continuing prejudice manifested above all by our folklorists, as well as parodic representations of *Kalevipoeg* in the work of some modern Estonian writers, the significance of Kreutzwald’s epic is slowly but steadily emerging, as we have entered

the 21st century. Kreutzwald created his work in extremely difficult conditions, when Estonian literature and literary criticism did not yet exist. In the early international emergence of the work, the support coming from the “border” and “outside” was essential. Some Baltic-German academicians having their roots in Estonia (F. J. Wiedemann, F. A. Schiefner) proposed Kreutzwald’s epic (published since 1857 by parts in *Verhandlungen der Gelehrten Estnischen Gesellschaft*) for the Demidov Prize of St. Petersburg’s Academy of Sciences. The prize was indeed awarded to Kreutzwald when the publication of the work was not even concluded. From Finland, more support came. Sven Gabriel Elmgren, a Finnish intellectual, claimed generously in a speech in Helsinki (1859) that *Kalevipoeg* was equal to the Finnish epic *Kalevala* (1835 – 1849), by Elias Lönnrot.

The prize contributed importantly to *Kalevipoeg*’s gradually gaining reputation in Estonia itself. Despite the political-ideological manipulations of the work amid the turmoil of different historical periods, already in the group of “Young Estonia” a split, as regards the interpretation of Kreutzwald’s work, could be observed. Another leading member of “Young Estonia” along with Tuglas, the poet and literary scholar Gustav Suits wrote a detailed monograph on Kreutzwald’s formation as an intellectual and a writer. From the 1930s *Kalevipoeg* became a life-long research topic for August Annist, a major folklorist and literary scholar, as well as the translator into Estonian of Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* (1939), Homer’s *Iliad* (1960) and *Odyssey* (1963), and Russian medieval anonymous *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign* (1941). Annist’s *opus magnum* on *Kalevipoeg*, comprising more than 900 pages, was published posthumously in 2005.³

Far from being a minor detail, *Kalevipoeg*’s first full translation into French (by Antoine Chalvin) was published in 2004 by Gallimard, while the preparation of a second English translation is under way.⁴ Among younger Estonian literary scholars, especially Marin Laak has fruitfully researched the vast complex of intertextualities reaching from Kreutzwald’s *Kalevipoeg* through literature and all other branches of Estonian culture.⁵

Among other aspects of *Kalevipoeg*, I would accentuate the epic’s lyrical quality, not as a drawback — as has been asserted by some Estonian folklorists — but as the main feature that makes Kreutzwald’s work gain significance in the context of the crucially renewed modern discourse, since the spread of feminist consciousness. The hero’s life journey is basically determined by his love for his mother Linda and the sense of guilt of having caused the death of the Island Maid. *Kalevipoeg*, in contrast to the prevailing belligerence of epic heroes of the past, defends peace and seeks to build a peaceful nation, a shelter for women, children and the old. To provide an idea of the work’s lyrical tonality, with the characteristic folksong-like repetitions and parallelisms, below is a small fragment from the 7th Tale of *Kalevipoeg*, with the hero singing, in repentance of his evil deeds:

Where are the alder groves of grief?
The aspen groves of anguish?
The fir forests of sadness?

The birch groves of repentance?
 Where I mourn, there grows an aspen grove,
 where I despair, an alder grove,
 where I am sad, fir forest grows,
 in my regret I am sheltered by a birch grove!
 Oh you my tender mother,
 you who brought me up in love,
 you who cradled me in your arms,
 you who lulled me with your voice:
 you who to die alone,
 you had to fade without me near!
 Who closed your eyelids,
 who smoothed your brow?
 A hepatica closed your eyes.
 Bent grass covered your brow.
 Oh my tender mother!
 A hepatica has secret thorns,
 bent grass has rough roots. (Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix)

In few European nations has the awakening to a national conscience been so influenced by a woman poet as the Estonian awakening was by Lydia Koidula (1843 – 1886), the “Singer of the Dawn,” whose poems, set to music, became immensely popular. They were and still are sung, and bring tears to people’s eyes, at the traditional song festivals that gather choirs from all parts of Estonia. Under the Soviet regime, performances at festivals of songs like “My Homeland is My Love,” based on Koidula’s poems, were often turned into a major expression of popular opposition to the forcefully imposed communist rule. Koidula grew up in the German language environment. In her poetry she imitated the metric of German poetry, and some of her best-known poems are adaptations of German models. (Especially inspiring in those times was the work of Heinrich Heine; his bold liberal-mindedness was echoed in Estonia via numerous translations and adaptations. Among the first to translate Heine’s poems was Koidula herself.)

