

*Of Hard Joy: Half a Century  
of Viivi Luik's Creations. Prose*

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**Abstract.** Viivi Luik has been active in Estonian literature for half a century: from the times of Soviet censorship to regained independence. Her renowned novels *Seitsmes rahukevad* (*The Seventh Spring of Peace*, 1985) and *Ajaloo ilu* (*The Beauty of History*, 1991) have been published in a number of foreign languages. Her first collection of poetry appeared in 1965. Since then ten more collections have followed. In addition, she has published three books of selected verse together with the volume of collected verse (2006), as well as four books of fiction, three volumes of essays, several children's books and two dramas. Many Estonian songwriters have appreciated her lyrics. Marked by an occasionally controversial reception in literary criticism, Luik's distinguished stereophonic, cool "neosymbolism" has developed from sincere nature lyrics towards a sombre urban modernism and firm social resistance, a kind of freedom of feeling and thought. Luik's narratives started to appear since 1974: first *Salamaja piir* (*The Border of the Secret House*), and the children's trilogy of Leopold. All her main characters, prone to pondering, are close to the author's alter ego, contrasting her childhood and youth to maturity; she seems to write prose as if it was tense poetry. In the two volumes of elegant essays *Inimese kapike* (*A Locker of One's Own*, 1998) and *Kõne koolimaja hual* (*A Sermon at the Grave of the Schoolhouse*, 2006), Luik shows herself on the border of two worlds and two eras, past and present, totalitarianism and postmodernism. Ice and blood dominate her writings full of childlike frankness, internal speech, prophecy and challenge. Two of her last books were released simultaneously in 2010: an essay *Ma olen raamat* (*I am a Book*; together with a co-author), and a novel about her melancholic *déjà vu* reflections in Rome, *Varjuteater* (*The Shadow Play*). Guided by a methodologically holistic perspective and moving towards a "unified theoretical field" of literary criticism, this contribution to Luik scholarship, for the first time makes available a biobibliographical comparative introduction to all of her works for the international audience. It illuminates the broadly representative character of her oeuvre and shows how Luik charts the course for an entire generation of "Soviet" writers of the Baltics as "border states".

**Keywords:** Viivi Luik, Estonian literature, "Soviet" literature, Estonian history, poetics, literary reception, censorship, realism, modernism, "neosymbolism", literary "unified field theory"

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.12697/IL.2013.18.2.04>

MAJAHOIDJA / HOOVIS / RAIUB JÄÄD, /  
 raske kangiga / taob kitsast / talverada.  
*Viivi Luik, Rängast rõõmust (1982)*

THE CARETAKER / IN THE YARD / SPLITTING ICE, /  
 with a heavy crowbar / cutting a narrow / winter path.  
*Viivi Luik, Of Hard Joy (1982)<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

Viivi Luik has been active in Estonian literature for half a century: from the times of Soviet censorship to regained independence. Her renowned novels *Seitsmes rahukevad* (*The Seventh Spring of Peace*, 1985) and *Ajaloo ilu* (*The Beauty of History*, 1991) have been published in a number of foreign languages. Her first collection of poetry *Pilvede püha* (*Holiday of Clouds*) appeared in 1965. Since then ten more collections have followed: *Taevaste tuul* (*Wind of the Skies*, 1966), *Lauludemüüja* (*Song Vendor*, 1968), *Hääl* (*Voice*, 1968), *Ole kus oled* (*Stay where You Are*, 1971), *Pildi sisse minek* (*Entering a Picture*, 1973), *Põliskevad* (*Perpetual Spring*, 1975), *Maapäälised asjad* (*Earthly Matters*, 1978), and *Rängast rõõmust* (*Of Hard Joy*, 1982). In addition, she has published three books of selected verse together with the volume of collected verse (2006), as well as four books of fiction, three volumes of essays, several children's books and two dramas. Many Estonian songwriters have appreciated her lyrics, evident in dozens of music books and recordings. Guided by a methodologically holistic perspective and moving towards a "unified theory" of literary criticism, this contribution to Luik scholarship, for the first time makes available a biobibliographical comparative introduction of all of her works. It illuminates the broadly representative character of her oeuvre and shows how Luik charts the course for an entire generation of "Soviet" writers of the Baltics as "border states".

