

Kalevipoeg, a Great European Epic¹

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Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803-1882) was born in a humble serf family in the county of Kadrina (North-Eastern Estonia, or Virumaa; Kreutzwald has been revered by posterity as 'the Poet of Viru' or 'the Father of the Song'). His father, a granary keeper, and his mother, a chambermaid, were liberated from serfdom in 1815, a year before the Russian Tsar's decree, abolishing serfdom in Estonia, was passed. Like the great majority of his autochthonous fellow-countrymen, peasant serfs or their children, Kreutzwald received his name from his German landlord, and that is why, instead of Ristmets (as the name would have been in Estonian), he had a German name.

Despite a number of difficulties, Kreutzwald managed to receive a reasonably good education. He studied at a district school in the capital Tallinn and was first trained as an elementary school teacher. After a failed attempt to enter the Military Medical Academy of St. Petersburg (he was not admitted because of his peasant origin), Kreutzwald started in 1825 studies of medicine at Tartu (Dorpat) University, the most renowned educational centre of Estonia, founded in 1632 by the king of Sweden Gustav Adolf II and re-inaugurated by the Emperor of Russia, Alexander I, in 1812.

Besides medicine, Kreutzwald became fascinated with literature at quite an early stage. For instance, even before entering the university, he had translated into his native Estonian fragments from Friedrich Schiller's famous first play *The Robbers* (1781), one of the boldest calls for social justice and freedom voiced by the influential German pre-romantic *Sturm und Drang* movement. By the way, one of the key figures of *Sturm und Drang*, Friedrich Maximilian Klingler who became a high-ranked military officer in St. Petersburg, was the curator of Tartu University from 1803 to 1917.

As a young and bright student, Kreutzwald soon became influenced by the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder, the great 'architect' not only of *Sturm und Drang* and German Romanticism, but of the mighty wave of national 'awakening' and liberation of the peoples of Eastern Europe, from the start of the nineteenth century. Incidentally, as a young man, Herder was active as a pastor and freemason in Riga, the capital of Latvia. He later published his influential collection of folksong *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1788-89), where he also gathered folk lyrics of Baltic people, Estonians included.

During his student years Kreutzwald became a friend of another student of Estonian origin (they were in those times a tiny minority at the university!), Friedrich Robert Faehlmann. From the small nucleus of Estonian students there the germ of defending Estonian nation, language and culture started to sprout. Faehlmann was the principal founder, in 1838, of Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft (Estonian Learned Society) that Kreutzwald joined a year later. Under the influence of the famous Finnish epic *Kalevala* (1836), created by Elias Lönnrot, Faehlmann also started to envisage the first contours of a similar Estonian epic, *Kalevipoeg*. In 1839 he presented at the Estonian Learned Society his *Ancient Tales*, where, in the spirit of Romanticism, he had converted the figure of Kalevipoeg (the son of Kalev), known in Estonian folklore as a malevolent giant, into an ancient king of Estonians who fights for his country's liberty.

One should not forget that the author of *Kalevala*, Lönnrot, visited Estonia in 1844, meeting Faehlmann in Tartu, and Kreutzwald in Võru. Another key 'engineer' of the epic was G. J. Schultz-Bertram, a Baltic-German medical doctor and folklorist who passionately advocated the creation of an Estonian national epic, following the Finnish example, and thus, laying a firm foundation for the further spread of the ideas of national independence of the Estonians.

Faehlmann died in 1850. Kreutzwald, from 1833 a medical doctor and people's enlightener in Võru, a small town in southern Estonia, turned the idea of the epic into

reality. His verse epic *Kalevipoeg, eine Estnische Sage* ('Kalevipoeg, an old Estonian Tale') was first published (with a parallel translation in German accompanying the original Estonian text), by instalments in the proceedings of the Estonian Learned Society (1857-1861). As a book, the German translation appeared first in 1861 in Tartu. The Estonian original came out a year later in the Finnish town Kuopio. In Estonia itself, *Kalevipoeg* appeared in book form only in 1875, in Tartu, two years before Kreutzwald moved from Võru to Tartu, where he spent his old age.

