

# Minority Language Writers in the Era of Globalization: Officialism, Fashion and Resistance

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**Abstract** In the present essay I will continue to develop some of the ideas related to cultural globalization issues in my books *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis* (Toronto: Guernica, 2005) and *Ten Letters to Montaigne: "Self" and "Other"* (forthcoming in English in 2016 at Červena Barva Press, USA; in Estonian: *Kümme kirja Montaigne'ile. "Ise" ja "teine,"* Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2014), as well as in several of my recent articles (thus e. g. "Culture in the European East-Baltic Periphery: Embarrassed Coexistence of Fashion, Officialism and Resistance. The Estonian Case of K. J. Peterson," *Interlitteraria* 20/1, 2015:7-22). For my ideas I have found continuous support and inspiration in the ideas of some of the outstanding literary and cultural thinkers of Eastern Europe, like Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri M. Lotman, in the work of European "creative humanists" of the Renaissance and Baroque era (Erasmus, Montaigne, Cervantes, Calderón, among others) and some early philosophically minded writers of my own "peripheral" nation, Estonia (thus, the first Estonian poet K. J. Peterson (1801-1822), the creator of the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg*, F. R. Kreutzwald (1803- 1882) and the poet-thinker Juhan Liiv (1864-1913).

**Key words** Officialism; fashion; resistance; world literature; postmodernism; active and passive canon of world literature; minority and peripheral language literatures

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Is cultural globalization, running in parallel with the present-day powerful

economic globalization, a fatal process that cannot be halted? I do not think the question is in halting it. As far as I can see it, resistance would rather mean an effort to reduce its negative, spiritually paralyzing effects, as well as to awaken ever wider parts of the world community to a new sensibility and conscience.

The final “products” of economic globalization and the price the humanity has to pay for it, start to be more and more visible. Science and technology are apparently innocent, because they are capable of equally contributing to morally positive as well as negative processes. However, the recent history of humanity provides abundant proofs that science, once astutely manipulated by evil conscience — ever led by profit-orientated business — has prevalingly become a faithful accomplice in destroying the balance of the biosphere and menacing life on the earth. This is the main topic of the novel *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (*Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, 1992) by the Danish writer Peter Høeg (b. 1957). I would call it “postmodern resistance.” The novel is beyond doubt influenced by aesthetic moods brought about since postmodern philosophy started to spread in the 1980s: its plot and narrative development include elements of adventure, science fiction and crime story close to the models of different species of mass literature. — in apparent opposition (approved by some postmodern theories) to elitist vanguard literature of the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the novel is not at all meant for a reading public “specialized” in any particular kind of fiction flourishing in the present-day book-market. It has a strong nucleus of ethical criticism, which at the same time is supported by aesthetic search of poetical images capable of transmitting the message of the novel to the widest possible audience.

My other example of “postmodern resistance” is a novel by even younger writer, Carlos Ruiz Zafón (b. 1964), *La sombra del viento* (*The Shadow of the Wind*, 2001). More lavishly than Høeg, the Spanish writer employs motives and narrative means praised by postmodern literary theory: meta-fiction, fantasy, the supernatural, crime, retro-narrative, adventure. Yet the nucleus of ethical criticism is kept together despite the bizarre postmodern narrative palimpsest: similarly with Høeg, Ruiz Zafón makes an introspection of the anonymous roots of the evil in any society. In his particular case, it is embodied by a political-ideological right-wing dictatorship, as was General Franco's regime in Spain after the Civil War and WWII. In Høeg's novel, the anonymous evil is represented by a secret alliance of big business and science. It is much less visible to ordinary people than political-ideological dictatorships, and it can perfectly achieve its goals in a democratic society. However, the roots of dictatorship are the same, be it in politics, ideology, commerce or economy. It is predominantly the concentration of power in the

hands of a minority of males in the name of material profit and other privileges of their “own kind.” In all cases, whatever the skills of their propaganda machines in creating images of nobleness, suppressing and humiliating the “other,” destroying nature, alienating people from culture as well as from free thinking are features that form the essence of any dictatorship, either harsh or weak, right or left wing, ideological or commercial.