Although Koidula is known first and foremost for her patriotic poems that manifest ardent opposition to the German hegemony and the serfdom Estonian people suffered for centuries, every Estonian also knows from childhood Koidula’s lyrical-intimate poems, such as “The Mother’s Heart” and “Home”. In their simple but intense cordiality, they resemble the lyrical work of Koidula’s contemporary poet Rosalía de Castro, in the other European “periphery”, Galicia.

Home

How lovely it was to play
 near the fence of our village street!
 Where we the children ran,

with bent-grass reaching our knees.

Where I played until sunset
now with a flower, now with grass,
from where grandfather led us
by the hand to the house to sleep.

I wished I could look
like him over the fence;
“Wait, my child,” he said, “that
time is quick to come!”

That time did come. On land
and at sea the eye could reach far;
yet no view was half so lovely
as there in the village street. (1865) (Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix)

That exceptional woman, Lydia Koidula, also founded the Estonian professional theatre, by writing several plays. Also, under the title “The Last Inca of Peru” (1869) she adapted from German W. O. von Horn’s story, providing for the Estonian indigenous people inspiring parallels for their opposition to serfdom, as manifested by the bold defender of the American indigenous people, Bartolomé de Las Casas, in the days of the European conquest of the New World.

During the next half century the patterns of syllabic-accentual verse, mainly of German origin, with less significant influences from the Russian and Scandinavian traditions, firmly rooted themselves in Estonian poetry. Deviations from that mainstream were rare. One of the happy exceptions originated from the unhappy life of Johan Liiv (1864 – 1913), a poet of tragic and patriotic tonality who, like Friedrich Hölderlin a century earlier, wrote some of his deepest poetry on the verge of mental breakdown. Liiv did not try to resuscitate traditional Finno-Ugric verse, but he skillfully used some of its elements, — sometimes rhythms, sometimes word-endings. Liiv consciously opposed rigid rhymes and meters, adapting instead 4-line stanzas with a lax rhyme matching even lines, with uneven lines remaining unrhymed, as in the work of Liiv’s favorite poet Heinrich Heine. Liiv’s ability to express existential and holistic feelings of life by extremely spare poetic means, without ever becoming directly sentimental, was later described by Ivar Ivask as Liiv’s “essential simplicity.”

Liiv who spent his life in elementary poverty, troubled by mental illness since 1893, did not manage to publish any poetry books in his life. His canon was established posthumously by Friedebert Tuglas who in 1926 published a lengthy monograph on Liiv’s life and work, to be followed immediately by a major selection of Liiv’s poetry, in 1927, on the basis of handwritten (and often almost unreadable) manuscripts left by Liiv. From under Liiv’s scribbles on the back page of a notebook, Tuglas, for instance, resuscitated a short poem comparable with Hölderlin’s “Hälfte des Lebens”:

Come, night's darkness,
gather me to your lap.

My sun doesn't recognize me,
the night is left to me.

There's not a single star,
I am in fear.

Cover me. (Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix)

Juhan Liiv's patriotic poetry is much subtler than the fatherland-poems written by Lydia Koidula. Like Kreutzwald in his *Kalevipoeg*, Liiv not only sought to refute the external enemies under whose dominion Estonia had suffered in the past, but also included in his patriotism criticism of his own people's vices, such as greed and vulgarity of spirit. Liiv's poetry intertwines genuine lyrical sensibility with irony and humor that points at the limits of human science and earthly aspirations. He defends the world's natural integrity, in which the tiniest individual particle, however fragile, has its significance.⁶

In 1966 the Juhan Liiv Poetry Prize was established. Although it was awarded for the first publication of only one poem published during a year, it rapidly gained prestige. In 1970, because the local communist authorities considered it "dangerously nationalistic," the prize was banned, but after a break of fourteen years it was restored, and has been awarded ever since. The prize, reflecting Juhan Liiv's fate and spirit, does not include any remuneration. It is given for only one poem, published for the first time during the year prior to the prize. Among the poets who have been awarded the prestigious prize twice are Kalju Lepik, Ene Mihkelson, Mari Vallisoo, and Triin Soomets.

