

# A Call for Love and Harmony

— On Juri Talvet's Poetry and Prose

Hu Tianfu

**Abstract** Juri Talvet is a famous modern Estonian poet and writer, whose poetry collection *Estonian Elegy* and prose *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis*, translated from Estonian into English by H. L. Hix, poet and scholar in the University of Wyoming, have been published by Canadian Independent Publishers Group. In his poems, the poet profoundly expresses his deep love for his motherland, his nation and the human race. In his prose, he appeals to the world for the cultural equality and symbiosis among different nations and cultures. He severely condemns big power's hegemony, cultural imperialism and the marginalization of the minorities, the vulnerable cultures and the poor countries, and he vehemently calls for a cultural symbiosis in the world. Consequently, these two books are very useful and necessary for the study of the writer's content, his creation concepts and for the research of the contemporary Estonian literature.

**Key words** Estonia; Juri Talvet; love; harmony; symbiosis

**Author** **Hu Tianfu** is professor at School of Foreign Languages of Nanyang Normal University (Nanyang 473061, China), specializing in Occidental literature research. E-mail: wyhtf@nynu.edu.cn

Juri Talvet is a celebrated poet and scholar of contemporary Estonia. His poetry and prose enjoy a prominent position in contemporary Estonian Literature. He is not only a poet, but has also served as a faculty member at different universities. He once acted as a translator in Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, Spain, and the United States, and gave lectures in Finland, Norway, Spain, Poland, Sweden and the Netherlands. H. L. Hix, an American scholar of University of Wyoming, translated his collection into English. Juri Talvet's collection of poems *Estonian Elegy* and the essay collections *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis*, published by Independent Canadian Publishing Group, are very important in the research of this contemporary Estonian poet. The two books have an irreplaceable role in revealing the author's deep love for mankind and his strong appeal for the loving and harmony in the contemporary world which is still full of frequent unrest and turmoil.

First, Juri Talvet is a poet and writer, filled with great compassion, whose love contains the passion for his motherland, the nation, the culture, the people as well as the love of weak nations. This kind of love is reflected in almost all of his poems. The poem translator H. L. Hix once said: "(His poem) starts at the heart of human experience, love and death, and culminates in a vision of a new Europe, indeed a new

world, vivified by that experience" (Hix 10).

In the opening poem "Believe What Signs You Like", love crosses national and ethnic and linguistic boundaries, and finally becomes a common pursuit of mankind's vast expanse and solidarity. He writes, "No matter that your ancestors/ spoke another tongue/ a tongue that now no one knows/...you spoke to me in the oldest tongue/ darker than your dark hair" (Talvet, *Estonian Elegy* 11). To him, love is powerful and conquers all.

Human sympathy and love are an eternal theme in his poetry. In September 28, 1994, one ferry called "Estonia" sank in the Baltic Sea and more than nine hundreds passengers were killed in the accident. The author was deeply grieved after hearing the catastrophic news, which reminded him of the troubled history of his motherland and the people who had experienced various vicissitudes. Estonia's history was replete with bitter events and memories. With the population of more than one million, the country had once fallen into the hands of Denmark, Sweden, and Poland respectively, and it was merged into Russia at last. When the people are going to enjoy the freedom and happiness in their newly dependent country, dereliction of duty of the officials and disasters make everything become a fantasy. People cannot enjoy the freedom and democracy that they should have deserved. He says: "Liberty should have meant warmth at last, and joy." But where is joy He writes in anger, "Had there not been enough bowing already/to German lords, scions of Vikings, Russian wags? /... And now that the people had power in its hands/why could not the feast of the body's solace last forever?" Evoking by painful memories of the past and the enslaved life of the people, his heart was full of sadness: "We found ourselves back on the snowy Siberian plains/gnawing on permafrost" (Talvet, *Estonian Elegy* 12 - 13).

In this poem, he did not only mourn the deceased and express his infinite compassion for the weak countries, but also condemned the barbaric atrocities of the Crusaders. His thoughts of ecological ethics are well reflected here. "Where was Christ / when the Knights of the Cross killed/the children of Mary's Land and raped women and girls..." (Talvet, *Estonian Elegy* 13) "early tillers, at a time when others, the stronger, consumed their neighbors,/like an insatiable swarm of grasshoppers/discovered and plundered new continents/driven by hunger/by the dark - sweet womb of a foreign woman" (Talvet, *Estonian Elegy* 14). Even so, the Estonian forgave the villainies and "an Estonian stretched his hand to a drowning Russian" (Talvet, *Estonian Elegy* 16), since the poet or the Estonian is "interested only in life" (Talvet, *Estonian Elegy* 17).

