

Dear friends,

In Anglo-American academic circles the rule of thumb for decades has been ‘publish or perish’. It’s a tenet by which primarily scholarly individuals strive for happiness and success via the career ladder. But if this group never wrote anything, English-language cultural space would certainly be impoverished, if not in danger of dying out.

In the literary cultures of smaller nations, the role that each individual plays is greater, and as we well know from the fates of many of our Finno-Ugric cousins, not writing or not arriving at a culture of writing is equivalent to slow national suicide. As such, ‘publish or perish’ applies just as well here, on the shores of the Gulf of Finland. In Estonian, given the alliteration that is characteristic of our language, it might be rendered as something like *kirjasta või koole*. Without a literary culture we wouldn’t be here, and that’s something we’ve all been aware of for a number of generations, since the time of

*Kalevala*

or

*Kalevipoeg*

. Indeed, in a few months’ time it will be 150 years since

*Kalevipoeg*

was first published, in Kuopio. Not that our national epic was printed here to be distributed among the Finns, but rather to avoid censorship in Estonia. In a sense I suppose we can say it was the first major Estonian-language work published in Finland. And it was clear as early as the 19

th

century that Russia took a very different stance when it came to Finland and Estonia – something which remains true today.

Today, here at this book fair, it’s clear for everyone to see that neither the Finns themselves nor the Estonians invited to attend the event as their guests have any intention of perishing, or giving up, or fading away when it comes to literary culture. More books have been published in Estonia in the last decade – original works and works of translation – than ever before.

And you only need to open the floodgates of the Internet for even more writing to spill through which never actually makes it to print. We're very much living in a time of high water rather than one of drought, which is why it's no surprise that as a nation we don't want to keep our thoughts and our brilliant ideas to ourselves, but to send them out there, further and further all the time. We're not on some mission to conquer the world: we just want to play a fully-fledged part (which is to say one that is understandable to all) in global literary culture; in the way people think, and the way they exchange those thoughts. With the power of words. Today, here in Helsinki, the people of Estonia have taken a big step towards this.

At the same time, while it is ostensibly an intellectual event, the fair is obviously also a business one. And to use the jargon of that sphere, small nations and small languages tend to be importers of literature, with our balance of trade constantly running at a deficit.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Although the amount that's written in languages with larger numbers of speakers (and writers) is streaks ahead in terms of quantity, it doesn't always hold that it's also streaks ahead in terms of quality. We shouldn't be afraid to dream that one day that balance of ours will achieve equilibrium.

Of course, I'm not suggesting that we cut out or even cut back on translating foreign literature into Estonian, but that we should be sending out as much as we order in. If we're to do this, we have to be better. Today, we've brought much of our best here with us to Helsinki. Whether it finds success and understanding and appreciation no longer depends on the Estonian authors who wrote it, but on the Finnish readers who pick it up. And, needless to say, on the translators who translated it – whom I would like to thank, since without your love for Estonian the power of our words would never make it across the Gulf of Finland.

Happy reading!