Juhan Liiv apart, the mainstream of Estonian poetry, until the outbreak of World War II and the loss of the country's short-lived independence, followed the patterns of European symbolism. Estonian symbolist poetry, however, being much younger than West-European symbolism, never abandoned romantic undertones. On the eve of the establishment of the Estonian Republic (1918), revolutionary idealism mingled with skeptical irony in the poetic work of Gustav Suits (1883-1956), one of the leaders of the "Young Estonia" movement, who, like Marie Under and many other prominent Estonian intellectuals, died in exile, never able to return to his home country. Suits is perhaps at his best in descriptive-meditative poems, like "Krupp" (1922) – comparable in its critical tonality with Heine's *Deutschland; Ein Wintermärchen*. The general distrust by Estonian intellectuals of Germany, with its growing industrial-military presence menacing Europe, is clearly revealed in the poem. At the end of the poem, Suits contrasts Germany as "hell's mouth" with Paris, the ideal paradigm of culture and modernity for the great majority of Estonia's writers and artists before WWII.

Marie Under's (1883 – 1980) best-known poems are those she published in early collections such as *Sonetid* ('Sonnets', 1917). In their erotic openness and spontaneous sensibility Under's sonnets resemble the poems of some of her contemporary Latin American women poets, the Chilean Gabriela Mistral or the Uruguayan Juana de Ibarbouru. With Mistral, there is also a parallel in the later work of Under, especially in her ballads, in which both folkloric and biblical motives can be found. At the same time Under was not at all alien to a critical-social sensibility. Before WWII she reflected in several poems the everyday misery of the people of lower classes. Unlike the "Young Estonians", she even dared to extend her criticism to the European "centre", as in the poem "Seine", in which the river is described as bearing an "iron corset", like "a dog accustomed to its chain", nourished by the filth of the French metropolis, an apparent symbol for the poetess of alienation from nature. After WWII, while in exile in Sweden, Under reflected above all the anguish and suffering of Estonian war refugees, torn from their homeland.

The vitalist-individualist poetry of the "Siuru" group (Marie Under, Henrik Visnapuu, 1889 – 1951, and others) was soon transformed into the more disciplined poetic line of the influential group "Arbujad" ("Magicians"): Uku Masing (1909 – 1985), Bernard Kangro (1910 – 1994), Heiti Talvik (1904 – 1947) and Betti Alver (1906 – 1989). Masing, one of the great sages of Estonia, who in 1947 became a doctor of theology, lived in postwar Soviet Estonia in a kind of internal exile, never seeing his poetry published again. He differed from other members of the group by his interests in Oriental philosophy, folklore and literature, as well as by strongly opposing Western orientation in culture. Symptomatically, Masing's poems were absent in a major anthology of Estonian poetry, *Eesti luule*, edited by Paul Rummo in 1967 (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat). His vast essayistic-philosophic work has been published posthumously.

In comparison with Masing, Betti Alver fared somewhat better, as from the second half of the 1960s her talent was re-discovered and acclaimed again in Estonia. Her husband Heiti Talvik, on the contrary, became a victim of Stalinist deportations and died in Siberia. Bernard Kangro, who fled in 1944 to Sweden, founded in Lund an Estonian publishing house, which became one of the main intellectual nuclei of the Estonian postwar diaspora. Alver and Talvik wrote both under the influence of Baudelaire and *fin-de-siècle* decadence poetry, now depicting social misery, now the existential limits of human existence. Both were also inspired by François Villon, in introducing ludicrous irony, playful grinning, and elements of allegory, as they observed the pre-war fall of the West, with Estonia, in Europe's northeastern periphery.

