Estonian Poetry in English

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Abstract Since 1950, Estonian poetry, ignored in international literary discourse because of the small spread and unfamiliar character of the language, has made a number of notable appearances in English translations. With the work of two British translators, Harris and Matthews, several classical poets were rendered into sonorous English, mostly with a full correspondence of rhymes and rhythmic patterns. The Estonian translator Oras continued their approaches. In the last decades of the 20th century, free verse translations, either of traditional forms or of original free verse, began to appear, with more interest in conveying the exact image structure. The exiled scholar and poet Ivask first translated and introduced talented new poets living in Soviet Estonia. Along with Ivask, a few Estonians have written their own poetry in English. In the 21st century, the cooperation of native Estonian speakers, mostly poets, with writers in English, has produced a new level of immediacy in translations. Efforts have been abandoned to convey the full values of older, rhymed poetry. The approximation of English translations to the originals is complicated even because of the vast grammatical and phonological differences of the languages. Elaborate new translation strategies have been developed by R. W. Stedingh in cooperation with T. E. Moks in their rendering of Arved Viirlaid's poetry, and by H. L. Hix in cooperation with J. Talvet. A selection of the classic Juhan Liiv, a modern anthology and two selections of Talvet's poems have appeared in Hix's translation in recent years.

Key words comparative poetics; history of Estonian verse; literary identity; rhyme problems; translation

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The position of Estonian poetry in international literary life is rather unfavourably determined by the exceptionally small number of readers who are able to understand literary works in Estonian. By the peculiarities of its grammar and by its main vocabulary, Estonian stands rather isolated from all the other languages. The only other people with a national literature, who might be able to understand some Estonian without any learning, are the Finns, not a big nation themselves, either. The Estonian ethnicity is defined by the language, and the very smallness of the ethnicity makes the language unattractive for potential translators, discouraging them from training to tune their senses to the literary keys of Estonian. Rendering poetry requires lyrically talented translators who are also experts in the language and lore of the country; outstandingly good translations are few and many works by a lot of the most inspiring poets remain without counterparts of matching quality in English.

The early forms of Estonian literary language emerged in the early 1500s (religious writings). Though it has few, if any, achievements of high literary culture to boast about from those early centuries, the treasures of written Estonian nevertheless have a long and solid history, accompanied with the tradition of oral folk songs which were memorized and passed on through ages. The relevance of an Estonian poet therefore often depends on how they recognize the dignity of that tradition, a bulwark against the whirlwinds of fleeting trends, superficial cultural temptations and changing political climates. It is on the ground of such consciousness of literary tradition that the poets ought to maintain their sensitivity to the pleasures and plights of the present. The foundation of one's poetic establishment cannot remain unshaken if one simply ignores what forms of versification were employed in the same language several centuries ago; if the poet is aware of them and then departs from those forms for new ends, there will still be an open dialogue with the predecessors.

Estonian Poetry in the Early 20th Century

The rather sudden rise of the quantity, and more importantly, the quality of the Estonian verse in the first decades of the twentieth century has to do with the general sociocultural changes in the region. For centuries, most of individualised poetry had been written in German by the main cultural elite, the Baltic German aristocracy. By the beginning of the twentieth century, their authority and collective spiritual power had begun to decline. Estonian-language newapapers had been encouraging the ethnic self-consciousness of the native peasants. In the first decade of the new century, the "Young Estonia" literary movement, headed by the poet Gustav Suits (1883 – 1956), manifested the intention of the Estonian literati to abandon the German models. Marie Under (1883 – 1980), the Estonian poetess of perhaps the highest renown of all Estonian women writers, initially had been writing poems in German but switched to Estonian early in her creative life (Lukas 465). With her, a representative of the "Siuru" ("Bluebird") literary movement, as with most of her contemporaries and successors (up to the "Arbujad"/"Logomancers", or "Magicians", school of poets, emerging in the late 1930s and including Betti Alver, Heiti Talvik, Uku Masing, Bernard Kangro, August Sang), it appeared to be the case of a newborn literary self-consciousness establishing itself in a language which few had earlier taken seriously as a medium of *belles-lettres*. The authors were keen on matching the beauty and depth of their Western European contemporaries and immediate precursors. The leading figures of the movement that strove for refashioning Estonian literary language after Western models saw the plastic potentials of the tongue as only being discovered. Most of earlier poetic styles were regarded as crude, initiated as they usually were by those who spoke Estonian as a second or third language. The venerable folk poetry tradition, on the other hand, represented an outmoded and archaic language (with greater similarity to modern Finnish) which was neither spoken nor used in printing. Its latent inspiring potentials were frequently not recognized. The Western aspirations, such as a need for high-quality poetry translations, called for greater flexibilities and subtleties. The highly inflected character of the language therefore required decisive and full-scale application. Another part of the spirit of belles-lettres

was to be an uncompromising perfection in rhymes. Free verse may be freer from tiresome conventions, such arguments would run, but often it is also lacking an invigorating sense of discipline. The poets mostly wrote metrical verses with full rhymes. The major literary influences were French, German, English and Russian.

