

VARIA

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The Estonian Association of Comparative Literature (EACL) held its biannual conference for the thirteenth time at the Department of Literature and Theatrical Studies of the University of Tartu between September 29 and October 1, 2019. The conference was held in homage to Gustav Suits, the first chaired professor of literature of the University of Tartu, and an Estonian poet. The international conference was supported by the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Tartu, Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, Estonian Cultural Endowment, and Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies. This year the topic of the conference was “The Current State of Literary Theory, Research and Criticism in (Non-“Centric”) National Cultures” and thus the tradition of addressing issues related to interaction between centric and non-centric literatures and cultures was efficiently maintained.

During the two working days participants from around twenty countries discussed questions connected with national literary theory traditions, teaching literary theories, and the application of literary theories in practice. The most discussed literary theories turned out to lie in the sphere of translation and reception, studies of literary identity, and historical discourse in national literatures.

A group of talks was united by an attempt to establish a link between literary theory and literature or, more broadly, culture. Scholars turned to the literature of

Lithuania, France, Russia, Estonia, and Cuba, and connected it to the current trends in philosophy, sociology, and psychology. **Ausra Jurgutiene** (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Lithuania) in her paper “Some Comments on Literary Theory in Nowadays Lithuania” gave a broad picture of Lithuanian literary journals, anthologies of literary translations, and associations. Ausra identified the key challenges that Lithuanian literary studies face nowadays, among which are disputes over ways of teaching literature, the positions of “small” literatures, the accurate translation of theoretical works, and the critical attitude to outdated dogmas. **Francesca Manzari** (University of Rome “La Sapienza”, Italy) gave a talk “On a Peripheral Theory of Love”, in which she analysed the 13th century Tuscan poetry, i.e. its philosophic implications. Using Giorgio Agamben’s research into the poetry, Francesca outlined the relations between knowledge, philosophy and poetry in Western culture. The 13th century was shown as a demarcation line, after which ‘knowledge and word’ were separated, which gave an impetus to literary studies thriving, where the “word” became an object of knowledge.

Raili Marling (University of Tartu, Estonia) delivered the paper “Traveling Theory Reimagined: Feminist Literary Theory in Estonia”, which identified the place of Estonian feminist literary theory in the Anglo- and American-centric reality of today. Distinguishing between international and local feminist theory, Raili stressed that feminism is not a cosmopolitan, but rather an imperialistic theory. Thus, in the constantly changing political world, feminism is a ‘traveling theory’. In the 1990s western feminists went east to spread their ideas, but met strong oppositions. However, they were not only rejected, but also appealed to the public, which created hybridized, or creolized systems. In Estonia, Raili Marling argues, such a situation can be observed. What we see is a lack of local engagement with the theory, and feminism in Estonia exists in a state of practicing and isolation.

Vera Meniailo (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia) summarized the theory of foregrounding developed by the Russian scholar Irina Arnold in the late 20th century in her paper “I.V. Arnold’s Theory of Foregrounding and its Application to Text Analysis”. The theory stands on the grounds that key elements of the text (such as title, key words etc.) are always intentional and thus should be considered first in order to objectively disclose the author’s message. Vera illustrated the relevance of this theory to contemporary text analysis by the material of her own research, in which she applied principles of foregrounding to the analysis of key concepts in John Fowles’ novels. The paper “Genre Studies in Russian Literary Research: Current Challenges and Needs” by **Natalia Tuliakova** (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia) outlined the major achievements of Russian scholars in developing genre theory and identified some pitfalls, which result from the lack of a comparative perspective.

Kaisa Ling (University of Tartu, Estonia) spoke on “The Perpetuation of Neo-baroque in Theory and in Practice”, namely, on Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, and Severo Sarduy, the Cuban authors of Neo-Baroque poetics theory, and how their ideas concerning the nature of the language were reflected in their novels. Literary texts referred to as ‘neo-baroque’ are first and foremost “difficult, confusing, convoluted, and controversial” as they highlight the role of language and form in creating a literary world. **Anne-Marie Le Bailiff** (independent researcher, France) discussed the status of Paris as a literary capital in her talk “Paris, ‘un lieu centre de tous les centres’ est-ce toujours d’actualité?”. Applying the ideas of the recently deceased Pascale Casanova, Anne-Marie identified the reasons for changes of the Paris status, among which are new methods of writing and a different type of relationships between writers, readers, and publishers, which dictates a new balance of forces in the writing – readership – publishing triangle.