By that time *Kalevipoeg* was well known all over Estonia and its author came to be considered the true founder of Estonian literature, as well as a principal fomenter of the idea of a free Estonian nation. Outside Estonia, however, Kreutzwald was hardly known, beyond the fact that the Russian Academy of Sciences gave him a prize for *Kalevipoeg*, in 1860, and that he was named a foreign member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1871.

As can be seen, the 'official' honours conferred on Kreutzwald in his lifetime recognised his merits as a learned man, first of all. Later, too, there has been a tendency to value Kreutzwald's work, in the first place, from a folkloric point of view. The most extensive monographs on *Kalevipoeg* so far, have been written by Estonian folklorists, like August Annist (1899-1972; he was also the Estonian translator of *Kalevala*) and Felix Oinas (1911-2004). There has been a considerable failure to appreciate Kreutzwald duly as a writer and a poet. The evaluation of the work has centered over and over again onto what extent Kreutzwald used authentic folkloric matter in *Kalevipoeg*. More than often the *a priori* judgement has been that once the author replaced in his work a genuinely folkloric basis by his own fantasy, and this conclusion has inevitably diminished the merits of the epic.

It does not seem to have occurred to anybody to ask the following question: if Kreutzwald published his *Kalevipoeg* first in the series of the proceedings of the Learned Estonian Society, claiming it to be a truly folkloric work, was it not then, really, a mystification *par excellence* à la Jorge Luis Borges (or, to turn to the

postmodern vocabulary, a simulacrum, a consciously ludicrous conversion of a poetic text into a scientific text), with the aim that the work could survive hard times, the censorship of the tsarist regime, a system revering sciences but at the same time strangulating any freer attempts of philosophical or ideological creation?

It is unlikely that the first book edition of *Kalevipoeg*, printed abroad, in Kuopio, could have had any significant repercussion in Estonia. It is true that Kreutzwald was revered since the climax of the national 'awakening' (the 1860s and 70s). However, at the end of the nineteenth century, an indirect pressure exercised by the wave of russification favoured a scientifically reproducing activity, rather than authentically creative work carrying ideological or philosophical accents. The arrogant opinion expressed by Friedebert Tuglas, by that time an ambitious budding writer who nonetheless by 1912 had already been able to absorb from the West the revolutionary spirit of pre-modernism, has had a strangely deep effect on the following evaluation of Kreutzwald's work. Tuglas's main claims have been echoed over and over again, namely, that Kreutzwald was not 'genuinely folkloric', that he had tried to mould an epic work out of lyrical material, that his epic was 'stylistically weak', etc.!

Even in the newly independent Estonia, since 1991, the banknotes of the nation's own currency (as an identifying sign of a nation) became to reproduce along the patriotic poet Lydia Koidula and the celebrated novel writer of the first independence period Anton Hansen Tammsaare, the meritorious collector of folklore, Jakob Hurt, while Kreutzwald, the creator of the epic, was denied a place among the fames.

Kalevipoeg as an individual epic of the late Romanticism

Despite being influenced by *Kalevala*, the epic of Kreutzwald differs radically from the Finnish epic. Kreutzwald's folkloric sources were much scantier than those of Lönnrot. He had to invent himself the myth and folklore. *Kalevipoeg* is, first and foremost, a literary work. As such, it should not be researched, really, in the canon of the ancient Greek *Iliad*, the medieval Icelandic songs of *Edda* or Lönnrot's *Kalevala*,

all of which are based predominantly (though not entirely either) on authentic folklore, reflecting primeval tribal conscience.

Kalevipoeg, on the contrary, belongs clearly to another – by no means less valuable – canon, the one of individual verse epics, starting in the West from Virgil's *Aeneid*, to be followed in the late Middle Ages by the French *Chanson de Roland*, the Spanish *Cantar de Mio Cid*, the German *Nibelungenlied* and, in the Renaissance, by *Os Lusíadas* ('The Lusíads'), the great epic written by the founder of Portuguese literature, Camões.

