

# Enlightened Entanglement: A Worn-Out Project to be Renewed?

**Jaan Undusk (Under and Tuglas Literature Centre)**

The first significant idea as regards Estonian national literature at the beginning of the 19th century was that this literature – as a future project – would be written in German. The author of this project, Friedrich Robert Faehlmann (1798–1850), an Estonian by birth and a lecturer in Estonian at the University of Tartu (1842–1850), was also the President of the renowned German learned society – the Learned Estonian Society – in Tartu (1843–1850) and a highly regarded practising physician both in German and Estonian circles. He was an admirer of the Estonian language and an opponent of the political strivings of the local conservative Germans. He wrote eight Estonian national myths in German which he claimed were exact translations of Estonian originals (no such originals are known to us, although the motifs are familiar from Estonian folklore) and which are now considered to be the cornerstone of Estonian national literature; the Estonian national epic obviously had to be in German as well.

This was a markedly “entangled” Enlightenment project based on the idea that language has nothing to do with the inner essential qualities of the nation. Every natural language is a more or less incomplete reflection of some ideal (divine) sign system, and a clever nation makes the better choice. Estonian was a small, dying language; German was a larger and more cultivated tongue with a promising future. To an Enlightenment thinker, the choice between them was clear.

The project was a failure because of the strengthening of Romanticist positions, according to which every mother tongue reflected the inner structure of the nation. In this context, Estonian literature in German represented a contradiction, or a cultural bastard (the positive value of a hybrid was not recognized). At the same time, Faehlmann’s project marked the beginning of a process which resulted in a well developed national literary culture.