As mentioned above, under the influence of Western symbolism, our pre-war poets of the consecrated groups ("Siuru", "Arbujad") predominantly relied on rhymed stanzas. Paradoxically, the quatrain with full end-rhymes, inherited from the poets of the "national awakening" period, was gradually canonized as the main vehicle of poetic expression, to remain in full vigor at least till the end of the twentieth century. Of slightly more than a hundred poets included in the voluminous anthology *Eesti luule*, nearly eighty have resorted at least in some of their poems to the fully end-rhymed quatrain. It is even more surprising to find the same verse pattern perma-

nently present in the last volume (IV) of *Sõnarine*, the largest existing anthology of Estonian poetry, edited by Karl Muru (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, Vol. I, 1989 – 560 pp; Vol. II, 1992, 798 pp; Vol. III, 1993, 640 pp; Vol. IV, 1995, 736 pp). Volume IV starts with examples of the poetry by Paul-Eerik Rummo (b. 1942) and includes in its end part poets born in the 1950s and 1960s (among the best-known, Doris Kareva, b. 1958, Mari Vallisoo, b. 1950, Tõnu õnnepalu, b. 1962, Hasso Krull, b. 1964, Priidu Beier, b. 1957, Kauksi Ülle, b. 1962, Indrek Hirv, b. 1956). Of the 62 poets included in the volume, about one third still offer examples of the four-line end-rhymed stanza.

Why do I speak of it as a phenomenon apart in Estonian poetry and call it a paradox? Because it very much resembles the tough enterprise of the French Pleyade poets who in the middle of the sixteenth century tried to model the French language departing from the Latin syntax, thus not taking into account the natural limits of a particular language. Estonian language is characterized by a great richness of individual forms. Our traditional poetry relied as the main poetic means on alliterations and assonances, without adapting any strict end-rhymes, for which neither our verbs nor nouns would provide good material. Full end-rhymes in Estonian are formed with a considerable difficulty, their limited variety being easily predictable. In a full contrast with Romance languages, from which during the Middle Age end-rhymes as such started to spread in European poetry, end-rhymes in Estonian poetry tend to sound artificial. Even English, German, and Russian have much richer reserves for rhyming words than Estonian.

In practical terms this means that an Estonian poet (or translator), to write (or to translate) a poem relying on end-rhymes, must first carefully calculate the existing end-rhyme possibilities, and only after that “technical” operation will s/he be able to start to create the poem. “Technicality” inevitably slows down and curbs spontaneity of poetic expression. Thinking gets separated from emotion. I do not argue at all that successful application of full end-rhymes in Estonian poetry has been completely missing. It can be effective in shorter poems, such as sonnets, for instance, or in satirical poetry. Also, in the field of translation, along the twentieth century, we have had a number of great masters of transmitting rhymed poetry into our language (Ants Oras, Johannes Semper, August Sang, Harald Rajamets, Kalju Kangur, Ain Kaalep), nearly all of them talented poets themselves. However, I am skeptical about the use of full end-rhymes in longer poems, lyrical poems and, above all, their adaptation as a guarantee of the quality in poetic creation. Rather, in the Estonian language, it tends to be a *tour de force*, hard toil of thinking in rhymes, with fruits more often than not failing to live up to expectations.

During the first two decades of the postwar years in Estonia, under the heavy burden of communist ideology, Debora Vaarandi (1916 – 2007) and Ilmi Kolla (1933 – 1954) were among the most notable poetic talents. The former, accepted and acclaimed by the official regime, inevitably paid some tribute to the system. As has been the case with many outstanding left-wing poets, Neruda, Hikmet, Alberti, etc., Vaarandi’s political ingenuousness does not exclude lyrical sensibility of intimate metaphors, in which she rivaled Marie Under herself. Besides, Vaarandi was

the translator into Estonian of the poetry of Edith Södergran (1886), the Swedish-Finnish writer who unlike her contemporary Estonian women poets of the start of the twentieth century, created her poems almost exclusively in free unrhymed verse. The equally deep lyric talent of Ilmi Kolla was fated to remain in the bud, as early tuberculosis ended her life at the same young age as Kristian Jaak Peterson.

From the beginning of the 1960s, however, fresh aspirations made themselves felt in Estonian poetry, both in exile and the “conditionally liberalized” Estonia. Jaan Kross (b. 1920), later celebrated mainly as a novelist, was one of the pioneers in introducing new free verse rhythms. He was seconded by Ain Kaalep, one of the most important mentors of the following generation. Kaalep not only wrote in free verse, but inspired by his extremely broad translation activity—he became the translator of the work of García Lorca, Prévert, Pessoa, Vallejo and many other important poets — he introduced into Estonian poetry entirely new rhythms and meters, both ancient and modern, from different parts of the world. Surrealist germs were not absent entirely: these infiltrated, on the one hand, from the work of the emigré poet Ilmar Laaban (1921 – 2000); and on the other hand from the bold, highly playful and philosophically suggestive free language associations that became the core of the poetry of Artur Alliksaar (1923 – 1966)—one of the greatest European “language poets.” Alliksaar, too, was a victim of the Soviet regime: accused of treason, he was imprisoned and deported to Siberia in 1954; after many hardships he was allowed to return to Estonia in 1958, earning daily bread by simple manual labor.