The epic tradition was still in full vigour in Romanticism through the end of the nineteenth century. Above all in the creation of those (minor) nations that had only recently been awakened to a national conscience, it served for the strengthening of their spiritual-cultural (and gradually, also physical) living space amid the greater nations who had until then brutally and unambiguously dominated Europe.

One is tempted to ask: how many genuinely folkloric epics have really been created or have survived in Europe? What do the French *Chanson de Roland* or the Spanish *Cantar de Mio Cid* have in common with folklore, beside their exterior form? Even though we do not know the names of their authors, the aesthetic-ideological content of both works leaves little doubt in that they departed from a very concrete, individually determined creative act. However, the fact by no means diminishes their value in the function of generating mechanisms of folklore. Like later Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg*, the French and Spanish epics became highly popular, spreading abundant motives into 'high' culture as well as into traditional folk culture. In fact, they themselves became folklore, assembling mythical images shared by and carried on by a whole society.

A number of outstanding poets of the past have tried to create majestic epic works. Not all of them succeeded in finishing their epics (thus, the Frenchman Ronsard managed to write only the initial part of his planned *Franciade*). The epic *The Faerie*

Queene by the Englishman Edmund Spenser also remained unfinished. The incomplete but nonetheless voluminous epic *Os Eoas* by the Galician writer Edoardo Pondal (who was somewhat younger than Kreutzwald) was published for the first time only in 1992. Sometimes historical conditions were unfavourable to the enterprise, in other cases, epic poets let themselves be influenced by a 'genre contamination' to the extent that the outcome were 'novels in verse', rather than true epics, capable of reflecting reality beyond amorous love stories.

Kreutzwald, without any doubt, is one of the few European late romantic writers who did succeed in creating a verse epic in its full rights. *Kalevipoeg*'s 'national' Estonian dimension can be seen, in the first place, in the verse form employed by Kreutzwald. He basically used in *Kalevipoeg* the four-feet trochaic meter, with abundant alliterations and parallelisms, characteristic of all the rich treasury of Finno-Ugric folksongs – thus a form that has emerged from the very national poetic soil. For instance, the U.S. poet H. W. Longfellow was like Kreutzwald influenced by Lönnrot's *Kalevala* in creating his *Song of Hiawatha* (1855), a work that was meant to be 'American indigenous epic'. However, Longfellow could not rely on any verse form of the American indigenous people, but had to 'import' it from the Finno-Ugric traditional poetics. The English four-feet trochee, besides, can never convey the interior flexibility and rhythmic variety of the Finno-Ugric traditional meter. To say nothing of the fact that even though Kreutzwald did not dispose of such ample folkloric material as Lönnrot, he genially imitated it (like the Scottish James Macpherson, in his *Ossian's Songs*). As a result, *Kalevipoeg* is abounding with lyrical metaphors and subtle poetic imagery as intensely as Estonian genuine folksongs.

A nation-building epic

Kalevipoeg is a 'nation-building' epic. I do not know any other European epic of Romanticism that would have emphasised, with such intensity as *Kalevipoeg*, the patriotic ideal. The only possible parallel for *Kalevipoeg* in this sense could be found in Camões's *The Lusads*, from the European Renaissance. Both are national-patriotic

epics *par excellence*, designed to inspire a nation by its great deeds in the past, to project its future.

In *Kalevipoeg*'s plot and even philosophical structure a certain similarity with Goethe's *Faust* could be observed. The great difference, naturally, lies in the fact that Goethe employed amply Greek mythology and ancient verse metres, whereas Kreutzwald relied exclusively on national folkloric sources: even when complementing them by his own invention and 'imported' intertextualities, he 'Estonised' the whole story. Following the same method, five centuries earlier, the Italian Giovanni Boccaccio created his famous *Decameron*.

Kalevipoeg is first presented as the youngest son and successor of Kalev, the ancient mythic king of the Estonians. Linda, his mother, brings him into the world, when the old Kalev is already dead. Soon Linda, too, dies, as she is raped by a Finnish sorcerer and, though saved from the latter by Heavens, is converted into a rocky pillar in Iru (near Tallinn). From Linda's tears, when she mourned her husband, Kreutzwald claims, the lake Ülemiste was formed (near the modern Tallinn International Airport is nearby). Kreutzwald mythologised the geophysical Estonia, scattered its soil with the seeds of spirituality.

