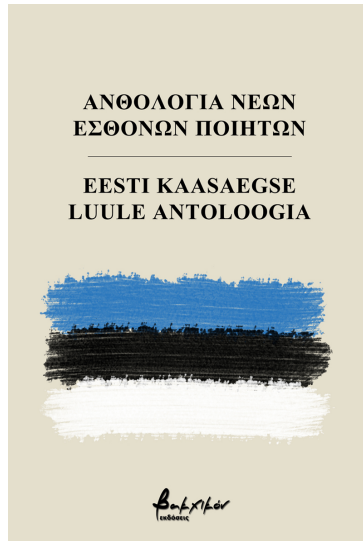


Anthology of young Estonian Poets

Anthology – Preface: Rami Saari

Translation: Edith-Helen Ulm



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Eda Ahi, Andrus Kasemaa, Igor Kotjuh, Kaupo Meiel, Krista Ojasaar, Wimberg (Jaak Urmet), Maarja Pärtna, Carolina Pihelgas, Kaur Riismaa, Jürgen Rooste

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An anthology of poetry written by poets from a foreign country always counts as an invitation – or challenge – to become acquainted with another culture, a different country, a distinct worldview and opinions that may seem strange to us because of the differences in our everyday lives, and even more so in the case of an anthology of contemporary poetry from young authors from a country that is both geographically distant and has different historical origins than Greece – although it is a country that is nonetheless a member of the European Union and part of the global village established in the early years of the 21st century. This bilingual anthology of Estonian poetry gives Greek readers the opportunity to discern and enjoy differences and similarities in equal measure. The more we sink into the poems featured in this collection, the more it becomes apparent that Greek and Estonian thinking perceive concepts about individuals, family and society in different ways. It also shows how significantly dissimilar both countries are in their views of history, politics and philosophy. Nevertheless, it eventually becomes apparent that their similarities outweigh their differences: Greeks and Estonians have many things in common when it comes to their need for human closeness, their craving for understanding, love and affection, their thirst for self-realization and their shared awareness of the importance of nature and its protection. In any case, studying this sample of Estonian poetry compiled for Greek readers also gives rise to questions – which should be the aspiration of any bilingual anthology. I wonder whether poetry currently written in a different language and coming from a different country serves no other purpose than to allow foreign readers to discover the secrets of a different land inhabited by foreign people. Or, if it is true that the very nature of poetry abhors stereotypes and takes pains to emphasize original thinking,

could it be that this book intends to give readers a window into the fascinating inner world of young men and women who feel, contemplate and compose hundreds of miles away, as “this world, the small, the great” seemingly becomes seemingly smaller, more uniform and unified, although the only thing connecting people is their shared hopes and concerns for the future?

In theory, the ten Estonian poets featured in this anthology all belong to the same generation. They were all born in the last quarter of the 20th century. The question is, are they all truly members of the same generation? The oldest of the ten was born in 1975, while the youngest was born in 1990. My original intent was to present Greek readers with what I considered to be the finest samples of contemporary Estonian poetry; however, as I assembled the poems, I couldn't help ask myself things such as: “How old was each poet when the Soviet Union collapsed?”, or “how old was each poet when Estonia regained its independence?”, or “how old were the poets in this book when their country joined the European Union?”, or “to what extent does the work of each poet clearly and expressly depict the economic, political and social changes that took or are taking place within their country?”

This anthology of young Estonian poets, published for a Greek audience, is the fifth anthology I have so far compiled as poet, translator, editor and linguist. There were two anthologies of Finnish poetry translated into Hebrew and published in *Iton 77* magazine, in Tel Aviv, in 1989 and 1999 respectively, another anthology of 27 European homosexual poets immersed in Western culture (publ. by Carmel Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2015) and a poetry collection published in trilingual format (Hebrew, Arabic and Hungarian) and featuring works of 40 Israeli poets (publ. by Kalligram Publishing House, Budapest, 2016). My first task was to shape this book according to the common standard for all bilingual anthologies of young poets published in the rich and diverse book series of Vakxikon, which also published Greek translations of two of my three poetry collections. According to this standard, the anthology would have to include works of 10 to 15 Estonian poets not older than 40 years, and each poet would have to have published up to three books to be eligible for inclusion. Although I was successful in escaping the Procrustean bed, I remained faithful to the general guidelines in terms of selection of poets and the quality of their poetry.