At the same time, as is the case of Peter Høeg, Ruiz Zafón complements his skills of developing the narrative by interpolating in his novel a long series of poetical images. I would claim it makes the difference between world literature and World Literature (in the latter case abbreviated in the following as WL). For mass literature it suffices to learn external skills of narration, follow the fashionable, imitate a pattern destined to a particular group of readers. On the contrary, the works overwhelmingly admitted in the canon of WL have been characterized by a search of original philosophical-aesthetic creative symbiosis.

As for the inter-relationship of the predictable (fashionable) and the unpredictable (original) in a literary work, I guess its germ was theoretically spotted quite a long time ago by Yuri M. Lotman (1922-1993). At the start of the 1970s Lotman introduced the notions of “paradigmatics” and “syntagmatics,” as the basic modeling-structural compounds of a literary work. “Syntagmatic” patterns rely on logically developing and arranged sequences and are more typical of prose works, while “paradigmatic” quality is intrinsic above all in poetry, being represented by repetitions, which often form the core of aesthetic-philosophical image.<sup>1</sup> Lotman’s theoretical thinking of his last period, twenty years later, in a way returned to the interaction of “syntagmatics” and “paradigmatics.” He introduced the notion of “semiosphere,” which above all could be interpreted as the intersection zone of “noosphere” and “biosphere.” While in the “noospheric” territory the processes tend to be predictable, in the “semiosphere” small or big “explosions” take place, capable of leading as if by “leaps” to new qualities and corresponding signs representing them.<sup>2</sup>

Four centuries before Lotman’s theoretical discourse, the creative intuition and philosophy of Miguel de Cervantes led him to similar conclusions, as regards the dichotomy and the opposition of mass literature and vanguard literature. He would never deny that the novels and stories of chivalry — in their full vogue in the days of the Renaissance —, had their powerful magical embryo in intertwining love and adventure. However, Cervantes who in parallel with the child of his fancy, Don Quixote, was well informed of most novels of chivalry written in Spain along the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, perfectly understood that even the mythical, once

it started to expand in predictable narrative patterns, would easily tend to lose its magic. It had to be revitalized by contact with concrete historical-physical reality. In his *Novelas ejemplares* and in a number of chapters of *Don Quixote* Cervantes demonstrated how a skilful and talented writer could intercept the “syntagmatics” of the narrative span by unexpected images mixing the real and the imaginative, as well as by unpredictable swifts from one plane of the fiction to another, from one point of view to another, from a timeless myth to a bodily tangible temporal reality. All these narrative and imaginative skills converged in the total image of *Don Quixote*, provoking a genuine “explosion” and a long “leap” in the historical art of the novel.

It is quite clear that one cannot expect such extraordinary “explosions,” as in *Don Quixote* or, let us say, in *Cien años de soledad* by the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, to take place in any successful and applauded novel. Yet it is equally certain that a search for a symbiosis of aesthetic and philosophic novelty goes on in our contemporary World Literature, beyond a more comfortable handicraft fiction destined to a specialized mass public, with all its variety of sub-species.

To understand better the functioning of the WL canon, I have divided it into three categories. In the “active” canon there are writers whose work is more or less permanently discussed in international literary criticism. Their work is constantly re-edited. Research on it departs both from the “inside” and the “outside” of their respective cultures of origin. It is at the same time an undeniable truth that the overwhelming majority of such writers proceed from the language area of English, French, Spanish, German, and to a somewhat lesser extent, of Italian and Russian, that means, from the languages not only used by and accessible to a considerably large communities of people in the world, but also from the areas that in the modern age have been identified as political-economic or cultural “centers.” Asian countries like India and China have huge population, however, for the Western “centers,” let alone the Western own “periphery” of minor language communities, Asian literature would still sound quite peripheral. Thus, to give an example, while the work of all major writers of the Western canon of WL have been translated into Estonian (my own native language spoken scarcely by one million people), a lonely modern Chinese novel (Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum*) and an equally solitary modern Korean novel (Hahn Moo-Sook’s *History Flows*) have found their way into Estonian. Japanese novel writers have fared somewhat better.