Besides Laaban, among younger Estonian exiles who started to write poetry abroad, Kalju Lepik (1920 – 1999), Ivar Grünthal (1924 – 1996), and Ivar Ivask (1927 – 1992) have been the most important. As compared with the older generation of the poets forced to create in exile, a new openness to the wider world emerged, as well as a more varied critical sensibility. Thus, Kalju Lepik’s grim irony was not exclusively targeted at the misery of his homeland under the communist regime, but also at the gradual accommodation of his compatriots to the material welfare and life-style of the West.

To conclude the overview, I will go back to the beginning of my essay and try to characterize briefly the work of the poets included in the anthology *On the Way home: An Anthology of Contemporary Estonian Poetry*.

This book includes Estonian poetry of the last thirty or forty years of the twentieth century. Like any anthology, it is by no means exhaustive, nor can it satisfy all tastes. The selection includes examples from the work of poets from the middle and young generation—starting with Hando Runnel, born in 1938, and ending with one of the latest winners of the Juhan Liiv Prize, Triin Soomets, born in 1969—who have brought some change into Estonian poetry. Another important criterion in selecting the poems has been to introduce to the international reader poets and poems that may add some new shades and colors—however modest—to international poetic experience. However subjective or, in part, even “uncanonical” the selection might appear, its purpose has been to offer the international audience a variety of different, sometimes even radically exclusive poetic voices and ways.

Hando Runnel (b. 1938), by now a celebrated classic of modern Estonian liter-

ature, worked under Soviet rule in steady opposition to the official truths. Though he has never studied philosophy or philology at a university, by stubborn self-teaching he has become one of the best connoisseurs of Estonian culture and literature. He has been seen generally as an incarnation of nationalist and patriotic spirit, in fact in many ways as a direct opposite of the cosmopolitan Jaan Kaplinski. His Estonian-centeredness, added to the fact that he mainly has written not-easily-translatable rhymed poetry, accounts for his being almost unknown beyond Estonian borders. In Estonia, on the contrary, his poetry has enjoyed the widest possible audience, as many of his poems have been sung by well-known artists and even choirs, their melody being created by some of the most famous Estonian composers, including Veljo Tormis and Rein Rannap. From Runnel's third collection (1972) mocking and grinning tonality became his characteristic feature, though deep existential grief never disappeared. His poetry is rich in intertextual associations, mostly used in a parodying and debunking way. The principal philosophical line of Runnel's poetry is "ethnocentric collectivism": the preoccupation with the fate of his own nation, Estonia, as part of the world global ethnic ecology, indeed, is the axis of Runnel's world outlook.

In Defense Of The Sad

In defense of the sad someday I'll found a city.
 In defense of the sad I'll build them brick houses.
 In defense of the sad I'll grate windows and doors.
 In defense of the sad I'll station guards.
 In defense of the sad I'll forbid sad thoughts.
 In defense of the sad I'll demand that everyone laugh.
 In defense of the sad I'll waste years and care.
 In defense of the sad I'll found a city of the sad. (1972) (Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix)

If an authentic forerunner for the trend of "de-semiotization" in postmodern poetry were sought, Andres Ehin (b. 1940) would best fit that role. Having become fond, at a very early age, of the loosely playful imagery of surrealists (in the Estonian case, of Ilmar Laaban's and Artur Alliksaar's poetry), Ehin did not attempt to oppose the absurd or semi-absurd language of the official Soviet regime by a deeper human content, but chose to face or echo that official absurdity by a poetic absurdity, purposefully depriving his images of any clearly graspable meanings. In that, he often relied on puns and sound effects.

Spring Night

Grass and leaves smell
 every moment more wild.

Women are every moment

more beautiful and alive.