## Prose on the Rise

Luik's first narratives appeared in 1974: *Salamaja piir* (*The Border of the Secret House*), *Leopold*, and *Vaatame, mis Leopold veel räägib* (*Let's See What Leopold Tells Again*). The third of the children's trilogy, *Leopold aitab linnameest* (*Leopold Helps A Townsman*) was published in 1975. The teenage but mature

<sup>1</sup> Here and henceforth free translation of poetry examples. A. M.

Leopold seems to be the author's *alter ego*, prone to pondering, and mostly depicted in the prosaic family life. Ethical attitudes emerge: support among family members, daily joy of work. The boy's opinions are conveyed in a colloquial language that was unusual at the time (Nagelmaa 1991: 509–510). In 1992 the writer, together with artist Epp Maria Kokamägi, compiled a child-friendly A-B-C book *Meie aabits ja lugemik* (*Our Primer and Textbook*), which has been reprinted several times.

The short prose piece *Salamaja piir*, as Tiina Kirss puts it (2007: 184), is a way station on Luik's ongoing journey between prose and poetry: "In this novella several characteristic gestures from Luik's poetics are visible: simultaneous illumination of her characters' inner and outer worlds [...]; placing clichés and saying from everyday life in changing textual environments; stepping back and forth across the threshold of memory, and listening for the secret speech of objects." The narrative describes the unsteady sensations of a lonely young man who deeply perceives close human relations, urban space and time. Sirje Kiin has written (1980: 1454): "The style of the story displays aspirations of density, it is not easy to read. [...] The sentences are brief, the wording clipped, the infrequent dialogues fragmentary and dotted [...] an attempt to find new means of expression [...] that do not fit into lyrical forms [...] the book remains somewhat mysterious [...]."

Luik admits (Kiin 1980: 1449): "I seem to write poems as if I was writing prose. At least three last collections of poems – from *Entering a Picture* to *Earthly Matters* – I have certainly done that." Indeed, her poetry moved towards objective lyrical description; and the elegance and clarity of prose sentence, on the other hand, reflect the curtness and generalisation of poetic speech: Luik's prose is that of a poet, a poetically structured, intertwined text. It is lucidly evident in her novels that Cornelius Hasselblatt, one of the first to introduce them abroad (see 1990, 2001a, 2001b, 2004: 90–94), calls it the poet's "second literary spring, without a fall between them" (1986: 85).

## High Fiction

During the rule of censorship the publication of *Seitsmes rahukevad* (1985; partly translated into English by Madli Puhvel, 2003), written in 1979–1982 concurrently with the last collection of poetry, seemed nothing short of a miracle. It might have been helped along by the interest of Finnish Estophiles in translating the manuscript (it was published in Finland the following year). This was but the beginning of the remarkable success of Luik's novels in Europe. Joel Sang (1985) compares the work with the paradigmatic childhood novel of Estonian literature, Friedebert Tuglas's *Väike Illimar* (*Little Illimar*, 1937)

(although a tempting parallel would be also the East German writer Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*, 1977). Both are autobiographical and observe the world through the eyes of a lonely 5–6-year-old country child, conveyed by an adult narrator, but the milieu could not be more different. Unlike Illimar's manor dwelling idyll, the world of Luik's child means a parochial village during the Stalinist collective farm hysteria, empty farms of those deported and guerrillas hiding in the forests: life in the midst of poverty, irrational evil and fear as a contrast to the appealing and dashing Soviet utopias. Tuglas wrote: "I would like to be little Illimar again", whereas a "Soviet" writer claims to be "wholeheartedly happy that my childhood is behind me" (Sang 1985: 986).