As far as I was concerned, it was more important to focus on two things: the quality of the poems that would be included in the anthology and the status of each poet in the panorama of young artists in modern-day Estonia. I felt that Greek readers needed to be presented with what I believed to be the finest contemporary poetry from a country whose language has no more than one million speakers. However, the small number of native speakers is inversely proportional to the great value and beauty of Estonia's literature. It is true that Estonian literature is not widely known outside Estonia, mostly because of the uniqueness of the Estonian language. This compromise about the number of poets meeting the requirements for inclusion to the anthology and their number of published books would be acceptable only if the basic criterion of quality of poets and poems alike would be fully respected and the anthology would feature nothing less than the very best.

Greek readers are fortunate, because they have already been given the opportunity to read in their native language poems written by the crop of the finest Estonian poets of the 20th century. Thus, the ten poets featured in this book follow the legacy of the 14 Estonian poets born in the years from 1864 to 1977, who were featured in the Anthology of Estonian Poetry published by Vakkikon in February 2018 in a translation by Magdalini Thoma. Those who will read both poetry collections will be presented with an interesting, representative and as far as possible complete picture of Estonian poetry composed over the course of the last 120 years. Reading both books will allow Greek readers to familiarize themselves with the themes of artists coming from a different background than that of Greeks. In a sense, Greek readers will have a chance to expand their horizons by discovering the poetry of a country that may be small in terms of territory and population, yet possesses a popular and literary culture, as created and developed in its oral and written language, that is quite rich and original.

This poetry collection focuses on young artists who are all alive and in their own way conscious of themselves, of other people, of society and nature, of their country and the world around them. What concerns go through their minds? What questions frustrate them? What problems do their verses reveal and what solutions do they manage to come up by writing and being able to express themselves through their creativity?

There are undoubtedly many young Estonian poets who are struggling with questions of identity, independence and self-determination. The same applies to stereotypical views and national worldviews, such as the case of the poet who composes an exceptional poem about the passing of his aunt and in doing so, emphasizes on how he views his fellow countrymen and their difficulty to express their emotions. Another example of national character is the poet who, having been born in Estonia by Russophone parents and is Estonian by virtue of having lived in Estonia all his life, raises the issue of national self-determination. This concern can only lead to the close scrutiny of Estonia from a political and historical perspective. The poem about the Dadaistic State is a typical example of this approach. The poet explicitly mentions that he was born in the Soviet Union, yet it is doubtful whether the figure of Lenin and the State's intervention in literature could constitute part of the work of a poet born and raised in the West. Young people from Western Europe are likely to be closer to the views of another Estonian poet who considers love and affection to be elements that eliminate borders. Nonetheless, the State is present in every turn when its goal is to shape its citizens' views on identity, making it Estonian, Christian, Soviet or European. This could be the reason that one of Pärtna's poems mentions the need for building shelters. The comparison of poetry composed in different places is good for discovering how poets living in the same period, yet in different parts of the world, are affected by the nature of democracy, dictatorship, or by our current regime, this "deficient democracy" that is given form by the power of bureaucracy, technology and social networks, along with the individual's helplessness against the systems that currently exist in our world. Still, this introduction harbors no ambitions to answer such complicated questions.