There is a special relationship between the hero, Kalevipoeg (also called, like his father, simply Kalev) and his parents. At the most dramatic moments of his life he returns to his parents' grave: they give him advice, how to find his way in the world. Kalevipoeg's conversation with his dead mother and father are really among the most lyrical episodes of the whole epic. In one episode, Kalevipoeg confesses that he has no intention to marry any girl. The highest goal for Kalevipoeg, like for the count Roland, as well as Faust, is to serve his country and people.

Yet Kalevipoeg's path to such a lofty moral understanding is gradual and painful. As a young man (like a young nation) he commits several grave sins. He causes the death of the Island Maid to whom he had made love (parallels not only with Faust but also

with Don Juan are present) and in a gust of anger, being drunk, he kills a son of a Finnish blacksmith. The latter event provides the main turning point for the following dramatic developments. Even though Kalevipoeg subsequently, thanks to his noble actions – he regrets his sins, has compassion for the weak and the humble, builds a town, makes, like Ulysses, an exploratory ship voyage to the end of the world, fights the Devil and the hostile troops of invading nations – achieves a genuinely ethical dimension, the imprecation on him of the Finnish blacksmith is fulfilled. Kalevipoeg loses his legs by his own sword and dies. However, in the same way as Faust's soul is finally redeemed by Heavens, the ancient Estonian gods led by Taara (the thunder god, comparable to Thor, in Scandinavian mythology) decide to bind the revived Kalevipoeg (cf the resurrection of Christ) to a rock at Hell's gate (a parallel with Prometheus), making him the guardian of the inferno.

Kreutzwald's epic ends with the author's augury that one day Kalevipoeg would be freed from the rock and he would return to Estonia, to bring freedom and happiness to his people. Every epoch has provided *Kalevipoeg* with some new meanings and, at the same time, has nearly always deafened other sounds and voices in the work, those that have become incomprehensible or uncomfortable. *Kalevipoeg* has inspired in Estonia numerous works of art (including a ballet, by Eugen Kapp) and the hero's figure has expanded through a great number of interpretations in Estonian literature, ranging from pathetic images to humorous and parodic travesties.²

Beyond doubt, Kreutzwald's great work has been essential in the forging of the national 'awakening' movement in the nineteenth century and in the persistence of national memory and the ideal of freedom during the twentieth century, under foreign occupations and repressions that Estonians have had to suffer.

Kalevipoeg as a polyphonic myth-creating text

Once more: *Kalevipoeg* is a myth-creating, polyphonic and ambivalent text. As the experience of world literature convincingly shows, only such texts are capable of generating an abundance of new texts as well as meta-texts

Kreutzwald's final augury in his epic is not devoid of ambiguity. In a sense, it may well be even more subtle than the final symbol in Goethe's *Faust*. A comprehensive comparative-philosophical reading of Kreutzwald's epic is basically a task for the future. It should not only mean an attentive study of *Kalevipoeg* as related to the author's other texts, the epic context of world literature and different interpretations. It would also be important to include the readings of *Kalevipoeg* in the languages into which it has been translated.³

One of the first attempts in this direction can be found in a sociologically and psychoanalytically orientated reading of Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg*, in parallel with the Latvian epic, Andrejs Pumpurs' *Lāčplēsis* (1888), by the Latvian scholar Sergei Kruks.⁴ The language question of the reading can hardly be underestimated. On the basis of the Russian translation of *Kalevipoeg*, Kruks envisages an attractive image of *Kalevipoeg* as a kind of a rational man of action, an active fighter for his people's happiness – in contrast with the melancholy *Lāčplēsis*, surrendered by fate.