The author says (Oja 1987): "I chose this child not because I wanted to describe myself and my childhood, but because she was most suitable in depicting that era. [...] The pathos, naivety and optimism of the time – I think the child has all that in her." Despite the significance of social symbols and the historical subject matter, the deeper personal starting point as the basic image of the novel was nevertheless asocial (Oja 1987): "[a]s I quite often teased the family dog when I was a child, I promised it every time that one day I was going to write about it in a book or another." And (Oja 1987): "[o]nce as a child I saw drops of blood on snow. [...] And another time, somewhere in the early 1980s, I happened to see a painting by Andres Tolts, *The Nordic Plain*, where droplets of blood had replaced snowflakes [...]. Maybe this magical union of blood and snow, this Nordic plain was exactly what I wished to describe, and for me all these people and events were no more than a background to that bloody and snowy plain."

Just like Jaan Kaplinski and his poem about Vercingetorix, so is Luik warning against too "historical" an interpretation (Maiste 2000: 13): "In Estonia, *Seitsmes rahukevad* has been seen as a period novel or a political book. Elsewhere its effect has been quite different. The Swedes, the Germans and the English have recognized themselves there, as an Eternal Child, regardless of the time and place. [...] No era is entirely grim or entirely happy. People laugh everywhere and at any time. They die whenever. Children play on graves just as they do in their home garden." On the other hand, however, cultural allegory motivates as well: to Paul-Eerik Rummo's image of a "dismayed swarm of bees" made up after Juhan Liiv and used extensively by reception, Luik's child replies by letting icy air into a beehive in winter, as if disputing the myth of the golden 1960s, despite the "*squealing of primeval sorrow*" and expectation of punishment from above. In an interview the author has said (Kivi 1991): "In the Sixties the Soviet mentality of collectivism finally took root in Estonia [...] the Sixties bred a generation whose way of thinking will for a long time prevent Estonia from becoming a truly democratic European country."

The critics understood, immediately or somewhat later, that *Seitsmes rahukevad* is a masterpiece (Pöldmäe 1985; Tonts 1985; Hasselblatt 1985, 1986, 1987, 1990, 1992; Kangur 1987; Liivamets 1989; Dittmann-Grönholm 1998; Kiisler 2000). It is indeed a highly poetic, figuratively braced text with dozens of budding poems inside (Sang 1985: 986), a kind of prose poem (Langemets 1988: 178). The style is associatively confessional, first entering the picture of memory and then of time (Veidemann 1985). The linguist Mati Hint (1986) characterizes it in the manner of Roman Jakobson as an expression of parallelistic (metaphorical) consciousness that opposes the syntagmatic linearity of traditional narrative. Indeed, the work takes a look at the networks of mind and language treasury; the projection directed outward, into sentences, serves wholly the depiction of the flow of consciousness influenced by time. Of course, these definitions apply to *Ajaloo ilu* as well (Langemets 1991; NN 1991; Väljataga 1991; Mägi 1993; Prosa 1993; Stalder 2003).

The profusion of associations in fact hides a simple story line (Unt 1985): events start in August 1950 and end in April 1951, without depicting summer. At first the protagonist gathers rowanberries with her mother; finds a cooking pot of the guerrillas in the forest; Soviet aeroplanes in the sky, there have been raids and communists have been killed. People visit the farms of those deported; jam gets burnt at home. The child sits at home on her own, boldly fantasizing; finds a German bayonet in a beehive, buries her rag doll, teases the dog. She goes to town with mother; they buy books, sit in a café, she frolics around with another girl. Father comes home, brings a radio, takes her for a ride on his motorbike. The child frequents the library, plays hide-and-seek with another girl, they put on gas masks, listen to the gramophone. She helps her grandmother to pasture the cows, meets the village idiot; granny is given a gun to protect the cattle; a heifer is killed in winter; she meets an unpleasant child of a war refugee; goes with her mother to fetch firewood in the forest and again sees traces of the guerrillas. Father arrives on New Year's Eve; cattle are counted; rumour goes round that houses will be dragged to the village centre. Alone at home and craving for something sweet, the child slides the cover off the beehive, but lacks strength to push it back on; she feels guilty and weeps; falls ill, spring arrives.