Outside the “centric” area, literatures and writers of the vast world “cultural-linguistic” periphery have had more importantly their share in the “passive” canon

of WL. This canon is built up by authors whose work despite not being in the center of active discussion of international scholarship, is still at least sporadically present and visible in international dictionaries and histories of literature. The data about them has been forwarded to the compilers of international dictionaries and histories predominantly by the national “agents” of literature, that is, by scholars belonging to the respective national-linguistic area.

Now let me briefly mention some concrete examples of my native Estonian literature. Even though Estonian literature indeed represents a very tiny cultural “periphery,” I do not think the basic elements of its paradigm would differ from those derived from larger “peripheries.”

My three examples include first the poems by Kristian Jaak Peterson (1801-1822), unanimously considered in Estonia the first outstanding autochthonous poet; secondly, the founding work of Estonian literature, the epic *Kalevipoeg* (1861) by F. R. Kreutzwald (1803-1882) and the lyrical-philosophic poetry by Juhan Liiv (1864-1913).

In the recent years I have dealt in a greater detail with these authors, with some fruits of my research available besides Estonian also in English.<sup>3</sup>

Some of our Estonian contemporary musicians have been acclaimed worldwide, thus especially the composer Arvo Pärt. Yet music has its clear advantages over literature, as far as intercultural reception is concerned. It indeed depends on interpretation, but not on translation from one natural language into another. Even though quite a few Estonian contemporary writers have been lucky enough to have their work translated into foreign languages, I do not think any of them belongs as yet to the active canon of WL. Neither have we had in the past such worldwide influential authors and works as in some national-ethnic cultures not far from us in the geophysical sense, but having quite a different history and also more numerous population than Estonia. Let me mention Henrik Ibsen in Norway, August Strindberg in Sweden, H. C. Andersen in Denmark, the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, by Elias Lönnrot.

When Peterson and Kreutzwald wrote their poetic works, Estonian literature and culture did not exist as yet. The parents of both writers had been serfs. The countryside was ruled by Baltic-German landlords, with the consent of the tsarist Russian imperial regime. Peterson was among the first autochthonous Estonian students at the University of Tartu, where most students and nearly all professors were in those times Germans, Russians or Scandinavians. Science was encouraged, but Estonian national ideas were crushed in the bud by the regime. Peterson could never see published his Estonian poems. Kreutzwald was compelled to publish his

*Kalevipoeg*, a thoroughly patriotic epic filled with his own philosophical ideal of a free and cultured Estonian nation, under the camouflage of authentic folklore, in the proceedings of the *Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft*. In the form of a book, the epic was really published for the first time in Kuopio, Finland, where the tsarist censorship was less harsh than in Estonia.

Thus Estonian literature emerged through a number of difficulties along the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in a permanent opposition to ideological and cultural officialism, which flatly rejected any manifestation of national-autochthonous culture. It goes without saying that the first important works of our literature, those of Peterson and Kreutzwald, represented ideological resistance in its most heroic form.

I would also mention here the basic factors that from the very beginning of *Kalevipoeg*'s publication favored its survival despite biased interpretations and manipulations from the "inside" of Estonia. First, the epic in Estonian appeared in the proceedings of the *Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft* (1857-1861) with a parallel translation in German (by C. Reinthal and G. Schultz). Even though the translation could hardly convey the rhythm of the Finno-Ugric traditional meter, employed in Kreutzwald's work, it still enabled at least an elementary access to it from "outside." The first significant appreciation of the work came from St. Petersburg: its academy of sciences, responding to the proposal of the Baltic-German academicians living in Estonia, F. J. Wiedemann and F. A. Schiefner, awarded Kreutzwald its Demidov prize in 1860 (thus, even before the publication of the work in its entirety was concluded!).