The friendship between man and man is an essential part of human love. In his long poem "From Santiago's Road", he sings "I wish love and friendship could extend our clumsy age a little longer/At once I knew I loved you infinitely/in another rain/near the heart" (Talvet, *Estonian Elegy* 53). In "21<sup>st</sup> Baltic Elegy", he expressed his unlimited grief and mourn to his deceased friend, professor and writer Ivar Ivask. He writes leniently: "Oklahoma fell silent, the Baltic froze/From Kafka's offices came glassy gentlemen/The narrowing lappets of your Irish coat closed around you/Your blue-eyed childlike festinator to the future, Ivar" (Talvet, *Estonian Elegy* 61). His poem is reminiscent of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", written by W. H.

Auden, in memory of Yeats. W. H. Auden writes in the beginning of his poem: “He disappeared in the dead of winter/The brooks were frozen/the airports almost deserted/ And snow disfigured the public statues/The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day”.<sup>1</sup>

Second, Talvet’s great love of mankind is reflected in his collection of essays *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis*. In this book, he calls for equality between nations as well as between human languages and cultures, attacks power hegemony and cultural imperialism, condemns the modern technology that has caused disastrous consequences on nature and environment, calls on the harmonious mutualism between different cultures and nations, and appeals for the spiritual sense of globalization.

In his view, all languages of the world, however small, can contribute to the process of inquiring into the meaning of our life. He does not think that only these ancient languages such as Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, ancient Germanic, etc., have the privileges to make contributions to human civilization. Western civilization did not bring happiness to mankind. In his eyes, the Western civilization seems to have reached the extreme that the material benefits which could not be imagined before have become reality now. But the sharp contrast is that many people are still living in suffering now.

For the current globalization, the author has his own unique viewpoints. He holds the view that the so-called globalization is merely nominal, which lacks true cultural exchange and interaction. There exists no cultural diversity in the world but the culture of the superpowers. While the cultures from the superpowers have been taken seriously, those from the small countries have just been ignored. The same is true with the fate of writers from small countries. Therefore, some Asian and African writers have to create their works in the so-called “international language” instead of their mother tongues. As a result, they can no longer use their mother languages to write effectively and efficiently, which in turn proves the fact that they cannot make contributions to their national cultures any longer.

Talvet expresses his care and love for the younger generations by the way of criticizing the Western films, in particular, the violence in American movies. He believes that movies, especially the description of violence in animated films, have poisoned the hearts and souls of the younger generation. He says that since the independence of Estonia, movie channels have been stuffed with American movies. And he concludes that American cartoons have sown the seeds of violence in human’s mind when they are very young (Talvet, *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis* 14). In his view, the emergence of 9.11 Event is not a coincidence but a symbolic event. It reminds people that the Western dream, which is based on exploiting “others”, whether is the natural “others” in the direct sense or human “others” that are less developed in technology and equipment, and accumulating wealth, will never last.

Does mankind really benefit a lot from modern technology In the author’s view, it is modern technology that has initiated the contemporary ecological crises and disasters. He believes that, in addition to being used to cure human loneliness and diseases, modern science and technology are tools of destruction and spreading evil on a large scale. No matter how advanced, technology cannot meet the essential human

needs, which can only be satisfied by literature and art, as literature and art are the main sources of human hope and faith. He advocates that we should be against those who stick closely to technology and those who presumptuously ruin nature for their own selfish purposes (Talvet, *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis* 10 – 11). He says that mankind introduces the natural law into human society and makes use of intelligence and technology during the process of struggling for survival, and all these turn mankind into a monster that initiates the mass destruction of nature. He condemns western philosophy, as it defends anthropocentrism which is responsible for ecological crises.

In the author's view, Norwegians are smart. They know how to treat nature friendly and how to take a low-carbon journey. “(The Norwegian) does not rush on like a profit-greedy civilized barbarian-as a tiger-but understands that the greatest progress in the world in our days can only be the preservation of life on the earth” (Talvet, *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis* 34). He speaks highly of the Norwegian government minister for his going to work by bike. In the author's words, such kind of behavior is worth following, especially in an era when consumption is advocated and people tend to show off their wealth eagerly.

He holds the idea that globalization should be different from the one that has aimed for the conquering of world since Renaissance. Instead, it should be one in romantic and spiritual sense, which can in turn protect human diversities in many aspects, such as ethnic diversity and cultural diversity.

In a word, it is clear that Talvet demonstrates to the world his philosophy of poetry and deep love for mankind in his poetry and prose. Criticizing hegemony of superpowers, cultural imperialism, and the natural destruction caused by the Western science and technology, he declares his ideas about ecological ethics. He mainly advocates a co-existence of different cultures without acculturation and elimination of individuality. He calls for a harmonious existence of different cultures in eternal dialogues. Therefore, to understand the contemporary Estonian literature, it is worthwhile reading those works by Talvet.

### 【Note】

1. For the e-text of Auden's poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”, log onto the website, <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15544>.

### 【Works Cited】

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