The heritage of that period, throned by Marie Under and later also by Betti Alver (1906 – 1989), is uniquely and unapologetically national. Under has often been compared to the Expressionists and Alver to the Symbolists, but it is important to see how much both, and their fellow poets from respective movements, also wrote as inheritors to even earlier cultural developments, such as Humanism and the Enlightenment. More than their Western kindred spirits, however, and typically of Estonia's rustic roots, those poets felt close to nature, shaping their poetic voices in concord with nature and as parts of an earthy chorus. Hence the general joy and brightness of their imagery, to which the many depressive voices of the late 20th century stand in stark contrast. Those traits, and the particular feminine strength and integrity of Under and Alver, related perhaps to the old position of female folk poets in the lore of Estonian peasantry, constitute a specific poetic phenomenon that has mostly passed for unnoticed by international receivers. It is not even so much a question of the existence, competence and quality of translations, nor of the knowledge or ignorance of the Estonian language, that plays the decisive role in the interest or disinterest in those Estonian schools of poetry. Rather, one should be prepared beforehand for encountering a specific blend, without analogies in other cultures, of sensual emancipation, a relative traditionalism in form, a lake of centuries old humanist attitudes, an enlightened nationalism, a certain degree of backwoods pride, and often a bold and unaffected femininity.

Beginnings of English Translations

The first translations into English of Estonian literature were renderings of folk poetry, done indirectly through the German language. The very first of those early glimpses was the collection *Popular Poetry of the Esthonians*, published in London in 1795, and including twelve folk songs. In 1863, the two volumes of Robert Gordon Latham's (1812 – 1888) monograph Nationalities of Europe were published in London, the first volume containing fourteen translations of Estonian lyrical folk songs, which the author had translated from the German work, *Ehstnische Volkslieder*, ("Estonian Folksongs", 1850 – 1852), by the Baltic German folklorist Alexander Heinrich Neus (1795 – 1876). The retelling in prose, titled *The Hero of Esthonia*, of the Estonian national verse epic, *Kalevipoeg*, by William Forsell Kirby, was published in two volumes in London in 1895. Besides introducing the epic and a wide selection of tales based on native legends, it also included suggestive translations of four Estonian folk ballads, "The Herald of War", "The Blue Bird I", "The Blue Bird II" and "Charm against Snake-Bite".[1]

Among translators into English, the exceptional flowering of Estonian poetry in the early 20th century was perhaps first noticed by the Welsh Estophile Ernest Howard Harris (1876 – 1961). In the two interwar decades (1920 – 1940) of the Estonian independence, he wrote a series of short books, introducing the culture, and espe-

cially the achievements of literature, of the much-ignored Baltic Finnic nation to the readers of English. In 1950, a small but outstanding anthology of Estonian poetry in the translation by Harris was published in Britain. Supplied with Harris's foreword, the anthology consists of samples from folk poetry and Kalevipoeg, the leading poetic figures of the first national awakening (Lydia Koidula, 1843 – 1886, Karl Eduard Sööt, 1862 – 1950), through the solitary Juhan Liiv (1864 – 1913) and the orientally meditative Ernst Enno (1875 – 1934) to representatives of the first (Gustav Suits, Marie Under, Henrik Visnapuu) and second generations (Heiti Talvik, Betti Alver, Bernard Kangro) of the Western-oriented currents of poetry, concluding with the promising new diction of Arved Viirlaid. Harris with very few exceptions uses full rhymes which are resonant and plain. The style of the English is archaic, with forms like "thou", which mostly befits the earlier poets, and with syntactic inversions that had mainly become outdated in English poetry when those translations appeared. The free verse translation of Gustav Suits's "Under the Quivering Aspens" in that anthology is the first one of that poem, and Harris's work with Talvik's and Alver's poetry is likewise pioneering. His eight translations of Juhan Liiv's poems have remained the only ones of that poet to attempt an exact reflection of the original rhyme schemes. Liiv's Estonian rhymes are sometimes of a full quality but more often only approximate. The monosyllabic full rhymes of Harris's translation successfully convey Liiv's sincerity but may verge on oversimplification. The same qualities may entail more emotional involvement in the translations of poems by Lydia Koidula, as in the following:

The Mother Heart

There is a place on earth to see,
Abode of love and loyalty,
And everything that is most rare
Has taken sanctuary there.