As it has been already mentioned, theories of translation and reception gained much attention during the conference, starting with the plenary speech “L’Essence éthique du dialogue culturel” given by **Ladislav Franek** (Slovak Academy of Sciences), who stressed the importance of literature as a means of establishing and maintaining cultural dialogue in the contemporary world. **Harvi Lee Hix** (University of Wyoming, USA) in the paper “Aspects of Current Literary-Critical Discourse” focused on what he defined as the ‘translation inertia’ that equally finds a place in translations of the Bible and in political slogans. He stressed the importance of world literature and close attention to words, the meanings of which change over time. As it is impossible to secure the meaning of any text, literary studies help to overcome these challenges. **Lora Tamošiūnienė** (Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania) argued in her speech “Translating Nature Excerpts” that translation could emphasize the importance of such elements of a text that are often left unnoticed by contemporary readers and even scholars. Nature scenes descriptions are among such deprived elements. However, analysis of nature excerpts translations shows that certain landscapes tend to be ‘translated’ consistently.

Susanna Soosaar’s (University of Tartu, Estonia) paper “The Relevance of the Reading Experience” gave an overview of Reader-Response theories, looking more closely at Wolfgang Iser’s and Stanley Fish’s ideas. Then Susanna described how the theories were translated into Estonian and gave tribute to the most significant Estonian researchers in the field – Jaanus Vaiksoo, who stated that a generation has a collective way of reading, and Johanna Ross, who suggested several models of reading the Soviet Estonian *Bildungsroman*. Drawing on the same culture, in the paper “La crise de l’attention et la critique dans la société contemporaine hypermédiate” **Tanel Lepsoo** (University of Tartu, Estonia) dwelt on the role of literature and arts in the modern world characterized by its attention

crisis. Drawing on the analysis of Reed Morn's prose and the ideas articulated by Lionel Ruffel and Yves Citton, Tanel asserted that art is a mediascape that helps the reader to find shelter, and at the same time to enter different ethnoscapas and be for a while a part of a different identity.

Identity was another key question discussed during the conference. Different aspects of identity (national, gender, social and even literature identity) were analyzed by participants from China, India, Lebanon, France and Hungary. Several speakers shared their ideas on double identities, be they of readers, scholars, or literary characters. **Kai Yung Lee** (University of Hong Kong, China) gave a talk on "Grappling with Contrasting Identities", in which she outlined the reasons for double identities emergence, challenges associated with them and ways of tackling them. **Lu Jinjin** (Masaryk University, Czech Republic) shared her dual experience of research in Australia and China in the paper titled "Cinderella and Pandora's Box: Auto-Ethnographic Reflections on My Early Career Trajectory between Australia and China". Using metaphoric images of Cinderella and Pandora, Jinjin dwelt on the obstacles to the career of a female bilingual in a multicultural surrounding. This experience resulted in a series of auto-ethnographic reflections, which the scholar briefly described in her talk, expressing the hope that this narrative would help readers to re-evaluate cultural stereotypes about Westerners and Asians. **Kuber Nag** (Indian Institute of Technology, India) discussed "Writing in the Vernacular: Asserting Dalit Identity in Odia Dalit Literature?", analysing Dalit identity, repressed due to its marginal status, but established through the process of writing, because literature can help to improve the situation as reading requires sympathetic identification with the protagonist.

