Translating from French Language into Estonian Literature

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Abstract French literature has been translated into Estonian since the late 19th century. Some authors have been central to this tradition from the very beginning, and have considerably influenced the Estonian understanding of French literature, if not literature in general. Based on the history of the reception of a few such authors (Zola, Balzac, Baudelaire and Molière), the article shows in what ways the Estonian literary tradition has been nourished by this cultural contact and how reading French literature has grown an important part of it.

Key words translation history; history of Estonian literature; translations from French; Honoré de Balzac; Charles Baudelaire; Molière; Émile Zola.

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What Does Translation Have to Do with Literature?

The subject of this article in a collection of texts intended as a general introduction to the Estonian literature may seem somewhat arbitrary. Why speak of translations while the original Estonian literature is hardly known well and widely and the Estonian language, the actual vehicle of these translations, is not spoken or understood by a public large enough to influence the world-wide understanding of the French literature?

First, it could be argued that such an approach is encouraged by the methodological and ethical expectations of our discipline today. In recent decades, several developments in the field of literary studies have contributed to a favourable atmosphere for rethinking translation practices and their role in any given literary tradition. In the literary histo-riography and criticism increasing value has been attributed to phenomena formerly considered as peripheral or marginal. It could even be said that marginality, the otherness, has become a value in itself: historians of literature look for alternative points of view in order to give more visibility to texts, authors and processes neglected in the earlier histories and canons. In this process, culture, and the literary tradition as a part of it, has become to be regarded as more complex and polyphonic than was customary in the ethnocentric historiography influenced by the romanticist concept of nation. The constant presence of otherness within a culture considered as one coherent system with its own particular identity has been acknowl-

edged.

Translation is a form of such otherness. On one hand, it allows to introduce new, inno-vative elements into the target culture; on the other hand, it helps a culture to perceive its own specificity in the comparison with the Other (Torop 593). Although it is a general characteristic of translation, it is particularly important in young literary cultures where translations, many of which are made by great writers, can play a major role in the development of the original literature (Even-Zohar 120 – 122). Therefore, translation history is not only important to study in order to understand the phenomena directly connected with translation practices, but also for a better understanding of the development and functioning of the target culture. While the original and translated literature result from somewhat different series of creative acts, their perception by the reader is not necessarily different, and readers' perception of texts is an important element of the target literary tradition. Reception is as creative a process as the production of literature.

In this particular case there is also another, empirical reason to discuss translations of French literature into Estonian in order to describe the Estonian literary tradition. There are many actual parallels between the developments of both since the time the French literature appeared in the field of vision of Estonian translators, that is, since the late 19th century. Before that time, translated literature in Estonian was mostly of German origin and rather loosely adapted. The scope began to broaden in the 1880s, and a more scrupulous attitude towards the original started to develop at the same time. During that period, the Estonian literary field grew more articulate and conscious of itself as well: the first professional writers appeared, criticism developed, first literary works of lasting aesthetical value were produced.

This process of emancipation continued at the beginning of the 20th century, with important new elements appearing in 1905: in the form of the group Noor-Eesti "Young Estonia," the first literary group with a clearly stated program entered the literary field. Their albums, although not numerous or frequent enough to qualify as real periodicals, were the first widely distributed strictly literary collective publications and had considerable impact. In the field of translation, the Young Estonia movement insisted on quality both in selection of texts and execution of the work. They also founded a very influential publishing house in 1913. The beginning of the Young Estonia period saw also the creation of professional theatre in Estonia (1906, both in Tartu and in Tallinn). All these developments contributed to the formation of a more demanding and knowledgeable public.

Thus, the basic elements of a fully functioning literary field were in place when, in 1918, the independent Republic of Estonia was created. The new political situation made it possible for better education to be given in Estonian and for more sophisticated institutions to emerge (these soon followed: in 1919 Tartu University reopened with Estonian as the new teaching language, in 1922 the Writers' Union was founded, the next year the literary magazine *Looming* was created).