The mother heart! Ah, do you know
Its tender firmness, constant glow?
Rejoicing in the joys you tell,
And sharing in your woes as well.

When you have come to feel again
The shifting praise, goodwill of men,
When all despise, and friendships break,
When faith and love do you forsake,

Then will that heart be manifest;
There still remains the place of rest
Where you can always dare to weep,
And in a constant heart to creep. (Koidula 13)

In 1951, the very first book-length selection of poems by a single Estonian poet, Bernard Kangro's (1910 – 1994) *Earthbound*, was published in Lund, Sweden. In 1953, a comprehensive *Anthology of Modern Estonian Poetry*, from the poems of Juhan Liiv to those of the contemporary young Estonian poets in Western exile, was issued by the University of Florida Press, in Gainesville, USA. A selection of Gustav Suits's verse, *Flames on the Wind*, containing forty-two poems from all his creative periods, appeared in London in 1953. A selection from Marie Under, *Child of Man*, with the same number of poems, followed in London in 1955. All the four books were compiled and translated by William Kleesmann Matthews (1901 – 1958), a professor of East European and Slavonic Studies at the University of London at the time. The son of an Estonian mother, of English descent from his father's side, born in the Eastern Estonian border city of Narva, he had the advantage of having mastered the literary registers of both the languages exceptionally well (Oras 228). The selections of Kangro, Suits, and Under, have remained the only book-form representations of those poets in English. W. K. Matthews, an associate of Professor Ants Oras, who strongly stood for rhymed verse in Estonian, seems to have held a similar position in his English translations, always preferring full rhymes (with the exception of the renderings of Bernard Kangro's imprecise rhymes). The concordant effect may too often resemble Robert Frost, which makes some of the poems by Gustav Suits and Marie Under sound suspiciously alike. Comparing the Estonian with the English versions, the impression is easy to arise that at times the translator has sacrificed some of the charm of the original phrase and the unity of poetic images to the effect of perfect end-rhymes. That is what the recent translations by J. Talvet and H. L. Hix (born in 1960) never do. But then, the latter have not translated Suits and Under, counting as two among the most significant poets of rhymes, but have focused on authors whose prevalent methods of versification rely on other means.

In any case, W. K. Matthews's work in translating those two major poets is to be esteemed and admired. It is only a pity that Matthews did not translate more of them—several of their masterpieces have been rendered but many more are missing. It is, however, a pleasing fact to have, thanks to Matthews, not only a selection of Marie Under's lyrical poetry but a few of her most impressive ballads ("Sea Kine", "Lady of Porkuni") available in English. Matthews's better achievements avoid monotony and display the airy spontaneity and free-flowing rhythm of some of English Renaissance poetry, like perhaps the following translation of a sonnet by Marie Under:

Summer Memory

The door ajar, I stood at point of day,
Tiptoe for you and with awakened eyes.
The sun's gold slipper trod the gravelled way,

The grasses spilled their dews in glad surprise –
And then you came out of a mist of flowers

That clung and swayed like knots of butterflies!

When afterwards we two, in softened hours,
Walked through the fields of rye all red for reaping,
I felt as if my heart obeyed new powers:

The old in me seemed either dead or sleeping,
And as I glimpsed the poppies' fluttering fire,
An eager pleasure set my pulses leaping,

And you, these sang, could give me my desire. (Under 34)

A cross-cultural, even gnoseological paradox concerning achievements like Matthews's lies in that his kind of fully rhymed and strictly metrical, smoothly readable translations may appear as even too smooth for native Estonian readers with knowledge of English, making it difficult for them to recognize their own native classics in such perfectly Anglicised vestment. The advanced role of co-authoring by the translator has made those poems more a part of the receiving literature and target language, diminishing their semantic and emotional ties with the Estonian. On the other hand, an English reader, not able to enjoy the originals, may in luckier places obtain a hint of the authors' unique talent from those translations, but on the whole they appear as just another respectable piece of contribution to the long-established English tradition of rhymed verse. Gustav Suits may be favourably compared with W. B. Yeats by Matthews's translations (as may Bernard Kangro); but it was difficult, if not impossible, to introduce Marie Under as a fresh poetic voice, as the great Estonian innovator, to English-speakers at the time when T. S. Eliot was remodeling verse principles in English poetry. It is therefore with only a small number of Matthews's translations that the achievement of more international notice may be hoped, as with perhaps the following rendering of a classic free verse poem by Gustav Suits:

Under Quivering Aspens

I am walking under quivering aspen-trees,
I am walking with silent thoughts of glamour,
Weary of reading famous visionaries.

