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TRANSLATING OLD SONGS: SELECTED ESTONIAN TEXTS

APPENDIX TO
‘ILOMAILE. ANTHOLOGY OF
ESTONIAN FOLK SONGS WITH
TRANSLATIONS AND
COMMENTARY’
BY JUHAN KURRIK

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Few Estonian old folk songs – *regilaulud* – have been translated into English. The anthology by Juhan Kurrik published in 1985 under the title *Ilomaile* is therefore a valuable source for getting acquainted with the wonderful world of Estonian folk songs for those who do not know Estonian. The anthology embraces a wide range of songs providing a comprehensive overview of the Estonian treasury of *regilaul* from both a thematic and geographic perspective, and the translator has successfully captured the poetic quality of the old songs. However, ongoing research on these old songs keeps shedding new light on the interpretation and translation of many passages.

For the most part, Estonian old folk songs were collected and transcribed in the 19th century when dialects had formed in different parts of the country that varied as to their vocabulary and grammar. Modern-day Estonians, whose language instinct is mostly based on standard written Estonian, the version which developed in the first half of the 20th century, and, to a lesser extent, on the dialectal background of their parents and grandparents, often have difficulty interpreting old songs. This may be easier for a linguist specialising in dialects, but even in this case knowledge of dialects is insufficient: the language of the songs is poetic elaboration and governed by different rules than everyday language. From the historical-linguistic point of view the morphology of old folk songs is characterised by old forms and their poetic elaborations, and many 19th century scholars regarded them as simply incorrect – until linguists discovered the rules behind it. Semantics, however,

is a more complex area than morphology and the discovery of laws governing the semantics of old folk songs still lies ahead.

In the interpretation of the texts of old folk songs the main advantage is having a knowledge of other, thematically similar songs – so that the meanings of individual turns of phrase may become clear – as well as a score of dictionaries to hand. About a half of a projected comprehensive dictionary of Estonian dialects, which includes the written form of Estonian vocabulary throughout the ages, is now also available. A knowledge of the vocabulary of related languages – Finnish, Votic and Karelian is a great help. Back in 1985, Juhan Kurrik did not have enough resource materials available to him. He often relied on his own language instinct, but this may have led him astray, when the dialectal word, because of a sound change, resembled another word in the standard language: for example *håbima* ‘perish’ resembles the word *håbi* ‘shame’, or with a change in the meaning of the word: *oht* the new meaning ‘danger’, the old meaning ‘sadness’, *ilu* meaning ‘beauty’, the old meaning ‘joy’. When the sound changes occurred in the inflectional endings, this may have led to a misunderstanding of grammatical relations: *ma laolan mua merese* ‘I will sing until the earth becomes one with the sea’, and not ‘I will sing until the earth falls into the sea’; *orud ohjelta hoosta* ‘valleys, [where] the horses can be bridled’, and not ‘the horses without bridles in the valleys’. A word can have several meanings, for example *hull* – ‘mad’, ‘crazy’, ‘bad’, etc, *ilm* – ‘weather’, ‘world’, ‘universe’, etc; however, a rarer connotation may be used in a folk song, for example *veeretama* literally ‘roll’, here: ‘sing’. Some difficulties arise from ethnographic notions, which have since fallen into disuse, for example the word *påevasammas* ‘sun column’. In some cases the reason for misinterpretation may have been errors of transcription in the Estonian-language texts. Some versions offered below may not qualify as corrections of errors as such, because the translator of a poetic text always has a certain degree of freedom to use a different word or phrase in the target language. The following is an annotated and commented list of words and verses (E = erratum; T = transcription).

Page	Estonian text	Translation	Corrections / comments
16	E: <i>Kõis külasta</i>		<i>Kõis</i>
34/5	<i>Läksin läbi alta ilma, pealta päeva</i>	I explored the underworld, the sky above	I passed under the sky, above the sun
36/7	<i>pealaud</i>	rake	small wooden board used for killing lice
	<i>hiljukesti</i>	late	quietly
	<i>kannikene</i>	imp	doll or flower
	<i>madalukene</i>	scamp	short person (with no pejorative connotation)
38/9	<i>päive peidetie</i>	sun was heisted	sun was concealed (from view)
	<i>peitaja</i>	pirate	concealer
40/1	<i>poogad</i>	tasseltufts	colourful ribbons
	<i>pääva sammas</i>	day column	hitching post (for horses)
	<i>nõudma</i>	claim	in folk songs ‘fetch’
44/7	<i>Hakkasin aru pidama, kase/kuuse/tamme käesta küsima</i>	I asked the birch/fir/oak to advise me, I asked the birch/fir/oak to counsel me	I began to ponder, I began to ask the birch/fir/oak
50/1	<i>pill</i>	pipe	musical instrument, here probably referring to a zither
52/3	<i>roes rukkivälja</i>	green rye-field	auburn or ginger hued rye-field
54/5	<i>keerud kingakannad</i>	quickest twostep	literally ‘quick shoe heels’
	<i>rumala</i>	dunce	in folk song usage ‘ugly’
	<i>ullu</i>	madwoman	in this context ‘unpleasant person’
62/5	T: <i>ie, uo, üö</i> (in <i>setu</i> songs)		<i>ii, uu, üü</i>
62/3	<i>pääle pikä pääväjala</i>	I put on my dress at daylight	I put on my everyday shoes
	<i>Hillo lätsi takah hellü piteh, kummu piteh kullöldõh</i>	Carefully I followed it by its shine, I followed the gold by its gleam	I followed it quietly, listening to its sound
	<i>kuldakukku</i>	coldpurse	golden cone

