

A Forgotten Beginning: Hella Wuolijoki's Philosophic Play Dr. Lucius and the Poet

JÜRI TALVET

Abstract. The article proposes to revise critically the work of the Estonian-Finnish writer Hella Wuolijoki created in her mother tongue, Estonian. The main Estonian researcher of Wuolijoki's work, the late writer and critic Oskar Kruus did not attribute any importance to the play *Dr. Lucius ja Luuletaja* (*Dr. Lucius ja Luuletaja*), which indeed was destined to remain in manuscript for about 80 years. As is claimed in the present article, the play, on the contrary, could be considered as a significant attempt to create a philosophic-symbolist drama in the Estonian language. From her early student years in Helsinki, Hella Wuolijoki became under a strong influence of socialist and feminist ideology. However, the main ideas of the play should not be identified as much with the offshoots of revolutionary ideologies of the start of the 20th century as with the spirit emerging from the work of some of the greatest poets-thinkers of Europe and the world, among whom was Juhan Liiv (1864–1913) – *Luuletaja* (the Poet) in Wuolijoki's drama.

Keywords: Hella Wuolijoki, Juhan Liiv, Bertolt Brecht, Henrik Ibsen, expressionism, symbolism, realism.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12697/IL.2013.18.2.06>

The smaller an ethnic culture, the more voids the course of time reveals in its memory. Under the outside pressure of new ideological currents and fashions some of the voids are filled, but a small nation's intellectual energy is seldom distributed evenly. Other areas and phenomena, even some important beginnings may fall into oblivion. An example of the aforesaid is offered by the play *Dr. Lucius ja Luuletaja* (*Dr. Lucius and the Poet*) by the Finnish-Estonian writer Hella Wuolijoki (Estonian-born Ella Marie Murrik, 1886–1954). She wrote the play in all probability in the early 1930s. The work that could be considered one of the first serious attempts to create a philosophic drama in the Estonian language, as well as one of the brightest early apologies of women's rights in Estonian letters, was fated to remain in manuscript for 80 years.¹

¹ The play *Dr. Lucius ja Luuletaja* was published for the first time this year (Tartu: Tartu University Press 2013). The present article in English largely coincides with my introductory essay in Estonian, included in the same book. – J. T.

The main Estonian researcher of Wuolijoki's life and work, a writer and literary critic Oskar Kruus (1927–2007) published in 1999 a monographic study titled *Hella Wuolijoki* (in the following cited as OK). I completely agree with Olev Remsu who in praise of Kruus's work in Estonia's main literary magazine *Looming* gave to his review the title "Midagi suurt ja ilusat" ('Something Great and Beautiful'; Remsu 1999: 1264–1265). The monograph crowning Kruus's thorough dedication to Wuolijoki's life and work will in any case remain as a fundamental point of reference for everybody who in this new century happens to take an interest in Wuolijoki's chequered life and copious work.

However, as regards the play *Dr. Lucius ja Luuletaja*, Kruus's book may easily mislead its readers. First, Kruus mistakenly claims that the copy (or copies) of the play that reached Estonia before the war had perished (OK 140, 276). As for the play itself, Kruus does not attribute much importance to it. Instead, he backs his meagre characterization of the play by quoting the opinion of Valve Saretok (1911–2004), in those times an Estonian student in Helsinki who worked as Wuolijoki's secretary and later became a writer herself (she died in exile in the US). The latter had said that the play was "thrash, impotent, spiritless twaddle"² (OK 140).

But was it?

Who was Hella Wuolijoki?

In his monograph Kruus claims that Wuolijoki is among Estonian women of all times the one to gain world fame (OK 263). In the chapters dedicated to the play born in Wuolijoki's collaboration with Bertolt Brecht, known above all by the German title *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti* (written 1940/1941, published and staged in Germany in 1948; translated into English as *Mr Puntila and his Man Matti*) Kruus describes the work as a joint achievement of "both European top playwrights" (OK 164).