Several papers covered the topic of writers' national identity. **Renáta Balázs'** (Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary) paper "Writing of Contemporary National Literary History in Finland and Hungary – a Comparative Approach" compared the representation of literary history in two countries with a cognate language, Hungary and Finland. What unites them is belonging to minor cultures, hence a necessity to connect to major literary histories. In addition, the scholar presented a productive model of the cultural gravitation developed by Melinda Szarvas, which can explain the shifting relations between major and minor cultures. As for Finnish literary history, it is complicated by the debated question of what it is to be a Finnish writer. Does it mean writing in Finnish, living in Finland, having Finnish citizenship? The answer dictates the model of literary history, e.g. in the 2013 book *Finnish literature (Suomen nykykirjallisuus)*, where one chapter is wholly devoted to migrant literature. **Sara Bédard-Goulet** (University of Tartu, Estonia) talked about "Litteratures migrantes: Concept from an Excentric Literary Field", which addressed the concept of migrant literature and its realization in the largely multicultural Canadian-Quebec literature, as opposed to French and Canadian

literatures. Sara characterized Quebec literature as a ‘hybridity movement’. The typical features she identified were the topic of displacement, specific forms that tend to be autobiographical, and hybrid texts. The scholar also emphasized the necessity to connect migrant literature to the related concepts of ethnic literature, immigration literature, exile literature, diaspora literature, emigration literature, cosmopolitanism and nomadism. **Lucía Caminada Rossetti** (independent researcher, Argentina) in the talk titled “How we Read Argentinian Literature as Part of the Latin-American One? Debates, Characteristics and Dialogues” asked to what extent it is reasonable to see Argentine literature within the context of Latin-American literature. What is Latin-American literature as a whole and how representative is the literature of Argentina?

Another two papers looked at the identity issue in the oeuvre of particular authors. In the paper “Aesthetic perspectives and the critique de Emilia Pardo Bazán: Naturalism in *La tribuna*” **Dolores Thion-Soriano** (University of Nantes, France) discussed the Spanish writer in the context of European and Spanish naturalism. Bazán’s Obras imbued Spanish cultural traditions, scientific method, and feministic views. **Laure Zarif Keyrouz’s** (University of Trieste, Italy) “Representation of Places within the Literature and Art of Etel Adnan in the Two Books *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* and *Of Cities & Women (letters to Fawwaz)*” analysed the 2005 and the 1993 novels by the American-Lebanese writer. Their main topics are the search for identity – political, and geographic – on the boundary of several countries. In this context it is essential for a literary critic how these places are construed.

Other scholars approached literature from the historical perspective, either analyzing how a particular historic period affected the development of literature or literary studies, or ascertaining how historic events are reflected in literature and the visual arts. **Beata Waligórska-Olejniczak** (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland) in the paper “Working through War Trauma in Contemporary Russian Cinema: the State of Current and Prospective Research” presented an attempt to interpret contemporary Russian war movies within the trauma studies context, comparing it with similar phenomena in German and USA cultures. Beata traced how post-traumatic identity is construed ‘between memory and forgetting’. Historical trauma in contemporary cinema is visually represented by ‘second witnesses’, the generation that was not directly influenced by the military events. Still, evidence shows that trauma, notwithstanding how old, still has to be worked on.

Artis Ostups’ (independent researcher, Latvia) “The Demands of History: Conceptualizing the Post-Revolutionary Melancholy of Contemporary Latvian Fiction” reviewed modern historical Latvian fiction and its major novels, particularly, “We. Latvia. The 20th century” (2014–2018). Artis suggested several ways of interpreting the interest in history in its current form of ‘melancholy and mourn-

ing': in Freudian terms of the reaction to traumatic loss, in the context of Tony Judt's historical analysis of Post-war events, through drawing a parallel with the 2009 Nobel Prize winner Herta Müller's ideas. **Audinga Pelurityte-Tikuišiene's** (Vilnius University, Lithuania) paper "History in Contemporary Lithuanian Literature" was connected to the one given by Artis, presenting an overview of the range of historical genres in Lithuanian contemporary literature. Audinga managed to show the shift from lyrical poetry prevalence to drama, especially in the oeuvre of Sigitas Geda and Marius Ivaškevičius.