Due to being artists who are sensitive towards themselves and others, both as speakers of a particular language and as human beings in general, a number of our featured poets

discover themselves through the views of others. Wimberg, for example, looks at its country through the eyes of Japanese tourists visiting Estonia: the Other, especially the foreign Other, is always like a mirror held up to our faces. Naturally, the strangers who are closest to us are the members of our own families. It is not by chance that many poems in this anthology probe the same question: what relationships are fair between family members in general and between parents and children in particular? This question and the issues it raises are troubling for many people; they also serve as the main subject of the poem about the ideal father and how parents are involved in the upbringing and education of their children. Other poetic themes explored are the need for poetry and the value and importance of writing. Some poets associate the difficulty in expression with depression and overconsumption of alcohol, which are two of Estonian society's major problems. Other characteristics occasionally associated with the same problems are love, sex and social or religious deviations.

In a world that blurs boundaries, it is interesting to observe the efforts of intelligent young people in their struggle to establish their own borders. Kasemaa and Kotjuh emphasize on their strong reservations about an excessively binding national identity, while Ojasaar, Riismaa, Pärtna and Wimberg look at their positions as human beings – either alive or dead – and the destiny of mankind from the altitude of pilots, astronauts and souls in space. Pihelgas interlaces dreams with hunger, investigates the relationship between sky and earth and contemplates the nature of man and animals. Rooste, on the other hand, being a true child of a generation that bases its belief on science, combines faith in the existence of the Higgs boson with faith in the existence of love. Ahi, from her part, focuses on her fellow human beings; even when she writes about herself, she often addresses others, such as the persons who will translate her poems into another language, or the capital city of her homeland, or her true beloved, or Adam and the Garden of Eden.

The theme of nature is essentially common to all poets featured in this collection, similar to the poets in Vakxikon's *Anthology of Estonian Poetry* (2018). The extent to which nature is inextricable from the world of Estonians is made more prominent by the fact that in Estonian literature, nature is the element that connect poets from the city, poets born in rural areas and later moved to cities, and poets who refused to leave their rural hometowns even after they decided to devote themselves to writing. Two typical examples of this are Kasemaa, who is featured in this anthology, and Ivar Sild, a good contemporary Estonian poet who wasn't featured in any of the two translated anthologies. There are numerous descriptions of nature's faces and aspects in this anthology's verses, whether they concern the cold or the birds, snow, rain, light, tides, forests, tree trunks, sun, storm winds, the darkness of the island, or outer space, or even other imaginary worlds that, for several poets, could very well replace their place of actual existence. Although poetry is traditionally regarded as part of humanities, it is obvious that the attitude of young Estonian poets towards nature creates in them a strong interest towards geography, physics, ecology and astronomy.

The position and relevance of the creator in society are also two major themes in many poems, although each poet treats it differently. Pihelgas, for example, refers to them in

her examination of memory and oblivion, human change and renewal. Despite their desire to have an optimistic view of man, society and the future, our poets can't ignore vexing problems such as violence and uncertainty. The positive thoughts about education, western democracy and neoliberal economies expressed in several poems are accompanied by feelings of guilt and the awareness of personal responsibility about society's fortune. In some cases, the poets express themselves in verses that are ironic, cynic, satirical, or even sarcastic.

Despite their young age, our featured poets share the same concern as every other person: the love of life and the relationship with death. Pärtna's poem about spring mentions the recurrence of seasons and concludes that there is no need to hurry. Yet a number of poets in this book are tormented by how quickly time passes and how years go by, never to return. This obsession about time may even become the spine of a poem, such as in Riismaa's "Chronophyte". It is also interesting to see how contemporary Estonian poetry examines old tales under a new prism, such as Ahi's poem about Adam and Meiel's poem about Jesus Christ.

The many fusions of poetic themes in this anthology and the hidden interrelations between poems require an intertextual reading. In this context, I can only emphasize that this anthology presents merely a small sample consisting of ten poets with five poems each. The final poem of Kotjuh and the first poem of Wimberg mention the word "kiss". Although this isn't the main theme of the poems, kissing is something that draws the attention of young people and helps unite different poets in this anthology, just as it can unite different people in real life, in different countries, regardless of political regimes.

I hope that this selection, a gesture of affection from the North to the South and vice versa, encourages people to come closer in a world abundant with strife, envy, hatred and war.

Rami Saari

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