Sharp stars
prick one's nostrils
and cause a sneeze. (2000) [1959] (Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix)

Jaan Kaplinski (b. 1941) was until the restored Estonian independence the only Estonian poet whose works had gained some international audience. Several of his books of poetry have been translated into English, both in the U. S. and Great Britain, and a book of poems written directly in English appeared in Canada. A graduate in French philology from the University of Tartu, Kaplinski has an extraordinary gift for languages and has shown himself open to the wider world from the very beginning of his work. He not only knows nearly all European languages, but also Japanese and Chinese, having become a follower of ancient oriental philosophies, above all of Taoism, seeking in consequence a rejection of abstractions and dogmatic thinking of any kind, and a search for a magic totality of life. At the same time Kaplinski has shown a keen interest in contemporary socio-political processes in the world and in Estonia, siding with ecologists and left-wing thinkers in their opposition to the excesses of the capitalist market economy. The main charm of Kaplinski's poetry emanates from skillfully achieved poetic shifts, i. e. constant and flexible movements between the local and the quotidian, on the one hand, and the universal and the philosophical, on the other. His images stand out by their extreme concreteness (local details of Estonian landscapes and nature), and at the same time nearly always intuit some deeper current of thinking—connections with the universal history and ancient cultures—beyond them. Though predominantly meditative, sometimes with lyrical and often with prophetic accents, Kaplinski has to his advantage a fine sense for irony and humor, which makes his poetry even more winningly subtle.

Cranes
cranes fly home
under their wings
there remain
clouds and houses
airplanes at airports
and a lonely honeybee that
could not return before nightfall

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earthy pleasures. The anguish of that continuing radical alienation may account for Viiding's tragic decision to commit suicide.

From Harald,
Who Committed Hara-Kiri,
To Rahel

we two were so lovely
and cactuses grew in the room
Rahel, you abandoned me
I'll use a knife as my doom

I know about the deadly sin
that one should not kill oneself
take it as a foregone conclusion
and skim the diary on my shelf

your name is there in every sentence
because the talk is all of you
in my funeral's black chaos
let your weeping adorn you (1971) (Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix)

In a manner unusual for Estonian poetry, Ene Mihkelson (b. 1944) has written almost exclusively in unrhymed free verse, often intentionally making the verse rhythm differ from the phrase rhythm (i. e. starting new phrases in the middle of a line) and abandoning punctuation. Though these features are by no means new in international modernist poetics, their constant use in Mihkelson has meant undermining a longer tradition in Estonian poetry. The “self” scrutinized by Mihkelson is not really an object, but is hidden in the poet herself so deeply that she has constant difficulties trying to express it or to drag it to the light of clarity. This has led her to a radical pessimism, contradicting both the official optimism of the Soviet ideology and the euphoric nationalism after the country's regained independence. Needless to say, it has also meant a rejection of the self-confident irony so widespread in postmodern “mainstream” art. The “borders” of the “self” in Mihkelson thus remain intransigent, though the poet has never abandoned her efforts to transgress them, towards an ethic of integrity, which can be conjectured (though obscurely) in the proximity to Nature.

A frog jumped through the scythe
and screamed It was as if
it were the voice of the scythe itself
touching the living (1989) (Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix)

Like Mihkelson, Mari Vallisoo (b. 1950) made her poetic debut at the end of the 1970s, but unlike Mihkelson, she has been more sparse than abundant in her pro-

duction, and has published little if anything besides poetry. Whereas Mihkelson's main discourse is heavily burdened with a fundamentalist search for the "self," Vallisoo, though essentially a poet of tragic inspiration, has been able to introduce into her poetic vision lighter shades of (often popular) humor and wisdom. The charm of her poetry emerges, for the most part, in swift transitions from the humbly trivial and intimate to the mythical, and vice versa. In a way, she has continued the rich balladic tradition of Estonian romantic and symbolist poetry, but has at the same time successfully introduced varying colloquial rhythms, not common in the previous ballad pattern. The mythical tendency in her poetry is mingled with a contrasting and playful de-mythicizing, by which she, often with bitter irony, discloses the hidden shades of humankind's selfishness (as especially in the poem "Heroes to Each Other," where a dialogue between the universal hero Heracles and the local hero Kalevipoeg is allusively rendered).