The sun is setting saga-crimson beyond the burning
line of woods:
I see it with sore and fevered vision.
Then come gusts of subsiding evening breezes
That stir the aspens.

Over the mown leas gusts from the Land of Winds
Still scutter at times in the tops of the aspens.

Over the mown leas haymakers in the languor of evening
Plod homewards, passing between hanging birches.

My spirit in its frail body, quickened by the Land of Winds,
Longs to communicate itself to kindred life.
I salute you, aspens, my brothers, my sisters.

I am walking under quivering aspen-trees,
Mute, absorbed, with the steps of an exile.

Take me into your quivering, aspens. (Suits 42)

The translations by the two English native speakers, Harris and Matthews, were followed by the work of the Estonian, Professor Ants Oras (1900 - 1982). A scholar of Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot, a translator of major works by classic Latin, German, and English poets, Oras, fluent both in German and in English, translated a number of Estonian poets into those two Germanic languages. The German *Acht estnische Dichter* appeared in Stockholm in 1964. The English translations, representing the same poets, Gustav Suits, Marie Under, Heiti Talvik, Betti Alver, Uku Masing, and Aleksis Rannit, with the exclusion of two others, were done at some period in the 1960s while Oras was living in exile and working at foreign universities. The translations only appeared in a bilingual edition in Tallinn in 2002.[2]

The selections from the poets are not big. The original metres are meticulously followed, the rhymes mostly are precise, natural and fresh. There may even be instances (e. g. in the renderings of Uku Masing) in which the translator, by taking justified liberties, improves on the clarity of the author's phrasal imagery.

From the Later 20th Century

A rather small but comparatively representative selection of translations of Estonian poetry was published in the anthology *East European Poetry*, edited by Emery George, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1983, and once again in 1993. It includes poems by Marie Under, Betti Alver, Uku Masing, Bernard Kangro, Kalju Lepik, Jaan Kaplinski, Paul-Eerik Rummo and Juhan Viiding, along with a few others. Most of the translations are by Ivar Ivask. The selection includes the long free verse poem "I Understood I Understood", with a Taoist outlook on man, culture and nature, by Jaan Kaplinski (born in 1941), which may be his most poignant single poem of all and which, when appearing in the collection "From Dust and Colours" in 1967, largely established his poetic reputation in Estonia. The English translation of that poem, by Hellar Grabbi, almost fully retains the suggestive power of the original.

I Understood I Understood

"is beautiful" is an illusion. It is time for esthetics
to die. The moon sets. Categories

lose their meaning. Something new
grows through the walls of Sparta.
Jericho
blow your trumpet John Coltrane blow don't be dead
return be a revenant be a phantom only don't be
silent shriek Ray Charles don't forgive Archie Shepp
blow blow away the firm cities the memorial tablets the holy books
the national heroes classical literature the renaissance the epics
the romanticism the Young Germans the Slavophiles Cromwell Richelieu
James Cook Columbus Vasco da Gama Philip Louis all of them
blow away their discoveries their borders blow
away their names their rooms and streets away Ludwig van
Beethoven G. W. F. Hegel Goethe Disraeli Alexander by
the grace of God Johann Strauss Baudelaire James Joyce away into the wind
of oblivion into the hot holy black wind of oblivion
their philosophy their music their pride and history
blow their banners inside out their moneybags genealogies
memoirs museums monuments of art tapestries draperies
capitals parliaments parties away their culture their
armless marble statues away back into the earth pantheons Phidias
Praxiteles broken pale statues which for centuries have
profaned the free living earth reviled the children and the sparrows
from their places up high blow into the burning all what is hope
black coal in the hard palms of rock layers …
(George 27 – 28)

In 1985, a book of translations of Jaan Kaplinski's poems, *The Same Sea in Us All*, appeared in Oregon, USA, rendered by Sam Hamill in cooperation with the author. In 1991, a collection of Kaplinski's original poetry in English, *I am the spring in Tartu: and other poems written in English*, edited and introduced by Laurence Patrick Anthony Kitching, appeared in Vancouver, British Columbia. Other English collections by Kaplinski, all published in the UK, include *The Wandering Border* (1992, translated by the author together with Sam Hamill and Riina Tamm), Through the Forest (1996, translated by Hildi Hawkins), and *Evening Brings Everything Back* (2004, translated by the author and Fiona Sampson). Among these poets, Jaan Kaplinski is the Estonian poet with the greatest number of collections having appeared in English.