For the translations of French literature into Estonian this new context brought also new possibilities. By that time, the core of what has become the French canon in

Estonia, was already well-formed. In the 19th century, the Estonian press had discovered Guy de Maupassant, Jules Verne, Victor Hugo, Émile Zola and Molière, in the early 20th century – Maurice Maeterlinck, Alexandre Dumas, Anatole France, Voltaire and Charles Baudelaire. A total of 63 authors (including the all-time favourites Maupassant, Verne, Zola, Perrault, Molière, France, Dumas and Hugo) had been published in book format by 1918.

Over the next period, during Estonia's political independence (1918-1939), the Estonian literature explored many different poetics and attained a whole new quantitative and qualitative level. The same acceleration can be observed in translation from French: 73 new authors were published in book format, and many already known authors, such as Maupassant, France, Verne, Zola, Dumas, Hugo and Perrault, also Maurice Dekobra, Octave Mirbeau and Prosper Mérimée kept occupying the translators. Among the newly discovered writers, the most popular were Pierre Loti, Romain Rolland, Honoré de Balzac, Alphonse Daudet, André Maurois, Maurice Leblanc, Claude Farrère, Gustave Flaubert, Henri Barbusse, George Sand and Voltaire.

Thus, the French literature in Estonian grew steadily in numbers and in quality, remaining all the while centered on the 19th and early 20th century prose, mostly realism. At the end of the 1930s, a certain openness to some more modern tendencies can be perceived, but the Soviet standards for literature imposed thereafter did not allow for any actual opening. Instead, they perpetuated the realist poetics and socio-critical intentions that the pre-occupation translators and critics had already appreciated of their own accord.

In diversity and quantity, the war and the beginning of the Soviet occupation brought about a significant decline. During the first two decades of the occupation, books of only 15 new authors were published, many of these were dictated by the Soviet canon (Louis Aragon, Elsa Triolet, André Stil) or at least tolerated by it (Pierre Jean de Béranger, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry). That tolerance was naturally also the main condition for the preservation of the earlier canon. Balzac, Rolland, Hugo, Stendhal, Perrault, Molière, Dumas, France, Maupassant, Maurois, Flaubert and Verne could remain. They continued to be central to the canon, even though from 1960 till 1990 the diversity grew again. The most important new authors from that later Soviet period were undoubtedly Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Georges Simenon rose to a great popularity. The total number of new authors was 69.

While the effort gone into the voluminous Estonian versions of authors such as Stil or Béranger hardly corresponds to their role in the French literature, as far as the core of the canon is concerned, the Soviet era didn't as much change as freeze the history. That resulted, among other things, in a vigorous return to the old values and old texts after the regaining of independence. Authors were rediscovered, old translations reprinted. Sometimes that inspired a new interest in same authors, but often not.

In this general dynamics there are obvious parallels with the original Estonian literature: the 20th century slowly removes poetry and prose from their respectively romanticist and realist origins towards post-romanticist and post-realist poetics, without really entering a modernist or avant-garde aesthetics before the 1960s. The Soviet pe-

riod undoubtedly contributed to the slowness of the process, but not by a radical change of direction, rather by imposing to all writers and translators the most traditional and simple tastes in Estonia, and inspiring to writers in exile a strong feeling of nostalgic patriotism that made them attach to pre-war values and subjects related to matters mostly Estonian. Upon regaining the political independence, the literary field tried at the same time to reabsorb the pre-occupation heritage and many missed-out developments that had, in the meantime, taken place in the world literature.

Chronological parallels aside, in that light we could still ask how translations from French could play a significant part in Estonian literature that has for a long time been concerned with its role as a preserver of cultural identity, and has moved at a very different pace and through different experiences compared to French literature. In what way has this contact nourished the Estonian literary tradition, apart from being structured by the same circumstances and thus following similar dynamics? The answer ventured here will be given in form of three case studies, which lead to some conclusions as to why the Estonian literature has needed the French and in what way the Estonian reading of the French literature is interesting.