This simple fabric is provided with a palette of semi-animistic intuitions of an imaginative and linguistically gifted young girl, where reflections of the (memorial) past, (narrative) present and (authorial) future intermingle, forming a mythical presence (see also Salokannel 2007). The environment seen through the eyes of a child, often not understood by her at all, becomes perceptible in the consciousness of an adult reader – the fading tang of history comes alive again (Hasselblatt 1986). The girl fervently wishes not to be

a human being but a radio battery, a square black mysterious source of energy that captures and makes audible all the screams and shrieks fluttering in the air. She makes no distinction between friends and foes, victims and aggressors, she sees everything around her as a fascinating bustle and she eagerly and with language magic, tries to communicate, interpret and influence it.

“The work contains a peculiarly humorous sadistic pleasure, a special irony towards its character,” says Mati Unt (1985: 631). The linguistic universe of text is polyphonic *à la* Mikhail Bakhtin (Verschik 2000). The standard language of internal speech of the fictional narrator and child alternates with the dialogical colloquial and dialectal speech, the communist “newspeak” with national style layers from folksy ballads and church songs or from “bourgeois” reading material to allusions of high poetry; the fragments, composed by the child – *Nuns and monks! Pharaoh!* – and tantalising swearwords with foreign phrases or other quotations.

Maire Jaanus has psychoanalysed the text (1988, 1989): the child is in the process of language acquisition. She listens avidly to the various dialects and voices about her, that of parents and strangers, madmen and bureaucrats, as well as the radio; she memorizes slogans, poems and songs, and entire speeches that sound authoritative or impressive. She smells and tastes words; for her they are palpable. The child’s reality is still body-centred; language, although enticing and desirable, is not yet fully understood or its meaning and, certainly, its ideological import are only dimly apprehended. The pre-school child is only at the beginning of its process of socialization, merely on the threshold of the symbolic in Jacques Lacan’s sense of the “mirror stage”. Her communications with the world are bodily, a series of actions, misdeeds, pranks, disobedience, and rebellions, such as kicking another child under a table, holding matches under the nose of her dog, sticking scissors into the flesh of cactuses, putting a rooster on the roof, eating forbidden food, stealing money, betraying her mother in her mind, and destroying the bees, the source of the honey.

According to Jaanus the novel is characterised particularly by the word that Julia Kristeva called semiotic (maternal chora): a word mindful of a pre-symbolic somatic experience, attentive to suffering and rejoicing, to the unreflective, lived life, to sensuous perceptions, filled with light, odour, taste, sound and rhythm, and the recollection of touch. The semiotic which Roland Barthes once called style: the decorative voice of hidden, secret, flesh, where the first coition of words and things takes place. What prevails here is more an unconscious impulsive genotype than a phenotype sublimated by culture; primary aggression rather than the late socialised persona: a naive-comic reflection of the primitive violent era with which the child intuitively and potently identifies, albeit with a growing sense of guilt.

Such straightforwardness probably scared readers with a traditional mindset – Stalinist horror is heretically not denied, but thrown together with fragments of national consciousness – the topic of the acclaimed poet's work was thus seen as alienation, although epithets such as *indifferent*, *cruel* and *with teeth clenched*, cropped up (Raudjalg 1987, Kurman 1992). As if a child could change the world, although her viewpoint makes it more transparent (Lias 1989). The aim of art, however, lies elsewhere – namely in the estranging of a petrified routine, wrote the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovski.