Page	Estonian text	Translation	Corrections / comments
64/5	<i>sinnä kutsusti tundijas, tundijas ni taidijas</i>	A knower was called, a knower and a wizard	I was called upon to recognize and to comprehend
	<i>sinivett veere tasa</i>	bluewater bubbling softly	bluewater to the brim (of the kettle)
66/7			Piusa – river; Võrtsjärv, Saadjärv – lakes
	<i>heidi hellä tsölokнат</i>	she was braiding bright yarn	she was throwing her sweet shuttle (while weaving)
	<i>ummel kiti kerikolle, avvustelli aluvulle</i>	God praised her to the church, acclaimed her to the town	she sewed praise for the church, honour for the town
70/1	<i>siis hakkas salu häbima</i>	the wildwood parched for shame	the wildwood started to perish
	<i>piirama</i>	to groom	to cut
	<i>kösterid üle kiriku</i>	vicars from the church	the highest vicars of the church
74/5	<i>ommukult kaste kasine</i>	in the morning the dew will melt	in the morning the dew is scanty
78/9	<i>käsit muta pea kasva, jõude jõuda, pea pikässe venidä</i>	you told me to grow by a head and gather strength, to stretch myself by a head	you told me to grow tall quickly
	<i>mu kirstu kinniteme</i>	to polish my hope chest	to complete my bridal dowry
	<i>kõrik</i>	throat	skirt
	<i>linik</i>	dress	kerchief
80/1	<i>ilm su kirstu kinnitegu</i>	the sky shall polish your hope chest	the world shall prepare your dowry
84/5	<i>Mareta, kõreta neidu</i>	Mareta, the scrawny maiden	that maiden Mareta (<i>kõreta</i> is here evidently just a rhyming parallel without any meaning)
88/9	<i>hakkas Annust vandumaie</i>	started to plead with Annus	started to curse Annus
92/3	<i>peenar</i>	balk	earthen embankment
94/5	<i>kangapaak</i>	cloth-beam	bolt of cloth

Page	Estonian text	Translation	Corrections / comments
96/9	T: <i>ie, uo, üö</i>		<i>ii, uu, üü</i> (cf. p. 62/5)
98/9	<i>Ao tütar Aleville</i>	the downdaughter for Kalev	the daughter of dusk for Alev
102/3	<i>Viige, viige sõrme peale</i> (maybe erratum for <i>viie</i>)	take me, take me, on five fingers	'take me, take me on the fingers' or 'take me on five fingers'
108/9	<i>ilmatarka</i>	sky-wise	wisest of the wise
	<i>teinepool</i>	other half	better half (cf. Salve & Lange 1987)
	<i>hilju</i>	patiently	silently, cautiously
	<i>astus oete'ese</i>	paced and waited	alighted into bed
	<i>külge vastu kulda, vaipa</i>	the side against the gold, the blanket	the side touching the gold, the blanket
108/11	<i>ei see kuld ei kuulnud tõusta, hõbedane ärgatagi</i>	the gold was deaf to the call, nor did the silver heed his words	the gold did not arise, the silver did not awake
	<i>sease</i>	flea	gnat
	<i>pori</i>	mud	drone fly
112/27	T: <i>ie, uo, üö</i>		<i>ii, uu, üü</i> (cf. p. 62/5)
	<i>kalm</i>	Death	grave or death (cf. Salve & Lange 1987)
	<i>ubasuu</i>	cosymouth	beautiful, round mouth in the shape of a bean
114/5	<i>heite langa hõbe'est, kirivämbä kui tuu ähnä</i>	she was weaving silverthread, she was more hued than the woodpecker	she was weaving silverthreads, which were more colorful than the woodpecker
	<i>veljä miil ravitie, vahaleemel vasta võeti</i>	his mind was put at ease, he was offered smooth soup	brother was fed with honey, received with mead
116	T: <i>müõka</i>		<i>mõõka</i>
118/9	<i>elo, kasumine</i>	wedding, courting	life (marriage)
120	T: <i>küõ</i>		<i>kõõ</i>