In the English translation of the article, the quotations from which the researcher draws his conclusions inevitably had to be replaced by those taken from the English translation of Kreutzwald's work.⁵ When Kurman translates the well-known conclusion of *Kalevipoeg* after the hero's voyage to the end of the world as 'knowledge must be held / [---] more precious than heaps of gold!' (p. 212) and Kruks relies on it, without suspecting that in the Estonian original Kreutzwald does not speak at all of 'knowledge' (*teadmine*) but of 'wisdom' (*tarkus*), the interpretation can hardly avoid to become misleading. Wisdom in *Kalevipoeg* is, rather, an

existential experience, a conclusion drawn from the failure of the knowledge, driven by the thirst for power.

One should not overlook the fundamental relatedness of Kalevipoeg's life and action with nature around him. The epic, in fact, is saturated with lyrical (and sometimes also coarsely sexual-physical, as well as humorously shaded) images that bind the hero to the nature and the soil of his native country. The 'unnatural proximity' of *Kalevipoeg*, as an epic, to the sentimental tonality of folksongs cultivated mainly by Estonian peasant women, is not necessarily a drawback. We may ask if one of the basic features of all great epic of the past has not been its openness to the aesthetic-perceptual 'other', its capacity to widen its horizons far beyond the established canon?

In the epic of Kreutzwald – one of the worthiest among all European epics – a sentimental-emotional tie with the nature and the soil of the native country, above all, restrains the hero's actions, makes his moral growth a slow process, contrary to any too straightforward rationalistic optimism. Kreutzwald makes the feeling of life's sacred totality become ever more intense, as the epic develops. In a close analogy with the mystery of Christianity he identifies the hero's father with the father of heavens, but differently from Lönnrot, the author of the Finnish *Kalevala*, avoids providing his epic with an unambiguous Christian framework.

The same could be true of Kreutzwald's prediction about the return of Kalevipoeg. It has often been interpreted literally, in a simple-minded way. Estonia is now free again; but Kalevipoeg still seems to be lingering on his way.

¹ In its initial shape, the present text in English was published in *Estonian Literary Magazine* (Tallinn: Estonian Institute, 2003), pp. 4-9. It has also been published in Spanish and Galician translation, cf. respectively, *Kalevipoeg, otra epopeya ignorada*, in *Lateral* (Barcelona, 2003), pp. 34-35, and *O Kalevipoeg. Unha grande epopea europea. No bicentenario de Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, autor do Kalevipoeg e fundador da literatura Estonia*, in *Boletín Galego de Literatura*, 29 (2003), 123-130. Following the publication of

an enlarged version of the text in Estonian ('*Kalevipoeg* – suur Euroopa eepos', in *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 12 (2003), 886-890), I have introduced substantial additions in the text in English.

² In the framework of the fifth Archimedes Programme of the EU, a small research group of the Department of Literature and Folklore of Tartu University took part in the project CULTOS (2001-2003, directed from the Salzburg Research Gesellschaft). In the course of creating a computer programme for teaching and researching intertextual relations of European cultural heritage, our researchers Marin Laak and Piret Viires identified hundreds of intertextual motif-threads emerging from Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg* and running intensely through the whole Estonian culture of the post-*Kalevipoeg* era.

³ Except the above mentioned translation of *Kalevipoeg* in German, all other translations of Kreutzwald's *chef-d'oeuvre* have been made and published after the author's death. As a complete text, *Kalevipoeg* has appeared in Russian (1886-87, 1949; reprinted 1950, 1956, 1961, 1979, 1987), Hungarian (1929, reprinted 1960, 1986), Latvian (1929), Finnish (1957), Czech (1959), Lithuanian (1963), Ukrainian (1981), English (1982, reprinted 1999), Swedish (1999), and French (2004). A revised version of the old German translation was published in Germany in 2004. *Kalevipoeg* has appeared in Estonian between 1857 and 2002 in 17 different editions. It was published in the Estonian Republic between the two world wars (1918-1940) as well as in the Soviet Estonia (1945-1990).

⁴ S. Kruks, *Kalevipoeg and Lāčplēsis: The Way We Imagine Our Communities. A Sociological Reading of Estonian and Latvian Epics.* – *Interlitteraria*, 8 (2003), 227–247

⁵ F. R. Kreutzwald, *Kalevipoeg*. Trans. Jüri Kurman (Moorestown, 1982).