The Battle of Naturalism and the Reign of Realism

The very arrival of French literature in Estonia is motivated by processes in the Estonian literature: Zola is mentioned as an example, translated and later on continuously quoted as a positive or negative authority in the disputes that surrounded the early realist writings in Estonia.

The existence of the naturalist method was discovered by Estonian critics in the 1880s. In 1891, Ado Grenzstein published in his newspaper, *Olevik*, a story by Zola, translated from Russian. It was followed, at the turn of the century, by many other examples of Zola's work and by reflections of the local critics upon naturalist literature. These were often rather hostile, which attitude can at least partly be explained by the over-general and simplified meaning attributed to naturalism by the same critics: they concentrated on symptoms, not the method itself, pointing out the social and material ugliness and misery the naturalists depicted, and presenting this as an objective in and of itself. As is reported in 1911, the hostility sometimes went as far as removing Zola's work from libraries – his novel *Nana* (published in Estonian in 1907), was removed from the library of the education society of the Tarvastu parish.

From all that we learn, however, that Zola and his method, however loosely interpreted, were well known and his works translated and read widely enough to cause concern in those opposed to naturalist literature. Their opposition worked most likely in Zola's favour, constantly drawing attention to his name and attracting attention of the readers. By the 1920s, naturalism had made its way to the very history of Estonian literature. In his authoritative textbook *Eesti kirjandusloo peajooned* (*The Basics of the History of the Estonian Literature*, 1912 – 1936) Mihkel Kampmaa firmly establishes an already much-used parallel between Zola's work and that of Eduard Vilde (1865 – 1933) who is considered to be the first true realist writer in the Estonian literature. Kampmaa writes:

> Just as Zola has almost superstitious regard for all that bears the name of science, and hurries to hand out to others, as so many pieces of fresh bread, everything he has heard said in the name of science, believing it to be the last, uncontestable truth, so does Vilde, being an ignorant in science, give himself unreservedly in to the propaganda of historical materialism and socialist projects for a better world. (Kampmann 121)

But Kampmaa's criticism is less aimed against the naturalism than its simplified interpretations. He explains the naturalists' aim for scientific and detailed approach that sets naturalism apart from realism in principle, not only in the choice of subject matter (Kampmann 5 – 9). The reason he dwells so long on Zola and his school in a history of Estonian literature lies in the fact that naturalism had already been drawn into a loop of circular reasoning: while it was used to label certain Estonian authors, like Vilde, who tried to introduce a realistic approach into an overwhelmingly neoromanticist literature, naturalism was also perceived through their work, the original concept inseparable from its Estonian version.

This merged reading of French naturalism and Estonian prose became problematic for both at the beginning of Soviet occupation. It was a hostile period towards naturalism or what was defined as such. Even though Zola was described both before and after as a tireless fighter for democracy and workers' rights, during the Stalinist period his work and his method were subject to hard criticism for dwelling too much on insignificant details and not offering any "progressive" solutions to social problems described in novels. However arbitrary the Stalinist prescriptions for criticism, they contributed to rendering Zola's position in the canon ambivalent for a while, which is probably one of the reasons Balzac had a chance to rise beside and even above him in the Estonian literary tradition.

Nevertheless, in 1970s Oskar Kuningas still had reason to observe that Zola was the most often mentioned French author in histories of Estonian literature (Kuningas 876). Indeed, attributing naturalist poetics to Estonian authors has a long and varied tradition in spite of the controversial interpretation of naturalism. In addition to Eduard Vilde, Ernst Peterson-Särgava (1868 – 1958) is one of the principal authors so labeled in the relatively appropriate period, but naturalism has been found in Estonian prose throughout the 20th century, in the work of authors who represent very different periods, aesthetics and ideas and present similarities only on a rather superficial level, if that.