In 1989, a booklet with translations of Betti Alver's verses was published in Toronto, Canada, rendered by Estonians in exile.[3] Only one of the translations mirrored the author's use of rhymes. All in all, the attempts to render the fully rhymed late symbolist poetry from the "Siuru" to the "Arbujad", began ceasing and gave way to new approaches to the original material as well as translation principles, in which the cooperation of Jüri Talvet and Harvey Lee Hix rose into eminence in the first decade

of the 21st century. However, in 2001, a rather voluminous dual-text anthology of Estonian poetry in English was published in Tallinn, compiled by the poetess Doris Kareva (born in 1958), and comprising works by Betti Alver, Artur Alliksaar, Uku Masing, Jaan Kaplinski, Paul-Eerik Rummo, Juhan Viiding, Doris Kareva, Tõnu Õnnepalu, and Triin Soomets. The samples by Betti Alver often had rhymes and followed regular metres; no such attempt had been made with the mystical poetry of Uku Masing, whose originals are amazingly rich in striking and fresh, though at times overly forced, rhymes.[4] The cooperation of Alan Peter Trei and Inna Feldbach produced enjoyable renderings of some of Artur Alliksaar's (1923 – 1966) free verse poetry, but the author's most characteristic "language poetry", heavily relying on the linguistic peculiarities of Estonian with assonances, alliteration and word play, remains untranslated and probably untranslatable.

Original Poetry in English

Among Estonian people of letters, few have written original poetry in English. Rein Sepp (1921 – 1995), who is remembered for having translated all the major Old Germanic epics into Estonian, wrote about a hundred poems in English, many more in German, and a smaller number in Swedish, Dutch, and Latvian. His contributions of the kind are virtually unknown even in Estonia. The majority of his English poetry is marred by occasional carelessness in expressive form and slips in taste, yet his resigned musings possess a serenity rare both in modern Estonian and English verse, that may remind one of the late poems of Thomas Hardy, as in the following poem dated July 14, 1971.

> Sure, the dream is now over:
> was it or ever has been?
> The sky falls lower and lower
> as life on a grey-growing screen.
>
> Only some colourful horses
> run truly their ground-bound rhyme.
> It's gold still the summer forces
> into the scent of a lime.
>
> My days have now all-all-right ended,
> what comes is marvellous fun.
> My heart has been finally mended
> by thorns of a heart-touching none. (manuscript)[5]

Reet Sool (born in 1951), an associate professor of English at Tartu University, writes poems in English. Her bilingual collections *murdub ääär / river runs* (2001) and especially *õrn morpheus / sweet morpheus* (2007) display her ability to compose inventively playful, often rhymed, poetry in English with the confidence of a lyrically talented native speaker.

Smile Through the Glass

love is a glance
in the Paris Metro
and the last
(and first)
smile through the glass
exchanged (Sool 59)

Reet Sool mostly uses rhyme like T. S. Eliot often did: irregularly and only when it rises from the natural rhythm. In her humorous and frequently self-ironical verse, one can find echoes of both the Romanticist and Modernist poetic discourses.

The Wavering

My love, of course, spans the ocean
look at all the water
bottomless, boundless
often roaring
(rarely soundless)
all that longing swaying
where is is going
where is it staying

even the plants do
cling to the permanent
stones to the seabed
stars to the firmament

I cling to waves and
then to the wavering (Sool 71)

Rein Sepp and Reet Sool have written a lot of verse in Estonian. However, by turning to English these authors have crossed the line that by convention separates Estonian poetry from foreign literatures. Although these texts can hardly be defined as belonging to any other national literature, the general perception of ethnic identity preordains it that literary works in a foreign language unavoidably denote an exteriority to Estonian culture.

The line between the native and the cosmopolitan had been crossed likewise by the Estonian American poet, translator, and literary scholar Ivar Ivask (1927 – 1992). An interpreter of both Estonian and world, mostly twentieth century literature, a long-time editor of *World Literature Today*, an introducer of Baltic authors to wider audiences (as it was noted above, most of the Estonian poems in the *East Eu-*

ropean Anthology have been translated by him), in his late years Ivask published the beautiful *Baltic Elegies*, written originally in English. The two series of the elegies, ten poems in each, were written in 1986 and 1989. In a somewhat Rilkean diction they delineate a Baltic exile's mental journey homeward through languid images of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian landscapes. Rich in well-learned intercultural references, these elegies also hearken to the aboriginal melodic sounds of the poet's native language. The procession of images that leads to the spiritual return is likened to spirals, to the annual circles of trees, or the widening circles in water. "The language of my poems pulled me home, / noun by noun, verb by verb, / an endless line / of vowel harmonies / found an echo on the Baltic shore. / The echo said: a poet can return. / For poems are forever spirals / without end", the author writes in the First Elegy of the Second Series (Ivask 67). While the Fourth Elegy of the First Series acknowledges the tempting advantages of emancipated cosmopolitanism – "You write ritual spirals in poems / and offer them to the four winds" (22), the Eighth, after a five-word phrase in Estonian, *see on mu luule keel* ("this is the language of my poetry") concludes: "It is in Estonian I still count my annual rings" (26). Thus, because of his devoted meditations on the Estonian (and Baltic) language-based identities, Ivask's English masterpiece forms an exception (or offers a challenge) to the language-limited definition of Estonian poetry.