Following these important premises for the epic's international repercussion, an abbreviated adaptation of *Kalevipoeg* (by P. Rasmussen) appeared in Copenhagen in 1878, while in 1886 its first Russian (prose) translation (by J. Trusman) was published in Reval (Tallinn). At the turn of the century a new German translation (by F. Löwe) followed (also published in Reval). Of the publications of the epic outside Estonia an early full Hungarian translation (by B. Aladár, Budapest, 1928) and a Latvian translation (by E. Zalite, Riga, 1929) stand out.

By today, Kreutzwald's chef-d'oeuvre *Kalevipoeg* in its full verse form (in 20 cantos) has been translated into thirteen languages of the world. There are two translations in English (by J. Kurman, 1982, Moorestown, USA, 1982; by T. Kartus, Tartu-Tallinn, 2011), while A. Chalvin's French translation was published by Gallimard in Paris. F. Löwe's German translation was reedited in 2004 (Stuttgart-Berlin) and a first translation in an Asian language, Hindi (by V. Khare, 2012) appeared in Delhi.

Such a wide translation geography expanding over more than a hundred years — in the face of aesthetic fashions, officialist passions and the current globalization — should be viewed in my opinion as the surest guarantee of our *Kalevipoeg*'s honorable position at least in the “passive” canon of WL. The fact proves that the epic's value transcends the merely sociological or the ideological.

As for the work of the other two Estonian poets from the past, Peterson and Liiv, they have been highly esteemed within their own ethnic-linguistic community, but for different reasons substantial translations into other languages — thus the most elementary premise for their intercultural reception — have been few. Peterson's work, besides, is extremely scarce in its volume.

However, I am glad to say that in this new century the poetic work of both Peterson and Liiv has revealed symptoms of a renewed dynamics in its interpretation and translation.

During a whole century after his early death in 1822 Peterson was appreciated in Estonia exclusively as a learned man, with his notable contributions to the research of Nordic mythology and the Estonian language. Along the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his figure as the first Estonian poet gradually emerged. However, our scholarship has until recently experienced difficulty in interpreting and identifying the versification forms used by Peterson in his mostly pastoral poems, odes and eclogues. The main point of puzzle has been that while the tradition of Estonian “cultured” poetic tradition since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century relied overwhelmingly on different end-rhyme patterns, Peterson wrote his poems exclusively without applying any end-rhymes!

The conclusion emerging from some recent comparative research<sup>4</sup> is that Peterson was among the early introducers in Western poetics of free verse without end-rhymes, while his particular contribution were odes created in a kind of “slender verse” (Undusk's term), with the number of syllables varying from 5 to 7 in a verse line, as well as with abundant use of *enjambements*. Peterson rejected classical Greek and Roman mythology of the Western poetic “centers.” Instead, he sought to rely on holistic nature philosophy and the idea of “Nordic-ethnic identity” of creation. He praised the beauty of the Estonian language and confirmed his faith in its future. In his ideals, all languages and cultures, big and small in equal rights, would contribute to world's cultural symbiosis and dialogue. In this context, his ode “Kuu” (“The Moon”) can be read as emblematical:

#### The Moon

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

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

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

Then I will sing to you,  
the stars of a clear  
blue sky, looking with joy  
from the earth  
to the high fatherland:  
then I will sing to you,  
king of the night, the moon!  
You who in the lap of clouds,  
like a flower from its bud  
with a merry white face,  
rise under the skies,  
where hot stars

are falling to the earth  
 from before you  
 into the black and gloomy mist. —  
 Thus you, human spirit,

are swimming in the mist,  
 as your thought is seeking  
 God from below the stars.

(Trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix)<sup>5</sup>

Juhan Liiv spent his life in elementary poverty and was sporadically troubled since 1893 by mental illness (a kind of schizophrenia). He never had a typewriter nor published a book of poems of his own selection. His poetry canon in Estonian was established posthumously by some younger writers. Until recently, it was generally thought that his poetry was untranslatable into other languages.