Thus we see that the term "naturalism," originally a name of a particularly precise and well-defined literary method, has grown into a very wide and general notion in Estonia and hardly implies any real comparison to the French naturalist school. When speaking of naturalism encountered in a work of literature, an Estonian critic is much more likely to have in mind a set of characteristics traditionally attributed to naturalism in Estonia (description of maximum number of ugly realities, for example), and to expect the audience to think of the same set of characteristics at the mention of the keyword, which the audience probably does.

Since Zola and his poetics had developed into the measure of bold, if controver-

sial, prose, it is understandable that a more stable landmark was bound to appear in the repertoire. That role was given to Balzac. Although preceding Zola in the actual chronology of literature, he was discovered much later in Estonia, the first translations (for example, *The Magic Skin*, *Eugénie Grandet*, *Father Goriot*) dating from the 1920s.

Soon after the first texts were published, accolades began to appear in the press. Where Zola had created a ground for comparison, more often than not a negative parallel, Balzac becomes a height to reach for, something to measure translators and Estonian novelists by. The critic Bernhard Linde, himself one of the first translators of Balzac, published a whole monograph about Balzac (Linde 1933), which is something extremely rare to happen for a French or any foreign author in Estonia. At the same time, another critic compared A. H. Tammsaare's newly completed 5-part novel *Tõde ja õigus* (*Truth and Justice*, 1926 – 1933) to Balzac's *Human Comedy* (Adson 1181). Tammsaare (1878 – 1940) was already the most highly regarded Estonian novelist, and the parallel is obviously intentioned as enhancing the prestige of both the local living classic and the earlier foreign one.

Unlike many other writers, Balzac gained only more attention and acknowledgement under the Soviet occupation, even during the Stalinist era. Having being appreciated by Friedrich Engels, he was among the first French authors the Estonian critics dared to begin to mention again after the Second World War. While the early realism was not quite the paragon of literature for the Soviet literary ideologists, it was considered a precursor to the much-praised and sought-after "critical realism", and thus Balzac continued to be set as an example and remained among the authorized objects of study and translation. Thus, a 15 – volume collection of his selected works was published in Estonian between 1955 and 1962. As a small curious testimony to the general acceptation of Balzac, a short story for youth from that decade (Jermakov 1969) uses reading of his selected works as a marker of a positive adolescent hero.

School, a powerful constructor of literary fame, had indeed also started to favour Balzac instead of Zola. The main school textbook on western literature published under the occupation observes that naturalist authors are reluctant to judge the society and its evils, they consider these as some sort of phenomenon to be studied with scientific detachment (Leht, Ojamaa 191). Nevertheless, by that time, well after the period of the worst Stalinist repressions and restrictions, Zola was reinstated in his status of a canonic author, an inspiring predecessor to the 20th century "critical realists" alongside Balzac.

Both these authors have remained part of the national curriculum, of which the latest version was adopted in 2010. Balzac is also among authors from whom an entire novel is recommended for reading as an example of realist literature. His *Father Goriot* is one of the five options suggested in the curriculum, the other four being Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* and Tammsaare's *Truth and Justice*. So not only is Balzac the model realist writer, French novelists are obviously regarded as the very core of realism.

The Challenge of Modernity

Another French author, who has become as emblematic as Balzac, although in a different way and in a different field, was discovered soon after naturalism and has been closely related to the latter in Estonia. In the first decade of the 20th century, members of the Young Estonia movement introduced the poetry of Baudelaire in their magazine. It was first done on the initiative of Johannes Aavik (1880 – 1973) who, as a linguist and radical language reformer, was attracted to the late 19th century French poetry mostly because of its creative approach to language (Aavik 196). Other translators and poets soon followed in Aavik's footsteps. By 1930, Baudelaire's poems, both in verse and prose form, had been published in Estonian in prestigious literary magazines, in periodicals destined for a larger public and as an independent book, the latter a translation of *Paris Spleen* by Marie Under (1883 – 1980), the most remarkable poet of that period.