Page	Estonian text	Translation	Corrections / comments
122/3	<i>kullakene</i>	the golden one	darling
	<i>Tuvvas mul meelikas minijä</i>	If only I would get a lovable bride	They will bring me a lovable daughter-in-law
128/9	T: <i>Võib o meeles neitsikene</i>	or do you remember that virgin	<i>Võibu</i> : oh, that dear maiden
	<i>kullista kareta kaudu</i>	in the golden carriage	along the golden path or earth
	<i>sisse liigade linade</i>	in excessive linens	between plentiful linens
130/1	<i>kulla kandaja</i>	golden keeper	dear mother
	<i>ummiraud</i>	iron	in this context 'knife'
	<i>varre</i>	at dawn	before, recently
	E: <i>Laine laius linusa</i>	a wave was spreading on the sheets	<i>laiusa</i> : a wave over the wide sheets
134/5	E: <i>lõdised</i>		<i>lõdiseb</i>
	<i>kalakoeuse</i>	to the fishes home	to the fishes spawn
136/7	<i>kilbised kässed</i>	coated sleeves	blouse of woven patterned cloth
	E: <i>Ridala 1896</i>		<i>Muhu 1896</i>
144/5	<i>(iste) kivi pääle kinnütemä, iste mätta pääl märgimäe, esi mähe, esi märje</i>	she sat on a stone to feed her, she sat on the turf to suckle her, as she suckled she was in tears	she sat on a stone to swaddle (her daughter), she sat on a turf to think, as she swaddled she was thinking
148/9	<i>lakja väljä laapima 'e</i>	to reap the rippling grain	to harvest the wide field
150/1	<i>poole ilma ta ilusti</i>	she beautified half the sky	her beauty shone to half the world
152/7	<i>Pääv</i>	Day	here 'sun'
178/9	<i>Mis mina võtan lauludeksi, Kudres kulla, üteleksi</i>	Whom shall I sing about, tell me, dear Kudres	About what shall I sing and talk in murmurs (<i>kudres</i> refers to 'I', meaning here grouse chicken or soft curls or something like this)
184/5	<i>vilula vierda, pakkasella pauku, kaste'ella kalju</i>	to rally to the shade, to thunder for the frost, to clamor for the dew	to sing in the chill, to thunder in the frost, to clamor in the dew

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192/3	<i>känge alla aujala, pääle pikä pääväjala</i>	put on my shoes at dawn, put on my dress at daylight	put on my formal shoes, put on my everyday shoes
194/5	<i>kodolda näio, velildä sõsarõni</i>	home-fond maiden, devoted sister	homeless maiden, brotherless sister
200/1	<i>linikpää</i>	linenheaded (maiden)	kerchief covered (maiden)
200	E: sinol kattõ <i>paigavani</i>		<i>poigavani</i>
200/3	<i>kiä reheh/laudah/tallih iih olli</i>	who was before the barn/shed/stable	who was already in the barn/shed/stable
	<i>ku sul viidi, viidä aigu</i>	if you have a stray, go searching	if your (husband) was abducted, go and waste your time
212/7	T: <i>ie, uo, üö</i>		<i>ii, uu, üü</i>
	<i>ilo</i>	beauty	here 'joy'
	<i>sõgel</i>	basket	sieve
214	E: Tii iks ilo <i>enehutat</i>		<i>unehutat</i>
216/7	<i>Päiv</i>	day	here 'sun'
218/9	<i>ase</i>	couch	resting place
	<i>kaasanaine</i>	help-woman	maid of honor
222/3	<i>päevä poega</i>	the day's son	the sun's son
226	E: <i>maada vannaldani</i>		<i>vennaldani</i>
226/7	<i>tinarind</i>	brazen girl	(young girl wearing) pewter brooches
	<i>lina</i>	hood	kerchief
236	E: <i>Vaskivaated sejassagi</i>		<i>seljassagi</i>
236/41	<i>someralla sormusilla</i>	on the seashore, on the sand	from the translation is missing any reference to ring (<i>sormus</i>), evidently on the fingers of Kristina (which possibly suggest that she was at least modestly wealthy)

