Literature and Culture of a "Peripheral" Nation, Estonia

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Following the publication in *FWLS* (Vol. 2, No. 3, 2010) of a first cluster of essays centred on the historical outlines and the projection into English of Estonian poetry, as well as on the reception of French literature in Estonia, the representation of Estonian literature in *FWLS* will now be expanded.

Liina Lukas's treatment of the historical reception of German literature in Estonia inevitably highlights one of the most crucial facets of the historical past of our small nation in the European North-Eastern "periphery". It has determined almost exclusively the birth circumstances of our national culture and still, until the present day, is casting shadows on our existence. Since 2004 a member nation of the European Union, the present-day Estonia enjoys all liberties the Western-type market economy and political democracy has been able to conceive and put into practice. However, I believe interiorly we still remain a strongly self-centred and vulnerable community. The historical wounds and scars, caused by the long centuries of slavery and foreign domination, still seem to linger on in our deeper conscience. We have sometimes been compared with our closest Finno-Ugrian kin-nation, the Finns, with whom we certainly share quite a few psychological features. Yet there is a basic difference, as the Finnish people in their past under the Swedes never suffered from the humiliating condition of serfdom, while even as part of the Russian tsarist empire, they enjoyed a considerable social and cultural autonomy.

As a small nation we, Estonians, have been extremely dependent on our mighty historical neighbours. Their long-time domination in Estonia explains our late national "awakening" along the 19th century and the belated as well as scarce projection of our literature outside the frontiers of our language. Whereas some of our musicians, like Arvo Pärt, have become world-famous, and also the work of Yuri M. Lotman (1922 – 1993) — the Russian-Jewish semiotic philosopher who lived and taught after WWII

in Tartu —, is widely known in international intellectual circles, Estonian literature still has to be discovered by the broader world community.

Liina Lukas is right in mentioning that until the first quarter of the 20th century and even during the years of our first short political independence (1918 – 1940) Estonians felt the language and culture of the Germans almost as our own (as all our educated people knew well German). It really might be one of the reasons why Goethe's *Faust* — according to Georg Brandes, the "touchstone" of a nation's cultural maturity — was translated in the fully acceptable aesthetic form into Estonian quite late, only in the second half of the 20th century.

However, translation as a means of cultural communication and dialogue can also bear a negative connotation, especially as applied to small national communities. It can easily become a tool of acculturation. Juhan Liiv (1864 – 1913), a major Estonian lyrical poet and thinker whose work after a long delay has recently been introduced in English translation, wrote a poem in which he claimed that translation — "a coffin", as he called it — breaks down the imaginative force of a young nation and suffocates its creative capacity.

One can often observe in different cultures, not only in Estonia, how in a writer's lifetime he /she is highly acclaimed for bringing into a national literature new trends. However, as soon as his/her work is viewed in a wider European or world literature context, the novelty pales, and there is little ground for hopes that it could catch any special attention beyond a determined language-restricted cultural area.

For that reason it is not surprising at all that, instead, one has to look for some permanent value transcending national frontiers above all in those works whose authors most consciously rebelled in their lifetime against currents and trends reaching from "centres", or the cultures of big dominant nations. Thus one of the greatest novelties of the main work of the founder of Estonian literature, F. R. Kreutzwald, in his philosophic-patriotic epic *Kalevipoeg* (1861) is that the he did not rely on any well-known verse patterns originating from Western Europe, but wrote the epic in the trochaic metre characteristic of Finno-ugric folksong. He had it indeed in common with Elias Lönnrot, the author of the Finnish epic *Kalevala* (1835 – 1849) , but in the content Kreutzwald differed substantially from Lönnrot: his epic is not so much a conveyor of ancient folk tradition, but a truly philosophic work, created in the same spiritually fertile romantic atmosphere as Goethe's *Faust* (1808-1833). As the result, one could claim that at least since the end of the 19th century Estonians were not in an urgent need of a foreign translated work carrying a major philosophic message: they themselves had a European chef-d'oeuvre created directly in their own language, Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg*! They could afford to delay translating *Faust*...

At the same time it is true that without the help of an early translation of

Kalevipoeg in a major European language, the fame of the epic could have been deferred for long years, beyond its author's lifetime. Estonian literature and literary criticism did not exist at that time. Contributions from outside Estonia, duly appreciating the work, were an urgent need. They gradually emerged thanks to the fact that the epic was published first in the proceedings of Estonian Learned Society (*Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft*) with a parallel translation in German. A full Russian translation of Kreutzwald's epic appeared in1886, while in 1900 a new, more advanced German translation followed. By today, Kreutzwald's epic, written in twenty songs, has full translations in a dozen of European languages, the most recent being a second English translation (2011). In 2012, its first translation in a non-European language was published — *Kalevputra*, in Hindi.