In the second half of the 20th century, Baudelaire continued to attract the interest of eminent translators and poets, such as Gustav Suits (1883 – 1956), Johannes Semper (1892 – 1970), Ants Oras (1900 – 1982), August Sang (1914 – 1969), Jaan Kross (1920 – 2007), Ilmar Laaban (1921 – 2000), Ain Kaalep (b. 1926), Indrek Hirv (b. 1956), Tõnu Õnnepalu (b. 1962) and Märt Väljataga (b. 1965). During the Soviet occupation, translating Baudelaire's poetry constituted a sort of bridge between the two literary traditions that developed in Estonia and in exile. Later, in the 1990s, the renewed interest in his works was rather representative of a general eagerness to reestablish connections to the pre-war literary tradition.

In addition to many poems printed in various periodicals, several independent books of Baudelaire's poetry have been published. Three of them are anthological editions of verse poetry: the first established by August Sang in 1967 (contains translations by August Sang, Ain Kaalep, Ilmar Laaban, Ants Oras, Jaan Kross, Johannes Semper), the second in 2000 by Indrek Hirv (contains translations by Hirv, Oras and Sang), and the latest was published in 2009 by Ain Kaalep (contains translations by Ain Kaalep, August Sang and Märt Väljataga). There are also complete translations of *Paris Spleen* (new editions of Marie Under's translation were published in 1991 and in 1999) and *Flowers of Evil* (2000, translated by Tõnu Õnnepalu). As the most recent dates show, the interest in Baudelaire has still not faded.

This continuing interest has a few paradoxical points. First, for a long time there was next to no positive critical reception to accompany the translations. The first translator Aavik himself never let pass an opportunity to criticize Baudelaire's morals and world view that he had labeled "decadent" from the very beginning (Aavik 1905), thus establishing a long tradition of interpreting Baudelaire in particular and the late 19th century French poetry in general.

Why someone as skeptical as Aavik undertook translating Baudelaire is not quite clear, but it probably wasn't only because of some mysterious attraction of opposites, but also by a deliberate calculation. Aavik and his colleagues wished to bring about fundamental changes in the literary culture and tastes of their time. In order to set new horizons to the public, they needed to create a contrast with the existing ones. In

1905, Baudelaire was shockingly different from everything that was known as poetry in Estonian, and the shock had a lasting effect, even on the first translators themselves.

This role Baudelaire had to play explains the second paradox of his Estonian reception. On many occasions, and over many decades, his poetics are described as "naturalist" by the critics. While the actual creative methods of Baudelaire (and of all late 19th century poets claiming him as their mentor) and of Zola are fundamentally different, it is not altogether surprising that the two appear similar in the eyes of Estonian critics who, with Zola, have concentrated more on particular themes and tropes than the method. The idea both Zola and Baudelaire most clearly and deeply introduced to the Estonian literature was that literature was not supposed to be beautiful, but could also dwell on the ugly, the immoral and the miserable. The reasons these authors dwelt on such things belong to two different philosophical and spiritual universes they represent, but in the early 20th century Estonia their names and works were thrown together in yet another cultural universe that has ever since defined them by its own logic and needs.

What was taken from the 19th century French literature was not a method, a poetics or a world view. It was both less and more: a general sense of newness, a sort of declaration of rights for a literature that from then on refused to play its former role of simply educating and amusing people with nice, decent texts. The Young Estonia movement demanded throughout its roughly ten-year existence that the Estonian literature move on towards modernity. It has been disputed a lot among today's critics and scholars whether or not the Young Estonians were modernists—it was one of the biggest critical debates in Estonia in the 1990s. If we consider modernism as the literary and political avant-garde on the European scale, Young Estonia does not qualify, being far too moderate in both aspects. But in their understanding that modern literature is an independent cultural field that can explore ideas and images in spite of all previous conventions, the Young Estonians certainly stand at the beginning of modern Estonian literature. Baudelaire became an emblem in service of the emancipation and broadening of horizons they demanded.