Indeed, Wuolijoki's success as a playwright in Finland from the mid-1930s onward was spectacular. Her plays had also a considerable resonance before the Second World War in Estonia. At least to some extent she was known in Sweden and Germany. However, to suppose that a few translations and some stage productions of her work outside Northern Europe should have granted Wuolijoki a European fame and made her equal to Brecht seems clearly exaggerated.

Kruus is indignant over the fact that despite a mutual agreement signed by both playwrights, the play *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti* soon after

² Here and in the following the translation of the Estonian quotes is mine. J. T.

Wuolijoki's death came to be published, staged, as well as mentioned in international dictionaries under the exclusive name of Brecht (OK 171). I agree with Kruus: this is lack of justice, a forceful imposition of the rights of man, that is, of the stronger sex and (in this concrete case) of his fame. At the same time one can hardly deny that thanks to Brecht's world fame, the popular farce (to which Brecht indeed made additions in the vein of Marxist ideology) spread outside Finland, carrying to the wider world audience an image of the Finnish people – possibly of a somewhat softer “national” version of capitalism ...

There is also unfairness in the reception of Wuolijoki's work in Estonia. The average idea about Wuolijoki among the newer generations of Estonians tends to be limited mainly to the political aspects of her life. Not long ago a Finnish film, *Hella W* (2011, directed by Juha Wuolijoki, its main focus on the secret contacts the writer had with Kerttu Nuorteva, a young Soviet female spy, and thereafter Wuolijoki's imprisonment for life in Finland in 1943). By contrast, most Estonians know nothing of a dozen (*sic!*) successful movies made in Finland since 1937, based on Wuolijoki's literary works (OK 240–247).

If the reason for the Estonian ignorance is that these movies depart from Wuolijoki's works written in Finnish, why then, one is tempted to ask, has not a single Estonian major theatre company nor any of our film-makers until today taken an interest in Wuolijoki's play *Koidula*, written in Estonian, published and staged in Estonia in 1932, followed by nearly forty (*sic!*) reviews and vivid polemics in the Estonian press? (OK 85)

It is obvious that Wuolijoki's “border” situation between two nations, as well as her left-wing world-view and political compromises have created some ambiguity about her figure as a writer and person. Was she a Finnish or Estonian writer, a communist or a capitalist?

Indeed, there is a curious coincidence: among the most renowned Finnish women writers at least three have an intimate connection with Estonia: Wuolijoki, Aino Kallas (1878–1956) and now, in the present time, the playwright and novelist Sofi Oksanen (b. 1977). Kallas was married to an Estonian, spent large periods of her life in Estonia and situated her shorter and longer narratives in Estonia's history. Oksanen's mother is Estonian. Like Kallas, Oksanen has based her most popular work almost exclusively on Estonian history, with the focus on the (post-)Stalinist era. Like Wuolijoki, Kallas has been defined as a Finnish-Estonian writer, though she wrote most of her work in Finnish, her mother tongue. Oksanen writes in Finnish.

Yet Wuolijoki's case is basically different. It is obvious that she must have had an extraordinary talent for language and intuition. Otherwise it would be impossible to explain the tremendous success in Finland of her plays written in Finnish. When that eighteen-year-old Estonian girl who came from the

Southern Estonian border-town Valga and went to a Russian-language high school in Tartu, arrived in the fall of 1904 for her university studies in Helsinki, she could hardly pronounce elementary phrases in Finnish (Wuolijoki 1996, the initial chapter).

On the other hand: had the Estonian work of Wuolijoki been limited to a single play, the above-mentioned *Koidula* (in whose centre is Lydia Koidula, the acclaimed patriotic poet from the “national awakening” era), what national narrow-mindedness would question Wuolijoki’s contribution to Estonian literature? In fact, Wuolijoki wrote all her early works in Estonian: besides *Koidula*, a play *Talulapsed* (*Peasant Children*, 1912), a novel *Udutagused* (*Those behind Mist*, 1914), a poem “Sõja laul” (‘War Song’, 1914) which according to Kruus was called by Brecht “the world’s most pacific war song” (OK 60), a sequel to the first novel, *Udutaguste Leeni* (*Leeni of Those behind Mist*, 1933), and two plays that remained in manuscript: *Minister ja kommunist* (*A Minister and a Communist*, written in 1931) and *Dr. Lucius ja Luuletaja*.