Passing on to the topic of the grotesque, treated in the article by Anneli Mihkelev, indeed, as she well demonstrates, the grotesque has been a constant feature in Estonian literature. As far as I can conclude from the experience of European literary and artistic history, the grotesque in its most ambivalent and expressive mood has emerged, first and foremost, from existentially conditioned historical circumstances. It has been a form of protest, a radical reaction to some of the most deformed aspects of society. It has never been deprived of existential anguish. This is true of the work of nearly all greatest masters of the grotesque in European culture — Franēois Villon, Franēois Rabelais, Francisco de Quevedo, Francisco Goya, Jonathan Swift, Ramón Marķa del Valle-Inclįn.

To all probability also in Estonian literature the most successful examples of the grotesque can be found in works created during the Soviet Russian era, dominated by alienated power. The grotesque emerged from an existential limit situation. Its aim was to oppose social and human alienation. Aesthetically, the grotesque pattern could have been foretold by the work of Franz Kafka and Mikhail Bulgakov (whose novel *Master and Margarita*, with its wittily ambiguous-fantastic images disturbing the rhythm of a rigidly totalitarian society was immensely popular in the late Soviet period in Estonia).

On the contrary, when the grotesque employed by a writer moves apart from existentiality, it easily tends to exhaust its imagery and is likely to degenerate into a mere entertainment. In the case of larger narratives, the final effect of the grotesque hardly escapes other general factors which usually determine a novel's success. Estonian novel originates from the end of the 19th century, dominated in Europe by realism and naturalism. Also in the Soviet period, realism was officially praised in literature, while Western modernist and experimental novel was declared unacceptable. In that background one can observe the poetics of realism still strongly conditioning and maybe also inhibiting Estonian novel. Estonian novels more than

often lack narrative and compositional skills demonstrated by major Western novel writers of the 20th century. To all probability the best achievements of Estonian authors can be found in short or medium-size fiction. Some of its best examples, including those of the grotesque (like Arvo Valton's short prose) have indeed been translated into some of the international languages.

Finally, I will make some observations about Estonian drama and theatre after the reestablishment of the country's political independence (1991). Their main features have been comprehensively resumed in her article by Luule Epner, the founder of theatrical studies at Tartu University. I feel intrigued by her claim about Madis Kõiv's "highly original thinking" in his dramatic work. A foreign reader of her article might ask: what are the proofs that you have such an original thinker-playwright in Estonia? Can I access some of his work in translation?

Alas, the sad reality is that the bulk of the so called post-dramatic theatre effervescence in Estonia, with all its enthusiastic aspirations and experiments, seems to be destined to remain an exclusively national phenomenon. Not a single work of Madis Kõiv has been translated into foreign languages. The trend of fragmentation and separation is obviously enhanced by postmodern theatre theories, which lay an important accent on detaching theatre performances from written dramatic texts. The key role in conceptualizing theatrical performances, according to these theories, should be played by stage directors. As great philosophers hardly abound among the latter, especially in smaller countries, stage directors inevitably have to look for support in theatrical theories conceived in the "centres". As the result, a vicious circle is formed: everybody is doing more or less the same, with scarce chance for a genuinely original theatre, which, to all probability should still depart from an individual creative and existential experience.

Madis Kõiv's drama indeed reflects existential experience from the author's younger days, coinciding with the last world war and the after-war years in Estonia. However, a fact worth of a serious analysis remains: outside Estonia, the Estonian after-war historical experience is not at all represented by the dramatic work by Kõiv but instead by texts created originally in the Finnish language by a younger writer of a mixed Estonian-Finnish origin, Sofi Oksanen (b. 1977). Since she gained the important Finlandia Prize for her novel *Puhdistus* (*Purge*, 2008) her work has enjoyed a considerable international success. By now *Puhdistus* has been translated into nearly forty languages... Indeed, as formerly a student of Helsinki's Theatre Academy, Oksanen first wrote a play with the same title. Recently, it has been successfully staged in New York and London. Her experience of the Stalinist years in Estonian is not based on a personal experience, as she was not born in 1977, long after that grim period ended. However, presenting the post-war Estonian everyday reality intertwined

with ideological and historical accents, roughly in the manner of social realism, her work has reached a wide international public.

One may ask if "post-dramatic" experiment has not become exhausted, to make theatre once again move closer to its ancient origins, it symbiosis with drama?

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