Only as such, he might have had just a lasting impact. To explain his constantly renewed presence, there is a third element to be pointed out. Most of the translators of his works are among the great poets of their time, some are among the most productive translators of poetry Estonia has ever known. Yet, only about two thirds of his verse poems have attracted their attention more than once and most of their effort has converged on a dozen texts from *Flowers of Evil*. Bringing Baudelaire's texts to the Estonian readers doesn't therefore seem to be the translators' main objective when they turn to his works. Rather, they wish to launch themselves into a dialogue, or sometimes a confrontation, with other translators, and thus to establish their beliefs about Baudelaire and even more about translation and poetry in general. The latest Estonian collections of Baudelaire form an implicit, but clear debate about principles of translating poetry. Some translators stand for rigorous respect for form and particular poetic figures, others view original texts more as a starting point for free improvisation; some believe to find the author's true voice in the tension between the cool, balanced con-

struction of his verse and its content, others in his syntactic structures etc.

Baudelaire has become an "inside author" — an author for poets to test their mind and skills on. Perhaps it explains why proportionally very little critical attention has been paid to him. The generally accessible sources the Estonian readers could turn to in order to learn more about a poet eminently present in their cultural repertoire are not overly abundant. But the translations themselves become thus all the more significant: not only do they give the Estonian public a glimpse of a highly influential author in the whole western literature, they are also an expression of poetic quests and values of remarkable Estonian poets from all generations since the beginning of modernity.

The Taming of the Classics

While Baudelaire's works have remained a great attraction for outstanding poets, another author drew from the very beginning the attention of the larger public, and made his way into school textbooks, although no debates or interpretations of his work stand out in the context of Estonian literature. This author is Molière. The first of his plays to be staged in an Estonian-speaking theatre was *The Miser*, translated from German or Russian adaptions and played in 1886 in Tartu, by the company of August Wiera (Rähesoo 31).

The first staging of Molière didn't bring about an immediate popularity. It appears that among the classics the young Estonian theatre tackled, Shakespeare was the most popular (Kask 59), and while the fashion of stage adaptations of adventure novels brought even Jules Verne on stage in the late 19th century Estonia (Epner 29), the French playwrights were not among the most appreciated at that time. Even when the first professional theatres appeared in 1906, there was no sudden change. During the early years of Vanemuine, the professional company in Tartu, German-speaking authors made up 68,5% of translated repertoire, Scandinavian playwrights (Ibsen being the most prominent) 15,5%, and French plays constituted only 8%, although it was still more than the share of English or Russian theatre (Epner 37). The art director, Karl Menning, who led the theatre until 1914, tended to avoid the classics, considering them beyond his actors' skills at that time (Kask 146).

In Tallinn, the Estonia Theatre did venture into the demanding field of classical drama, but their author of choice was Shakespeare, whose plays began to appear regularly from 1910 (Epner 40). Only at the beginning of the 1920s did Estonia bring a Molière play to stage. Again, it was *The Miser* (Tormis 32), which had, by that time, become a sort of a token text of Molière and had, in 1923, been published as a book, translated anew by Reinhold Kask. The reviews were quite positive, mostly about the performance of Toomas Tondu in the role of Harpagon. However, the poet and critic Gustav Suits published an article in 1924, discussing Molière's works and their Estonian reception in more general terms. He stated that Molière's plays had gone more or less unnoticed by Estonian theatres and welcomed the newfound interest in Molière (Suits 13).

Said interest, no doubt inspired by the playwright's 300-year anniversary, was expressed by one more production in a professional theatre: a two-part show including

Georges Dandin and *The Mock Doctor* (translated by Marta Sillaots) in Draamateater. Here, however, the critics were much less favourably impressed (Tormis 87 – 88).