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242/3	<i>hilja</i>	late	silently
	<i>vaperdas</i>	made bold	came or leaped
	<i>õbekangas</i>	silver bar	silver cloth
	<i>õbelõimed</i>	silver	silver warp
	E: <i>Pilved olid vee pisarad, pisarad olid purjed pikad</i>	the clouds were tears of water, the tears were long sails	<i>pilvel, pisaral</i> : on the clouds were tears of water, on the tears were long sails
	<i>mardus</i>	fairy	revenant
248/9	<i>kelle rüppe rühkinessa, hame alta võidunessa</i>	the skirt that is hustling, the shirt that is striving	whose blouse will be threadbare, whose skirt hem will be soiled
250/1	<i>tule luugista tulema</i>	the pyre rampaging	the fire pouring out of a hole
	<i>tähed lõivad tääringida</i>	stars were tossing dice	stars emitted sparks
	E: <i>Pühi nutab Saare maada</i>	the blessed weep for the land of Saare	<i>Tühi</i> : the devil weeps for the land of Saare
	E: <i>Vöö kudujad</i>		<i>Vöö</i>
	<i>rahaskirja kirjutajad</i>	writers of laced scrolls	artisans making patterned belts
252/3	<i>ilmatarka</i>	sky-wizard	wisest of the wise
	<i>künnäpuu</i>	plow-tree	fluttering elm
	<i>päevä</i>	day	sun
254/5	<i>ladassarve</i>	horn-tree	(a buck with) broadly branching horns
258/9	<i>pauad</i>	tassels	hollow metal ornaments worn as a necklace
266/7	<i>ilu</i>	beauty	here meaning also joy in addition to beauty
	<i>tanav</i>	street	village road
270	E: <i>kööds peon</i>		<i>kööds</i>

Page	Estonian text	Translation	Corrections / comments
280/9	<i>pane see/neid paras minusta</i>	let this one/them stand good for me	use the best of these to ransom me
294/5	<i>ruadikmaa</i>	clay-land	stony land
300/1	<i>Sain mina vaenemees vaduma Pikkjalga, Põikjalga</i>	I poor man took to flight along Pikkjalg, along Põikjalg	In the original text, <i>pikkjalga</i> and <i>põikjalga</i> appear in lower case letters, indicating that the Tallinn street Pikkjalg (literally 'Long Leg') might not be the intended reference. The other possible interpretation of this passage would be that the recruit escaped by running zig-zag, along (<i>piki</i>) and across (<i>põiki</i>) the street.
302/3	<i>kannaksin mina kalevi</i>	I bore myself like Kalevi	I would wear broad-cloth
306/7	<i>suil sugida</i>	gently groomed	groomed with a currycomb
	<i>kalakudesse</i>	to the fishes home	to the fishes spawn
308/9	<i>kõhutamata</i>	without scruple	without honing
316/7	<i>tappelemas</i>	killing	battling
320/1	<i>uusi ürge'eida</i>	new grooms	new workers starting (with the field labour)
322/3	<i>eeke</i>	island	swath
	E: <i>Yaksi vihku</i>	a measure	<i>Kaksi</i> : two sheaves
324/5	<i>hanine</i>	waif	little goose (not in any pejorative sense)
326/7	E: <i>ei karand kallada tõttu</i>	thin beer	<i>kallade</i> : fishes
330/1	<i>orud ohjelta hoosta</i>	unfettered horses in the vale	to fetter horses in the vale
334/5	<i>veerand, poolik</i>	quarter, half	quarter keg, half keg
	<i>vaks</i>	bushel	span (a measure of length)
338/9	<i>ilu</i>	beauty	here 'joy'
	<i>rätte nurgassana</i>	in my pockets	enclosed and tied into a corner of the kerchief
	<i>Ilu tõin enese kaasa, nalja noore neiu kaasa</i>	beauty I took for myself, jokes for the young maiden	I, young maiden, brought joy and cheer with me

Page	Estonian text	Translation	Corrections / comments
340/1	<i>pisokene pillamaie, veikene veeretamaie</i>	little wench to broadcast, little imp to bandy	little girl to warble, little imp to trill
	<i>taevas aga (kõitku) laia lunda kinni, pilved pitka vihma kinni</i>	wide sky but curb the snow, long clouds restrain the rain	sky but curb the wide snow, clouds restrain the long rain
342/3	<i>ma laolan mua merese</i>	I sing the sea into land	I sing the land into sea
	<i>mõek</i>	sword	wooden sword-shaped instrument used for braiding belts
	<i>mõegalõ mõnust tegijät</i>	for the sword a pleasure maker	for the (belt-braiding) sword, a worthy craftsman
344/1	E: <i>laulud <u>laugenevad</u></i>		<i>langenevad</i>
	<i>üksi hauduja harinud</i>	one guide had taught us	one nurturer had taken care of us
348/9	<i>ohu olut</i>	beer of danger	beer of sorrow
350/1	<i>ilo</i>	beauty	here 'joy'

References:

Salve, Kristi; Lange, Anne. Huvitav ja õpetlik matk ilomaile. (J. Kurrik, Ilomaile. Anthology of Estonian folk songs with translations and commentary.) – *Keel ja Kirjandus* 1987:2, 119–122.