### The Trauma of History

In 1991 Luik writes in the paper *Eesti Kirik* (*The Estonian Church*) that although not a member of a congregation, she considers herself a Christian. The icy angel on the cover of the novel *Ajaloo ilu* (*The Beauty of History*, 1991; translated into English by Hildi Hawkins, 2007) is thus no literary decoration but a truly perceived messenger of a higher dimension. The novel plays on the danger-tinted parallelism of the era of the dramatic political years 1968/1991, the Prague Spring and the Singing Revolution in Estonia. The themes of various symbolic Biblical motifs such as Jonah escaping from God's spiritual task or the cutting of Samson's hair (shearing of hippies, mother's braid, heaps of hair in prison camps, the rock opera *Hair...*), tables of Moses, the Song of Solomon or the fish motif, guide the reader through the poetically associative, densely composed text.

Again, the plot is simple: the protagonist, like the girl growing into a woman in *Seitsmes rahukevad*, a 21-year-old aspiring writer Tema (She – however, Estonian personal pronouns do not distinguish gender!) meets a young Jewish-Russian-Latvian sculptor in Tallinn and travels to Riga to pose for him. She falls in love with the artist who is paranoid about the political spying upon his family. The young man goes to Moscow in order to use friends in the right places to get him off the compulsory military service. She remains alone in the empty flat, rummages in other people's things, reflects eagerly but indifferently about things happening outside – including the fire in the neighbouring house; then suddenly decides to go back to Tallinn. The journey is broken off in Tartu where the girl gets involuntarily involved with the militia. After that she decides to return to Riga.

The Finnish critic Juhani Salokannel (1991) – in Finland, the book was actually published only a month after the original in the crisis-era Estonia; for their unanimously laudatory reception see Pakarinen 2003 and Lilja 2007) – calls the novel a laboratory examining human relations, where the main

attitudes are doggedness and distance: it rejects topics that seemed “national” and significant at the time. A young woman among alien people, language, customs and culture. Her hosts, however, are also strangers in Riga and in the entire Soviet Union, and are desperate to emigrate. A clash of identities causes communication problems: mutual empathy is being tested but she senses warm trust. She abandons language as a useless means and tries to understand her partners via the objects in the flat.

After all, what does an Estonian know about the Jews? Anna Verschik writes (1992: 301–302; see also 2007): “Viivi Luik has amazingly captured the essence of Jews in the post-war Soviet empire: most of them cannot remember who they are and where they belong. [...] Instead, they have fear – one of the most important keywords in the novel. Because of unhappy experience [...], a Soviet Jew will never be rid of fear.” Nor will probably the Estonians, Latvians, or Russians themselves. Are love, freedom and salvation possible in the grasp of the “unbearable lightness” of history as a bloodthirsty Vampire when the rhythm is dictated by the joint armies of angels and demons all dressed in fashionable uniforms?

Distance and misunderstanding on the one hand, and approaching and understanding on the other – the imagination moves fort-da between the two opposite sides. The constant approaching and distancing of the main character and the narrator also creates a fickle mood in the text, ranging from tenderness to spite. In Salokannel’s opinion (1991) the novel “breathes”: the narrator is surprisingly mobile, a turn follows another, free association is “anarchically savage”. Still, if the representation of terror appears a bit “banalized and deflated to the Estonian reader”, as Tiina Kirss puts it in her postcolonial critique (2006: 286), “for the European reader, as safely removed from those horrors [...] *The Beauty of History* feeds and vicariously fulfils a desire to witness and experience such violence.”

“Viivi’s sense of humour is grim”, her style is “tormenting and infectious”, admires poet Kalev Kesküla (1996), calling the book a “gravedigger of old belles-lettres” and a “chronometer of new times”, which invented the language later used by the Republic of Estonia (that is, of President Lennart Meri) in communicating with the world. Partly on the strength of Mati Unt’s and Arvo Valton’s existentiality, the deep tone, frame and speech force of Luik’s poetic expression – the Heideggerian poetic declarations of common being – was to be employed by Emil Tode’s *Piiririik* (*The Border State*, 1993), as well as by Ene Mihkelson’s *Nime vaev* (*The Torment of the Name*, 1994) (see Merilai 2007b, as it is based on his pragmapoetic approach 2003, 2007a); also Parhomenko 2007, and Luik 2005).