At the end of the decade, the Ugala Theatre in Viljandi gave yet another production of *The Miser* (Tormis 253). While the theatres took happily advantage of the availability and familiarity of this particular play, not all critics considered it the best or the most representative work of Molière. Thus, the young Ants Oras, who later became one of the most eminent literary critics, had reproachfully written after the publication of the book that the translator Reinhold Kask should have chosen one of the great verse comedies instead of *The Miser* (Oras 169).

However, the canon doesn't always build itself on the preferences of critics. *The Miser* had made it first to the Estonian stage and also to the Estonian bookshops, so it was only to be expected that the play made it also to the textbooks of literature. The first textbooks on western European literature (Peterson 1922; Jänes et al. 1936) have whole chapters about *The Miser*. The textbooks published later, under the Soviet occupation (Leht 1957; Leht, Ojamaa 1965), didn't abandon this play either, although there was an obvious intention to shift the attention from *The Miser to* the great verse comedies, such as *Tartuffe*, *Don Juan and The Misanthrope*, which had also been translated by that time. Some of that work had been done in the late 1930s, but Molière's reception gained also much by the volatile political context of the 1940s and 1950s and the war-time: both under the Nazi and the Soviet occupation the classics, such as Molière and the old favourite Shakespeare, were much staged (Epner et al. 2006: 67), since they were considered timeless and thus relatively harmless by both totalitarian regimes.

Even though the Molière-related repertoire has broadened with time, *The Miser* has not been forgotten. In 2000, it was staged in the Vanemuine Theatre in a new translation by Häidi Kolle. Seeing as there are only a handful of authors who have inspired Estonian translators to produce more than one version of one text, this is a most remarkable success. Molière has actually several works (*The Mock Doctor*, *The School for Wives*, *The Misanthrope*, *Tartuffe*) of which two different Estonian translations exist. This puts him with Balzac, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Hugo, Maupassant and Zola. The number of versions of *The Miser* boosts him into the company of Perrault, Dumas, Verne and France.

About these writers, there is no doubt that not only have they been adopted by translators, critics, teachers and textbook writers, but they have also been read among the general public. It is quite obvious for Molière as well, since the early days when the professional theatres avoided staging his plays.

The Miser was one of the two most often staged plays of the amateur theatre clubs in the early 20th century, the other being Schiller's *The Robbers* (Kask 122). It was staged, for example, by the drama club of the bicycle society Taara that was active in Tartu from 1901 till 1905 and was led by Karl Jungholtz, who was later to be the director of two professional theatres (Kask 104). There was also a production of *The Miser* by the sobriety society Võitleja in Narva in 1917 (Kask 230) and by an amateur theatre in Kuressaare in 1919 (Tormis 257). The most attached to Molière were the Estonian drama amateurs in Saint-Petersburg: in 1902 they staged *The Mock Doc-*

tor and *The Miser*, in 1908 *The Bourgeois Nobleman* and later on again The Miser (Samoilov 65 – 71, 114).

Such popularity led unavoidably to some rather superficial interpretations and labels. In 1909, the critic Bernhard Linde complains:

> An important — important especially in the eyes of an even more important colleague — Estonian literary scholar gave a lecture about Molière at some course intended mostly for school teachers, where he spent a quarter of an hour explaining and pointing out that "you see, Moli? re is an important playwright who wrote important plays", that he has been translated into all important languages in the world, that his importance will not diminish as long as the French literature plays an important role among the important literatures of the world. Such an introductory spectacle was then followed by a reading one of Molière's "most important" works — for that purpose, a Russian translation was used, which was claimed to be even "a lot better" than the French original — and thereafter the audience was supposed to be familiar with the characteristics and specific qualities of Molière's works. (Linde 226 – 27)

While Linde's frustration with empty declarations of importance can be understood, it hardly applies to all Molière's critics of that time with justice. Even though the interpretations were neither varied nor overly concerned with the more complex aspects of Molière's drama, they pointed rather unanimously out a way to make the foreign author of a long-ago period understandable in their contemporary context: Molière was cast as a critic of society and its injustices.