Recent Decades

A notable event for the Estonian literature was the publication of Arved Viirlaid's (born in 1922, an exile in Canada) *Selected Poems in English*, in Vancouver in 2001. Translated by the renowned American poet R. W. Stedingh in cooperation with the American Estonian, Taimi Ene Moks, the voluminous book contains a rich selection of poems from all the original collections of the five decades of the author's poetic creativity. Even better known as a productive novelist whose novels have been translated into nearly a dozen languages, Viirlaid as a poet carries on a few of the outlooks and principles of the pre-war Estonian schools of poetry, especially the "Arbujad"/ "Logomancers", with perhaps Bernard Kangro as the most direct influence. A lot of Viirlaid's poems are rhymed, but an almost equal part is in free verse, which gives reason to speak of him as a bold link between the older, interbellum Estonian verse tradition and the newer, late Soviet and post-Soviet developments in Estonia. The translators of the selection have based their work on elaborate and detailed principles, mostly abandoning the original rhymes in translation, but always maintaining a sensitive touch with the rhythms, the logic of images, the correspondence of sound effects. In the two accompanying essays to the selection, R. W. Stedingh both places Viirlaid in the context of Estonian poetry, observes his major characteristics and stylistic fluctuations through successive collections, interprets his esthetic peculiarities, and offers an exhaustive insight into the theoretical foundation of his own and Ms. Moks's translation principles, with precise calculations of limits set by linguistic differences, such as considerations of prosodic correspondences and numerous other aspects. Stedingh writes:

> In the Estonian, Viirlaid uses assonance, consonance, initial and end rhyme, refrains, symbols, metaphorical kennings and a number of other poetic devices; however, some of these same forms have been abandoned or de-emphasized by contemporary English, American, and Canadian poets, but to deny their utterance in the English would be to miss the formal expression of one of Viirlaid's major thematic concerns. What I have attempted here is to retain the flavor of these conventions without their becoming obtrusive in good English poems. I have not hesitated to make changes where they moved the English versions closer to the spirit of the originals (Stedingh 32).

As Jüri Talvet wrote in his review of Viirlaid's selection in *World Literature Today*, "*Selected Poems* is a worthy contribution to the other canon of Estonian literature, the one that, despite its inevitable halts and casualities, still, brick by brick, goes on building the image of Estonian literary culture in the eyes of the world" (170).

In spite of the fact that the majority of Professor Jüri Talvet's (born in 1945) poems are free verse and rhymeless, a number of their specific values cannot be adequately transmitted into English. In fact, rhymes as such are one of the lesser hindrances. Estonian, like Spanish (or Italian), and unlike English (or German), is a language in which vowels in unstressed syllables always retain their full value. That allows for sonorous effects similar in Spanish and Estonian, and for the assonance rhymes of words with two or more syllables. Mr. Talvet, as a scholar and translator of Spanish and Latin American literature, has been an avid employer of such linguistic possibilities and was indeed the one, after and along with Ain Kaalep, to first introduce such literary effects into Estonian verse. After the initial discoveries of the kind in his first two books of poetry (published in 1981 and 1986), almost the entire second half of his original *Eesti eleegia ja teisi luuletusi* ("Estonian Elegy and Other Poems", 1997), on whose basis his first English selection, *Estonian Elegy* (2008), was compiled and translated, contains poems, many of them about love, in Spanish metrical patterns and employing assonance rhymes. Such methods have an ambiguous and pleasantly bewildering effect in Estonian, because they appear both exotic and yet innately and latently available in the native language. It is as if a Spanish poet were writing in Estonian: an intercultural circulation which English translations can hardly render, and none of whose samples were included in the English selection. If one were to look for Talvet the poet as an "indigenous" Estonian, with voice modulations rooted in the melodious fabric of his native language, one should probably turn to those untranslated verses. His free verse poems show him as an international courier between a vast variety of contexts, from dream images of family events and of memorable childhood localities through reflective and introspective travel notes from around the globe to major historical and intercultural discourses. His lines of expression have evolved into an intertwining of sensually particularised imagery with ideas of aspirations that should guide humankind. Human failings may evoke satire, but the prevalent tone is of quiet musing. The verses, rich in echoes especially from Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, British, and German cultures, nearly always engage in a dialogue with either someone personally close or a distant soulmate.