As for *écriture féminine* (e.g. Kurvet-Käosaar 1998, 2007), she prefers, just like Emil Tode / Tõnu Õnnepalu or Mihkelson, a universal point of view of a sexless child or an androgyne. This is much evident in her essay which caused some polemics, *Suhkrustatud koletised ja lahjendatud inglid* (*Candied Monsters and Diluted Angels*, 1994), where she argues why the reader is no longer attracted to literature as it used to be (1998: 48–47): “Older poets talk about the seasons, although we do not notice them [...] spring water is not drunk from a spring but from bottles taken from your fridge, and milk does not come from udders but from tall wicked glasses in expensive cafés. Writers insist on talking to us about men and women [...] while we already long to be androgynous. What’s the point of men and women when we can make do with ourselves!”

### Collateral Dramas and Essays

In 1994 the Estonian Radio broadcast Luik’s radio play *Koera sünnipäev* (*Puppy’s Birthday*). The drama was originally commissioned by the Swiss Radio, but considered to be “too cruel”; it was instead presented in Germany, Sweden and Finland in 1995 (published in 2002). The intrigue is as follows: a family celebrates their dog’s birthday; father has switched on the TV, and the world with its militant events and leaders (Gorby, Yeltsin, Bush) forms the background to the nonchalant conversation. The teenage daughter is glued to her phone; the son is sawing a gift – a deep-frozen animal’s heart for the puppy. Mother arrives, in her own detached way; an emotionless young relative, a soldier comes to visit who celebrates the occasion by a burst of machinegun fire. Nobody sees or feels anything around them, although a dark shadow lies on the formal dialogue. The radio play is written in a hidden language of symbols, the characters, like those of Anton Chekhov, talk past one another, and their conversation is charged with meta-irony.

The leading poet and novelist Luik became interested in the drama genre, as evidenced by her opera libretto *Pilli hääl* (*The Sound of a Lyre*), published in the magazine *Looming* in 2000. The script was dedicated to the memory of her friend Aila Gothón, an Austrian Jew who was killed in a car crash. Music for the short opera was written by Aila’s husband Ralf Gothón, a Finnish-Swedish-Jewish pianist; it was supposed to come out on Helsinki Yleisradio (translator J. Salokannel), however, it never did. Recitative drama intensifies the sense of the contradictory unity between cruelty and beauty (*Everything on the knife’s edge / and is thus so beautiful*; or *Two souls, ah, you have in your chest*), lifting several blending pairs of oxymora onto the level of symbolism in the manner of Maurice Maeterlinck’s *L’Oiseau bleu*.

Another allegorical-psychedelic companion would be Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*, the parallels of Orpheus and Eurydice being two young men Johannes and Toomas: androgyny, the blending of light and darkness into Lichtung, yin-yang and Jungian Shadow. The sarcastic eternal choral song, "grave on the neck", mouth "smeared with warm blood": hate/love, violence/art, murder/life-giving (surgeon mother, in conspiracy with a drug dealer, kills her own disobedient son for a secret organ donor business), horror/beauty, demonism/Faustianism, Pythagoras/Plato, kitsch/eternal, shallow time/profundity of time, meanness/nobility, potato crisps/soul. A perfect counterpart for Mati Unt's vampire novels *Doonori meelespea* (*Donor's Memo*) and *Õös on asju* (*Things in the Night*), both published in 1990.