Thus his work was perceived already by the critics of an early Saint-Petersburg production (Samoilov 65). Later, already in a more authoritative text — a textbook on poetics — Karl Peterson explains *Don Juan* as a play directed against nobility (Peterson 110), a position easily understood by the contemporary Estonian public, fresh from the War of Independence and about to set their score with the Baltic German barons, long-time landowners and political elite in the Baltic region. Later, in the Soviet context, the same kind of readings of Molière guaranteed him a safe place in the canon.

Although a Molière made to serve anti-German or pro-Soviet political agendas may be a somewhat limited Molière, the fact that his texts lent themselves to such interpretations undoubtedly helped with their acceptation and adoption in the Estonian literary tradition. Molière could be read as a realist author and thus incorporated to the most strongly rooted poetic paradigm. A didactical, socially active intention could be perceived in his works, which was a merit often sought after by many literary critics before the Second World War and also under the Soviet regime. The cast of characters of a classical comedy — ordinary people with rather down-to-earth problems and humour — was closer to the Estonian public than the classical tragedy, and the prose form acceptable in comedy made Molière also more accessible to the early translators.

Thus Molière has not only become a fixture in the literary tradition (even the lat-

est national curriculum still confirms his place as one of the most representative authors of the whole drama genre, of the 17th and 18th century theatre and of the French Classicism). He has also come to represent the whole classical French drama in Estonia, giving to this faraway and fundamentally foreign form of literature a reassuringly familiar face.

How to Tell the Difference between Same and Different?

What of the cultural otherness, we could ask, if foreign authors take on a familiar face? For this familiarity, achieved by various means, is the key element in all the success stories of French literature in Estonia. In a way, it is always an important element in a successful translation, of course, but in this case it seems almost intentional. Not because translators have purposefully transformed the literature they have translated, but because the purpose of many translations has been to contribute to the building of the modern Estonian literary culture.

This is hardly surprising, since the available resources for that construction work were limited: translators being at the same time writers, critics and teachers of literature is more of a rule than an exception in Estonia, even today and all the more at the time when the authors discussed above were introduced. Because of this, if nothing else, it is difficult to imagine a translator working only for some kind of locally disinterested French cause, at some point, all of them have asked (some, like Aavik, openly, others perhaps more implicitly) what the Estonian literature could gain from their effort. And so the Estonian versions of French authors, at least of those with the longest history in Estonia, are all remodeled to fit in the local literary tradition.

This, however, is the very otherness we were looking for. Estonian literature may have adopted a lot of foreign authors for its own purposes, but in so doing it has shaped itself in ways that wouldn't have been possible otherwise, and has brought up generations of readers who consider the presence of foreign authors in their basic reading repertoire as something elementary.

The Estonian Zola, Balzac, Baudelaire or Molîcre may not be similar to the French ones, or any others for that matter, but they are as inseparable from the Estonian literary culture as the originals are from the French tradition. The already quoted national curriculum gives two options for reading in order to illustrate the drama genre: Molîcre's *Tartuffe* and Andrus Kivirähk's *Voldemar* (a play about a legendary actor and director Voldmar Panso, by one of the most popular contemporary writers in Estonia). As questionable as it is academically to put the first on a par with the latter and expect inexperienced readers to find the common elements in order to understand a whole genre, it is quite beautiful symbolically. In a way, this choice is between an old playwright, whose works have been part of school reading since the beginning of Estonian-speaking secondary education, and a contemporary playwright, who has only recently been established as a textbook author. The fact that the first is a French writer and the other an Estonian one matters little, since the objective is to teach new readers how to enjoy works of literature, not to distinguish their origin.

Those already well-read enough to be interested in such distinctions have their work cut out for them, perhaps for the whole next century. It may be an interesting

challenge for today's translators, critics and literature teachers to "translate" this self-evident and familiar French literature back into the differences there actually are between Molière and Kivirähk, between Zola and Baudelaire, between naturalism and general ugliness, and between the two literatures and cultures brought together in this web of literary relations.

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