As I have tried to show in my recent research, based on manuscripts and all existing publications, Liiv was not only a great poet, but also an outstanding poet-philosopher. Both his nature and patriotic imagery emerges from the sense of the unity of all living world and at the same time from a painful admittance of the limits imposed to the existence of individuals as well as of nations. He rejected radically officialism and hated aesthetic fashions. To apply terms coined long after his lifetime, Liiv would be perhaps closest to existentialism and holism.

When with the American poet and philosopher Harvey L. Hix we prepared the first book-long selections of Liiv's poetry in English translation (thus, *Meel paremat ei kannata. The Mind Would Bear No Better*, Tartu 2007; *Snow Drifts, I Sing*, Toronto, 2013) we certainly did not have any great illusions that our humble Estonian poet's creation would be immediately recognized and applauded as such in the wider world. However, some of the first repercussions of these publications have been surprising. Especially two of Liiv's poems in our translation, "Leaves Fell" and "Music," first published in the US magazine *Poetry* (June 2011) have indeed attracted worldwide attention and interest. Suffice to say that "Leaves Fell" has been reproduced and echoed with commentaries in more than thirty English-language internet blogs and web-pages. Even without the support of international literary criticism our "peripheral" poet has been spontaneously recognized as belonging to the front line of great poets of the world...

“Leaves Fell”

A gust of wind roused the waves,  
leaves blew into the water,  
the waves were ash-grey,  
the sky lead-grey,  
ash-grey the autumn.

It was good for my heart:  
there my feelings were ash-grey,  
the sky lead-grey,  
ash-grey the autumn.

The breath of wind brought cooler air,  
the waves of mourning brought separation:  
autumn and autumn  
befriend each other.

(In Estonian 1897; trans. J. Talvet and H. L. Hix; in Liiv 30-31)

Since long a great number of Liiv’s poems have been tuned to songs by Estonian composers. Several of them have been sung by choirs at Estonian traditional song festivals. Following our English translation of Liiv’s poems, American composer Timothy Takach has taken vivid interest in Liiv’s lyrical work and his philosophic message thus, Takach’s musical work “Su rahva koda” sung by an American choir<<http://www.timothytakach.com/Works/SuRahvaKoda.html>>.

As in the past epochs, it is still very hard for writers of the linguistic-cultural “periphery” to become visible in the world literary arena. Yet the great sign of hope is the remarkable activation of the “periphery” itself. I cannot claim with surety that it is necessarily a concomitant feature of globalization, but my impression is that in this new century the “periphery” is gradually overcoming its submissiveness to the Western “centers” and making ever bolder heard its own voice in the world, both in literary theory and literary practice.

## Notes

1. Yuri M. Lotman, *Analiz poetitsheskogo teksta* (Leningrad: Prosvestshenie, 1972) 39.
2. Lotman, Yuri M. *Kul'tura i vzryv*. (Moskva: Progress, 1992).

3. Thus Jüri Talvet, „Constructing a Mythical Future City for a Symbiotic Nation from the European Periphery: F. R. Kreutzwald’s Epic *Kalevipoeg*.” *Interlitteraria* 14/2 (2009): 84-103; “The Universe of the Mind of a Poet: Juhan Liiv’s Philosophy and Poetics.” *Interlitteraria* 16/1(2011): 103-122; “Culture in the European East-Baltic Periphery: Embarrassed Coexistence of Fashion, Officialism and Resistance. The Estonian Case of K. J. Peterson.” *Interlitteraria* 20/1 (2015): 7-22.
4. In Estonian, see Jaan Undusk, “Eesti Pindaros. K. J. Petersoni oodide vaimuloolisest taustast.” *Keel ja Kirjandus* 1 (2012): 11-29; 2 (2012): 103-122; in English, Jüri Talvet (2015).
5. The present translation in English was published for the first time in *Forum for World Literature Studies* Vol. 2, No. 3 (2010): 471-472.

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