The political ambivalence of Wuolijoki has at its heart the fact that although she already during her student years in Helsinki came under the strong influence of the socialism, it was not an obstacle to her later career as a rich businesswoman and a landlady, nor to providing in her book of memoirs (Wuolijoki 1995; written in a Helsinki prison, where she was thrown as a “red” traitor to her country) a cordial portrait of Jaan Tõnisson, one of the pre-eminent pre-war Estonian (right-wing) national politicians. The latter fact aroused such suspicions about her in Soviet Estonia that the aforementioned memoirs could be published in their full form only after Estonia’s re-established independence (1991). Similarly to Brecht, despite sharing almost fully a Socialist-Marxist world-view, Wuolijoki never became a member of the communist party. Differently from Brecht, she never included in her works such ideological-political talk or preached her ideas in such a boring manner that it would have kept from the theatre a substantial part of the public or have turned her work into something difficultly transplantable from one determined historical moment to a substantially renewed one.

Maybe the future historians will explain women’s role in ending big and small wars. In that case their consideration should beyond doubt include Wuolijoki whose contribution to the peace negotiations of both the Finnish Winter War (1939–1940) and the Sequel War (1941–1944) has unanimously been recognized (OK 157–160, 189, 193). By a happy coincidence, at the moment of ending the Winter War, the Soviet Union’s ambassador in Stockholm also happened to be a woman (of Finnish descent) – Aleksandra Kollontai, with whom Wuolijoki developed a confidential relationship. Life-long imprisonment to which Wuolijoki was sentenced in 1943 lasted in fact less than a year.

When it became clear that Finland at the closing stages of the Second World War did not appear on the side of the winners, but instead, of the losers, Finnish politics were overhauled. The former traitor and prisoner Wuolijoki became one of the founders of the People's Democratic Union of Finland, as well as the director of Yleisradio (the Finnish national radio) (OK 193). Likewise she continued to be productive in her literary work.

Ideology, aesthetics, philosophy

Researching Juhan Liiv's work I came across the chapter "Juhan Liiv" in Wuolijoki's memoirs written in prison in Helsinki (Wuolijoki 1995; reprinted in *Juhan Liiv mälestustes 2000: 271–276*). Wuolijoki compares Liiv with the Son of Man. The parallel was drawn by a woman who indeed could share in the broad lines of the Marxist-atheist world-view, but for whom what mattered was probably not so much a concrete political doctrine or ideology, but the search for justice, purity of the soul and love.

The same values Wuolijoki learned from socialists and Marxists, as well as from the early exponents of women's rights (like August Bebel, cf. OK 37) during her student years in Helsinki, she could have intuitively grasped earlier from Liiv's poetry, as well as from the work of numerous European and Western writers, and especially, poets. Besides, one should not forget the personal contacts the high-school girl Ella Murrik had with Liiv. In her memoirs Wuolijoki mentions that Liiv sent her and to her sister Salme love letters and poems, of which Friedebert Tuglas, the main biographer and the subsequent constructor of Liiv's poetic canon knew nothing (Wuolijoki 1995: 114–115).