Anneli Mihkelev (Tallinn University, Estonia), whose interest lies in the field of life-writing, highlighted the changes that this phenomenon is currently undergoing in her research "Poetry and Life Writing in Contemporary Cultures". Among the most noticeable trends, she emphasized the blending of autobiography with fiction, authors' desire to concentrate on historical events of global significance, and the focus on social and cultural life within the historical context. One more recent change is that life writing has penetrated into the sphere of the visual and performing arts. It is worth mentioning that Anneli is one of the organizers of the 12th International Conference of Baltic Literary Scholars Life Writing and History Writing in Contemporary Baltic Cultures held in Tallinn in November 2019. This research was echoed by **Joanny Anne Moulin** (Aix-Marseille University, France), who delivered a paper "Biography: A Blind Spot of French Theory". President of the Biography Society, and a biographer herself, she gave a talk on the French theory of biography. This theory spread in the 1970s and 1980s and, based on Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction and post-structuralist conceptions of Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault, led to the situation when biography studies started to be neglected by academic research. Although the situation has improved recently for autobiographic studies, the same is not yet true for biography. Still, Joanny expressed the hope that relevant biography theory will develop soon.

Marisa Kerbizi and Edlira Macaj (Alexander Moisiu University, Albania) stressed the devastating impact that the ideology of a certain political regime has on art in the paper "Albanian Literature and its Critical Evaluation Process". The scholars made a case study of Albanian literature during the period of communism, when many authors were not published, were excluded from school curricula and even suffered repressions. The modern stage of another literary culture, namely postcolonial (the paper "Redefining Postcolonial Literature in the Contemporary Age: A Comparative Approach"), was described by **Shivani Ekkanath** (UC Berkeley, Le Havre campus, France), a young Indian writer living in Singapore.

A special section paid tribute to Gustav Suits, and 100 years of Tartu University, and was completely held in the language of the country hosting the conference – Estonian. **Elle-Mari Talivee's** (Estonian Academy of Sciences) paper

“Eesti kirjanikud ja 1905, aasta tuli” demonstrated how the 1905 Revolution influenced Gustav Suits’s political thought, and how his poetry that reflected the fighting spirit and the rebellious mood is linked to the tradition of Estonian industrial poetry. Elle-Mari also established the historical literary context for the Young Estonia movement’s emergence. **Hasso Krull** (University of Tartu, Estonia) examined in “Luxembourggi aias: Gustav Suits ja Euroopa Liit” the views of Young Estonia and Gustav Suits on Estonia, Europe, and the search for a cultural force within the latter, which enabled the scholar to trace the origin of the Pan-European idea in Suits’ works.

The paper “Õitsilise motiiv Juhan Liivi jutustuses «Vari» ja Karl Eduard Söödi varase loomeperioodi luules” by **Lauri Pilter** (University of Tartu, Estonia) compared several passages from the poetry of Juhan Liiv and Karl Eduard Sööt, focusing on the floral motif of blooms. This motif presents difficulties for translators, because the word “Õitsiline” (related to both ‘blooming’ and ‘nocturnal’) cannot be translated into any other language with a single word. **Tanar Kirs** (University of Tartu, Estonia) in the paper “Juhan Liivist Gustav Suitsuni. Luulevõrdlused” compared Juhan Liiv and Gustav Suits from the perspective of generation values, the attitude to time, and the past, present, and future. Tanar attempted to explain Liiv’s appreciation of the younger poet.

Liina Lukas (University of Tartu, Estonia) emphasized the link between Baltic and German literary criticism, i.e. Georg Brandes and Gustav Suits. Throughout the paper named “Baltisaksa kirjanduskriitika ja Georg Brandes” Liina studied the contacts between the two scholars, Suits’ perception of Baltic German literary criticism, and explained why Brandes was important for Estonian literary criticism. **Mirjam Hinrikus** (Estonian Academy of Sciences) and **Tiina Kirss** (University of Tartu, Estonia) in their paper “Gustav Suitsu kirjandusteoreetilistest ideedest” focused on Suits’s national identity. Could he be considered a Nordic writer due to Brandes impact? The scholars also discussed Suits’ theoretical views and the views on Estonian literary history articulated in his lectures.