Ossian's Songs

2
You have read the *Book of Kells*.
Ringabella rang in your ears like a beautiful ring.
Already the days could be paper-clipped together:
good or bad, praises and dispraises in pairs.
Sheets of a timeless book, around them only thin air.
Errant letters on the margin — *Today under my pen*
In the bright sun the parchment shone gold —
inspired even more.
The day's gifts of love seemed to have
the same weight. They showed the same
Confident coil of logic. Aba bcb cdc ded efe
fgf etc. —like the metric of Dante's verse
that remembers the past and is always full of the new.
But it is pointless for me to intrude into your day.
In the same way that night shuts your swinging door,
carelessly pushing from the sheet your careful pen,
I, Ossian, by the way of Ringabella
on a moonlit rock await the blind lightning of death
that must strike me, the red lance of love
that pierces me from behind.

3
To the nickeled handrails in the Amsterdam airport
one wished to shout:
Answer! Be alive!
The longing at the end of the 20th century to see
beautiful people
murderously burdens (as AIDS burdensomely
murders).
What 500-year-old nodule on nosebridge, what
furrow
between the brows in London's Queensway
hides from the eyes of Iseult, Laura, Francesca?
A voice at any rate remains communication.
Everything is a sign, every branch.
Do not expect the crowd to wait for your words,
when on the counters every crust of beauty,
every smile, every frail ray of memory stands exposed.
What do you desire, soul, Ossian?
On a high rock, you are no higher than others.

Listen then to the inward forest you carry.
There from leaves is freed, from the day's fatigue,
at the moment of departure — *come then*, *stay*,
be always — the voice of Iseult.
There from moss, from separation, flow into you,
faithful — *yes*, *everything*
is as you say — Francesca's green eyes. (*Estonian Elegy* 58 – 59)

Notwithstanding the special qualities of Estonian, Mr. Talvet's mature free verse poems include pieces that can be translated into English with a levity of form and gravity of content equal to the original, as the following poem for which he won the prestigious Juhan Liiv Poetry Prize in 1997 and which has been translated into seventy languages.

Love
is imperative, Kierkegaard
thought. Better,
I think, to love
without imperative.
Recognition
soul to soul,
correspondence
blood to blood,
flying
up or down,
without knowing
the destination. (*Estonian Elegy* 66)

The second English selection of Jüri Talvet's poems, *Of Snow*, *of Soul* (translated by H. L. Hix), includes verse from his three latest Estonian collections, all of the 21st century. In it, the continuing free verse, binding a keenness of mind with a misty softness of contemplation, has achieved an even more sensitively intimate level.[6]

As it may be with poetry in all languages, some of the most valuable qualities of Estonian verse are the untranslatable ones. It is especially true of the poetry of Juhan Liiv, the most tragic, the deepest and the sincerest of Estonian poets. With most Estonian masters of poetic expression, there may rise a vague sensation of the authors' tacit regret of their mother tongue not having happened to be one of the major languages of Western Europe, to have supplied them with the riches of ancient literary tradition and the continuity of polished poetic registers, along with a wide and competent reception worthy of their merits and talents. It is different with Juhan Liiv, whose magic uniqueness lies precisely in his humility as the poet of a small peasant people. In his methods of style and versification Liiv relies mostly on what are essentially the living oral traces of the language of Baltic Finnic folk poetry, dating back to the twi-

light of a distant illiterate past, with the age of perhaps millennia. He modulates that simplicity of ancient peasant language with a very subtle touch of his personal motives and experience, as minute motions in perception pierce his mind, and that symbiosis of laconic postulations of the poet's suffering self with a humble anonymity, gives his poems an enduringly noble ring. Other characteristics, such as the undeniable influence of Heinrich Heine on Liiv's rhymes and stanzas, are of secondary importance. Naturally enough, to perceive Liiv's particular power described here, one should read him in Estonian, as well as have a clear idea or some inkling of the flavour of Estonian folk poems. Ernest Howard Harris's fully rhymed iambic translations of Liiv from the early 20th century sound lucid and fluent enough, but his new translators Talvet and Hix have done the poet no lesser a favour by rendering his works, in the dual-text book *Meel paremat ei kannata / The Mind Would Bear No Better* (2007), mostly in free verse, though in rare cases one may find rhymes. The volume includes the translations of thirty-nine poems and six poetic fragments; previously, Harris and Matthews, each in their respective anthologies, had published only eight translations of Liiv's poetry.

Our Room's Ceiling Is Black

Our room's ceiling is black,
black with layers of smoke,
its spiderwebs and soot host
the cricket and the roach.

Impossible to say
what it has heard and seen,
since pain casts a shadow,
since it changes its expression.