In the brief characterization of Wuolijoki's dramatic work in his bulky overview of Estonian theatre *Eesti teater (Estonian Theatre, 2011: 188)* Jaak Rähesoo concedes that scandals followed the stage performance of Wuolijoki's plays from the very beginning (veiled rebelliousness, a revolt against traditional male power in her first staged play, *Talulapsed*, immediately banned by censorship after its first performance in March 1913; similarly, the Finnish version of the same play was banned by censorship after its first performance in Helsinki in February 1914) (OK 53–54). In the footsteps of Johannes Semper's earlier observations (OK 85) Rähesoo detects in the drama *Koidula* an imitation of the main motif of Ibsen's play *The Lady from the Sea*. In the following he considers Wuolijoki's Finnish play *Justiina* (1937, Estonian translation 1938) "an insipid melodrama" and calls the main character of another Finnish play *Juurakon Hulda* (1937, Estonian translation 1938) "a boring literary type". Nevertheless, Rähesoo admits that in the play *Niskavuoren naiset* (the first performance in Helsinki in 1936; the same year in Estonian, at the Vanemuine Theatre in

Tartu), the main source of Wuolijoki's subsequent fame as a writer, she managed to balance her two sides (Rähesoo 2011: 189).

In his earlier book in English, Rähesoo mentions Wuolijoki in the general context of the pre-war Estonian theatre only in passing: "Characteristically the more experimental authors, like Luigi Pirandello and Jean Cocteau, were largely ignored, while the more conventional plays of Marcel Pagnol and the Estonian-Finnish dramatist Hella Wuolijoki were highly successful." (Rähesoo 2008: 54)

In Rähesoo's own opinion, formulated some ten years earlier, Estonia was "a culture that had matured in modernity" (Rähesoo 1998). However, I doubt whether one can expect from Wuolijoki or any other women writers of the first quarter of the 20th century a full acceptance of the formal experiments of Western modernism. Virginia Woolf was a singular woman amid the mighty masculine vanguard of the 1920s and 30s.

In the young and small Estonian culture even the most daring male writers did not adapt themselves to the formal experiments of modernism. It is obvious that in Estonia, where literary and art criticism was in its budding phase, hardly supported by a tiny intellectual elite, a technical display of tricks would not have had any audience among readers, nor in theatres.

Doubtless it would be worthwhile to research more thoroughly Wuolijoki's revolt against the conventions of her time, as well as the factors which made her plays attractive both to a wider public and the intellectual minority. Not only had Wuolijoki innate talents, but she was also one of the most educated Estonian women at the start of the 20th century. In all probability she was the first Estonian woman who ever obtained an MA degree at a university, in the spring of 1908 at Helsinki University, where she studied folklore, history and aesthetics (OK 44). Her early intellectual and spiritual interests, as well as her enthusiasm for the modernizing processes in literature and the arts are reflected in both her books of memoirs (Wuolijoki 1995, 1996).

It is also obvious that at the time when Ibsen by his dramatic work managed to give rise to an entire feminist revolution in China (Tam Kwok-kan 2006), he influenced even more deeply closer cultural regions, like Finland and Estonia. Naturally, both Eugene O'Neill and Bertolt Brecht, playwrights whose world-view was close to Wuolijoki, learned a lot from Ibsen. Nevertheless, despite their personal contact and a shared play, Wuolijoki's relation with Brecht remained superficial. Wuolijoki was not satisfied with the modifications Brecht introduced in the manuscript of her comedy *Sahapuruprinsessa* (*The Sawdust Princess*). Discrepancies were revealed also between the Finnish print version of the play, *Iso-Heikkilän isäntä ja hänen renkinsä Kalle* (1946) and Brecht's German *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti* (1948; OK 165–168).

Brecht introduced a change in the title of the play, turned Wuolijoki's farm-hand into a proletarian and diminished considerably the personal features of the female character, Eeva. Quite surely Brecht's coarse masculine speech, by which he in quite a few of his plays intended to ensure success among a broader popular public, was not Wuolijoki's style. In her humour Wuolijoki is merrier and subtler than Brecht.

A much greater affinity than with Brecht could be discerned in Wuolijoki's relation with Eugene O'Neill. Kruus quotes several passages from the author's preface in *Justiina* (1937), in which Wuolijoki confesses that watching O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* at the theatre made a tremendous impression on her (OK 145–146). Yet she was not satisfied with the end of the play, where Lavinia / Electra, after the destruction of her murderous family, closed the doors and windows of her home. Instead, Wuolijoki calls for opening homes with their family intrigues and crimes to the world, looking for help and support in other people. It became the main idea in Wuolijoki's *Justiina*.