Marin Laak’s (Estonian Literary Museum) paper “Gustav Suitsu mõjukriitikast” followed the Estonian criticism of the 1920s that she called “impact criticism”, meaning the search for literary role models and influences. Marin compared impact criticism with the criticism in the “Noor-Eesti” periodical. She argued that impact criticism is still an effective tool for literary historians. The paper “Murulugemine ja peebujutt” by **Arne Merilai** (University of Tartu, Estonia) discussed the Estonian researchers Karl Muru (1927–2017) and Harald Peep (1931–1998) and their method. In their usage of the national biobibliographic and intertextual impact critical method, they followed the tradition developed by Suits.

Several talks were devoted to teaching literature, current trends in this area and problematic issues that need to be tackled. Several scholars focused on prac-

tical aspects of teaching literary theory. An important tool in literary studies was presented by **Sven Vabar** (independent researcher, Estonia) in the paper “EWOD: The Online Dictionary Connecting Estonian Literature with Global Networks”. He spoke on the *Estonian Writers Online Dictionary* compiled by University of Tartu, Department of Literature and Theater Studies of the Institute of Cultural Research, which primary aim was to collect and categorize the existing bibliographical data about Estonian literature and writers. After navigating the audience through the website of the dictionary, Sven stressed that this project would facilitate access to the data on Estonian literature for research endeavours outside Estonia. Sven is the managing editor of the Dictionary, while the editors-in-chief are Jüri Talvet and Arne Merilai.

Katre Talviste (University of Tartu, Estonia), a professor, translator, and publisher, continued her series of reports on literary pedagogy in Estonia. In Katre’s paper “From Teaching What We Know Towards Teaching What We Do” it was maintained that teaching theory should be accompanied with translation into the national language and the other way round. “Twenty Years of Literature at University. An Insider’s Perspective” by **Anneli Niinre (Kõvamees)** (Tallinn University, Estonia) shared the scholar’s personal experience of teaching and studying literature at Tallinn university.

Marco Pajević (University of Tartu, Estonia) in his talk “For a Re-Appreciation of the Literary in Literary Studies” stressed the gap between language and literary studies, with the former overwhelmingly predominant in universities. Although literature is far from being in crisis due to a large number of literary TV shows popularizing literature, the value of literary studies has decreased, as well as the value of literary theory. It happens on a par with the Anglo-centric approach to world literature and comparative studies, read mostly in English. In Marco’s view, the attitude to language and poetics should be re-considered. Poetics should be seen as a form of cognitive science, and language – as an access to reality, which is nothing without interpretation and context.

In the final paper, which united and summarized to a certain extent the ideas expressed by the above-mentioned presenters, **Jüri Talvet** (University of Tartu, Estonia) addressed the question whether it is possible to revitalize the humanities, and how. The answer was: partly through reworking our understanding of the canon and teaching literature. Quoting professor Talvet, ‘every nation should be free to define their canon’, and each has their national history of World Literature, which was demonstrated throughout the conference. Unfortunately, in the modern world, departments offering majors in comparative or world literature are few. One way out could be a new form of representing world literature in coursebooks. Jüri shared his experience of writing the 2019 book *Critical Essays on World Literature, Comparative Literature, and the ‘Other’*, published by Cambridge

Scholars Publishing. Professor Talvet's approach is innovative in the way that it combines creative writing, aesthetics, and philosophy, as inherent components of World Literature. The latter is seen as a mental spiritual vehicle that allows readers to grasp all the forms of the Other (understood in the vein of Montaigne and Bakhtinian philosophical terms). Another essential point was an effort to embrace Occidental and Oriental tradition, which, taken separately, are 'exhausted' and 'not real', respectively. As the western canon is very different from the eastern one, the latter is typically excluded from western studies of the world literature. Still, it, on a par with smaller national histories, such as Estonian, should become part of supra-national literary history. This can be achieved by the combined efforts of interpreters, translators, teachers, scholars, and readers.

The conference turned out to be a very engaging, thought-provoking event, featuring many outstanding scholars. It came as no surprise that the discussions that followed the papers were animated and stimulated the cultural dialogue and exchange of ideas.