The two slim volumes of elegant essays *Inimese kapike* (*A Locker of One's Own*, 1998) and *Kõne koolimaja haul* (*A Sermon at the Grave of the Schoolhouse*, 2006) contain reflections and speeches published or held in Estonia and abroad. Luik shows herself on the border of two worlds, two eras, East and West, light and shade (Kronberg 1998). The barbaric zone of darkness, withdrawing to the East, and the past, where light was only for the powerful, are contrasted to the (post)modern democratic world. Luik believes that the forthcoming new century will be accompanied by the birth of new men and new art, which she, like Milan Kundera, envisions as rising on the basis of kitsch. She does not theorise, her texts are characterised by an intuitive pursuit of truth, which may, now and then, allow some contradictions, and radiant images, which originate from her poetry. Ice, glass, blood and flesh dominate both her poetry and essays, which the critics have found to be full of childlike frankness, prophecy and an adventurer's challenge to obsolete ways of thinking.

## Magna Mater

Bearing witness to Luik's enduring productivity, two of her new books were released simultaneously in 2010: an essay *Ma olen raamat* (*I am a Book*, together with Hedi Rosma) and the novel *Varjuteater* (*The Shadow Play*).

Her third novel consists of thirteen memorial essays which concentrate on Luik's years in Rome in 1998–2003, together with her husband, ambassador and writer Jaak Jõerüüt (*who has been my home in the world*), dodging now and again into the realities of her childhood, and Berlin and Finland. As the author of this article has written in *World Literature Today* (Merilai 2011), the idea of the book originates from a deep *déjà-vu* experience which lies at the heart of her identity. She feels that her whole life has been a journey toward Rome. It started in her childhood when she saw a muddy and bloody picture of the

Colosseum on the floor of a house of deportees, and became clear in a flash when she finally arrived in the Eternal City. For half a century, the Almighty knew that this precocious child and that pensive woman is the same person who has spent her lifetime between the ruins, scooters and cafés of the Whore of Babylon.

The image of the shadow play divides reality in two: outside there is an everyday bustle of superficial masks, behind which glimmers the sense of the unity of mankind. These two spaces are separated by a temple screen like a sheet of ice between people, positions, and faiths, which may also transform into an Iron Curtain. Luik has always tried to break through that wall “*when the human masks disappear and all living beings turn into one breed*”. Still, despite her enduring passion to feel a common love, she has also learned to accept scepticism: “*In Rome you’ll understand that you don’t know what it is all about, even that you shouldn’t know. Live.*”

Luik’s melancholy alternates with mild self-irony. She makes fun of the clumsy Estonians in the “elite” Europe as much as she mocks “*the cultivated indifferent impudence*” of Italians who prefer shallow entertainment to thoughtful communication. The author tries to follow an urgent recommendation: “*Write only about what you are most ashamed of – don’t lie!*” This may not be the easiest of tasks as the undertone of her work is shaped by the inevitability of facing death. The last chapter describes her father’s funeral back home and a Jewish shadow show in Berlin: the candle is out and while it seems that nothing more is expected: “*the dead are rising again, stamp their feet on the floor and sing a new brave song. And people are laughing.*” After all, she comes to the conclusion: forget shyness and offer your lonely neighbour the first flower of spring which has penetrated through the snow – “*no way this earth and these muddy spades can ever harm you*”.

In sum,

marked by an occasionally controversial reception in literary criticism, this is how Luik’s distinguished stereophonic, cool “neosymbolism” has developed from sincere nature lyrics towards a sombre urban modernism and firm social resistance – towards a kind of freedom of feeling and thought. “I have written in order to capture time,” declared the singer of hard joy, “detain it and show it to the others. To become different myself. To say: everything is possible, you just have to wish, persevere and suffer. You have no right to give up, no right to succumb.” (Kiin 1980: 1451)

“I should also add that the language I use is Estonian,” wrote the prosaist Luik (1998: 50) a few years after Estonia regained its independence, which had been lost for half a century. “To everybody who asks me what it feels like to write in such a small and obscure language, I’d like to reply in the words of Isaac Bashevis Singer: “I love to write stories about ghosts, and nothing conveys the essence of ghosts better than a language on the brink of extinction... I am sure that one day all the dead will wake up and their first question is: can I read a new book in an extinct language...””

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