Heroes To Each Other

Where have you come from? Where are you going?
 Oh, just hurrying
 to a heroic deed.
 Passing by — a man was there on a rock,
 bound, a bird
 annoyed him.
 I unbound him from the rock.
 And yourself? What's on your mind?

With a kid over the sea
 I have to settle accounts.
 On my way I visited some corners
 of the world — ports, an island
 where a girl was ruined.
 No more time to speak. (2000) (Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix)

Still with time ahead to reveal fully his poetic talents and to assert a definite place in the present-day young poetic generation, Hasso Krull (b. 1964) became in the 1990s a leading literary and art critic, whose views have been first and foremost influenced by the French post-structuralist thinking. The purposefulness of the meaningless in deconstructing and defying the previous national and international "big narratives" can be seen in Krull's poetry with much more clarity than, for instance, Ehin's absurd imagery ever managed to convey. His poem "Modern Discourse" reads as a fine postmodern manifesto.

Modern Discourse

In old times people had a clear and determined worldview.

They didn't try to invent bicycles again,
 because Buddha already had spoken.
 And Christ and Mohammed and Aristotle.
 Already Confucius had instructed everyone
 to turn the left cheek.
 Children drank milk, grew like plants,
 a housewife cooked in the kitchen.
 The law of the strong reigned.
 Nobody had to hurry anywhere, there was no rush
 or noise of machines,
 there was vodka, there was temperance.
 Already Hegel said.
 Already Goethe said.
 The bigger could not harm the smaller.
 The fight was man against man and woman against woman.
 Everyone must meditate daily,
 let's say five minutes.
 In old times they lived with nature, lived in harmony,
 everything was as it should be.
 Oh times, oh habits, oh universality!
 Oh naturalness!
 Only Christ was ethical.
 If only one could return those times for a while,
 then even to work in a factory would be acceptable. (1993) (Trans. J.
 Talvet and H. L. Hix)

The same kind of defiance found in Hasso Krull's poetry occurs in the poems of Triin Soomets (b. 1969). However, some of Soomets' poems reveal a spontaneous personal passion that may easily transcend that influential pattern of the postmodern "grand narrative," which has not concealed its shyness facing immediate physical reality and has traditionally distrusted emotive significance. The work of Soomets embodies woman's psychosomatic revolt against the rationally organized, purposeful establishment, set up and ruled predominantly by male-kind.

a gynecologist in a narrow dress comes tapping
 looks with her green eyes at my flowery veil
 her suntanned cheeks glitter like a metal
 in an endless corridor I recede covering with my hands
 dull white skin green walls
 straight to a dead end at a stool
 she puts her foot victoriously on my chest
 tearing bracelets breaking my hand
 until with a clatter——
 well I am I am 25000 times guilty

write it down finally
 cry it out finally
 into the enduring memory of pioneers (1990) (Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix)

【 Notes 】

1. Here and in the following translation from Estonian is mine. J. T.
2. For further reading about Peterson, see Arne Merilai, “Genius of Estonian Poetry – Kristian Jaak Peterson.” *Estonian Literary Magazine* 19(Autumn, Tallinn, 2004).
3. August Annist. *Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwaldi “Kalevipoeg”*, ed. Ülo Tedre (Tallinn, 2005).
4. The first English translation (by Jüri Kurman) appeared in 1982; *Kalevipoeg. An Ancient Estonian Tale* (Moorestown, New Jersey).
5. Cf. Marin Laak, “Beyond the Literary Canon; Recontextualisation of Classical Texts in the Digital Environment”, *Interlitteraria*, 15, 2010. About *Kalevipoeg* in the comparative cue, see also Sergei Kruks’ article “*Kalevipoeg* and *Lā? plēsis*: The Way We Imagine Our Communities” in *Interlitteraria* 8(2003):227–247, and my own article “Constructing a Mythical Future City for a Symbiotic Nation from the European Periphery” in *Interlitteraria* 14, Vol. I. 84–103.
6. About recent writings in English about Liiv, cf. my introductory essay “Juhan Liiv and His Existential Poetry” in a bilingual selection of Liiv’s poetry *Meel paremat ei kannata / The Mind Would Bear No Better* (Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix, Tartu, 2007. 29–52) and also my longer article “Juhan Liiv and ‘Young Estonia’” in *The End of Autonomy*. Ed. C. Hasselblatt. (Maastricht, 2008):85–98.

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