It's seen its share of weeping,
and heard many quarrels,
so much, so much suffering,
God have mercy on us.

As is true of our time,
our room's ceiling is black:
as if it writhed in chains,
if only it could speak. (Liiv 89)

The closeness to nature, the breathing in unison with the country's and the Earth's destiny, are traceable in these translations, even with a hint of the cadences of the originals, as in the following, partly rhymed poem:

Oh Heather, Oh Blossom!

Oh heather, oh blossom,
such a bleak, bleak autumn.
Though my mind suffers gloom
you still tenderly bloom,
oh blossom!

Oh heather, oh blossom,
sadness is my burden:
there's love, there's death, there's autumn—
your eye, cerulean—
oh blossom! (Liiv 107)

And there are translations of poems with an East Asian-like brevity and terseness, which, if they had appeared a century earlier, when the originals were written, may even have placed Juhan Liiv among the pioneers of imagism (note the alliteration in the third line):

Autumn

Autumn wind
quivers on a limb,
huddles on the hay
like a beggar. (Liiv 125)

Triin Soomets (born in 1969), one of the freshest voices among women poets, writes with occasional rhymes, more often just ending lines with words which only slightly sound alike, possessing perhaps one or two similar phonemes within the same syllabic structure. Such applications of rhyme did emerge in much earlier authors, even in the middle phase poetry of Bernard Kangro, and they are often present in Arved Viirlaid, but on the whole that is a newer kind of phenomenon in Estonian letters. The bold surprises of irregular rhyme effects may remind one of certain turns of verse in Emily Dickinson, whom Soomets also resembles by the powerful persuasiveness of soaring associations (otherwise, by her frequent acridity Soomets stands closer to Sylvia Plath, but is more joyous). While composing in full rhymes is difficult in Estonian, and often disappointing, it is, however, in a way even easier for a translator to render such verse into regularly rhymed English. It is easier in the sense that the task remains in full view, and a settled rhythm of rhymes may help the mental processes in looking for the expectable. On the other hand, what the original poet does, rarely means looking for the expectable. Casual, random, or accidental rhymes like Soomets's, require of the translator such an amount of congenial spontaneity, almost a full transference into the poet's flow of thinking, that the inspiration may easily run dry. Thus, choosing the safer path of euphonious but rhymeless verse, the translations by J. Talvet and H. L. Hix of not only the poems of Soomets, but also mostly of Paul-

Eerik Rummo (born in 1942), and, with very few partly rhymed exceptions, of Hando Runnel (born in 1938) and Juhan Viiding (all published, along with free verse by Andres Ehin, Jaan Kaplinski, Ene Mihkelson, Jüri Talvet, Mari Vallisoo, and Hasso Krull, in the anthology *On the Way Home*, in New Delhi in 2006) rarely attempt to catch and convey all the frolicsome play with full or half rhymes or other sound effects that more or less characterise those poets' original lyrical style. However, Talvet and Hix's translation of Paul-Eerik Rummo's prose poem "In Imitation and in Memory of Artur Alliksaar", with the abundance of assonances, alliterations and puns of the late senior poet's language poetry, comes amazingly close to conveying most of the rich mind acrobatics of the original, alike to accomplishing the seemingly impossible task of translating James Joyce's Finnegans Wake. A selection of the Surrealist poetry of Alliksaar's other disciple, Andres Ehin (born in 1940), *Moose*, *Beetle*, *Swallow*, translated into English by Patrick Cotter, was published in Cork, Ireland, in 2005. An English selection of the free verse, ethnically conscious, associative poetry of Kristiina Ehin (Andres Ehin's daughter, born in 1977) by the British Estonian Ilmar Lehtpere, *The Drums of Silence*, appeared, to a lot of critical acclaim, in Cambridge, UK, in 2007.

【Notes】

1. See William Forsell Kirby, *The Hero of Esthonia and Other Studies in the Romantic Literature of That Country* (London, Adamant Media Corporation, 1895).
2. See Ants Oras, *Kuus eesti luuletajat Ants Orase tõlkes* (Six Estonian Poets in Translations of Ants Oras. Comp. Anne Lange) (Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2002).
3. See Betti Alver, *Selected Poems*. Foreword by Mardi Valgemäe (Toronto, Estonian Centre International P. E. N. , 1989).
4. See *Tuulelaeval valgusest on aerud. Windship with Oars of Light. Valik eesti moodsat luulet. Estonian Modern Poetry*. Comp. Doris Kareva (Tallinn, Huma, 2001).
5. Manuscript in Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia.
6. See Jüri Talvet, *Of Snow, of Soul. New Selected Poems*. Trans. from the Estonian by H. L. Hix (Toronto, Guernica,2010).

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