O'Neill is generally considered to be one of the founders of Expressionist drama. In his *Electra*-trilogy expressionistic means can be observed in the employment of such elements of ancient drama as the choir and the mask. Both are meant to create a distance between the tragedy developing on the stage and the viewer of the play. On the one hand the story is told from aside and, on the other hand, characters are turned into conveyors of ideas, their individuality being diminished. The origins of Expressionism can be traced back to ancient literature, but it enjoyed a great popularity above all in the late Middle Ages, when allegoric expression was widely used in literature and drama. The characters did not appear as more or less individualized personalities, but instead embodied ideas, abstract notions, general features and summarized figures representing people's social status, range and occupation.

Expressionism of the initial part of the 20th century was preceded by Symbolism, which in practice often intermingled with features of Realism. The employment of myths, in fact, is quite characteristic of Symbolism, whereas the realistic dimension generally secures a chance for a psychological trend, which tends to be absent in a more clear-cut Expressionism.

In her highly successful Niskavuori comedies and other plays with the peasant life background Wuolijoki did not avoid a game of casual events and farce-like comical effects based on the action on the stage. Yet I do not think these plays could be reduced to a mere peasant idyll or to demonstrating how valiantly women defended their family property. Rather, I suggest that in Wuolijoki's plays a many-voiced historical woman stands forth. Universal archetypes for that woman could be found in the myths and history of the most ancient times. The capacity of Wuolijoki to create for the stage independent, psychologically

different women, representing a variety of points of view, as well as different male characters, and show them against the background and connections of changing history is the principal characteristic feature of her Niskavuori-plays, and some others. There Wuolijoki indeed bridles her most impetuous feminist drives, but in any case woman as a great symbol is powerfully visible, as is the author's philosophy: notwithstanding man's inconstancy and fragility, woman in her different roles ensures humankind's oneness with nature, as well as the hope of love and life's continuation.

At first glance indeed, similarities with Ibsen's *A Lady from the Sea* could be found in Wuolijoki's plays *Koidula* and *Dr. Lucius ja Luuletaja*. In all three works a man / a stranger appears, calling upon the main woman character to follow him in getting closer to nature, life's totality and love, to move beyond the conventional (not to say, bourgeois) in life, away from materialistically sober and rational social rules.

Yet the similarity cannot be extended. The expressive force of *A Lady from the Sea* is diminished because its symbol tends to be somewhat too unambiguous. It stands out prominently, while in the work as a whole, developing against the background of a private family story, the main woman character does not possess any stronger features of individuality besides the fact that once, years ago, she had met a man, a stranger who had awakened in her love as the call of nature (symbolized by the sea). Such a woman lets herself easily be submitted to Ibsen's idealistic imagination, leading to an idyllic solution in which granting the woman freedom of election seems to be sufficient for her return to her lawful husband and family.

Wuolijoki's *Koidula* differs radically from Ibsen's play because of its historical background. Its heroine is not simply a woman whose private life would serve as a symbol expressing authorial idea. In Ibsen's work the name of the main woman character does not mean anything at all. As the play tends to employ the means of expressionistic allegory, her name as a citizen could well be replaced by "the lady from the sea", just as her husband, in the same allegoric vein, could be called, for instance, "the tame man".

Differently, in Wuolijoki's *Koidula*, there is no abstract character like "the lady from the sea", "the tame husband" or "a stranger" that would be a mere symbol of the call of love. In Wuolijoki's play *Estonia* of the times of the national "awakening" appears on the stage as the protagonist, with all its pains and suffering and its humiliation in the past centuries. At the same time Wuolijoki is not interested in making the action correspond to the real details of *Koidula*'s private life. What she aims at is to foreground the first spiritually and intellectually awakened woman as a personality in Estonian society and culture, as well as to convey the voice of a young creative woman. *Koidula*'s call to refute

one's slavish spirit and to love genuinely one's homeland was destined to persist in the emotional memory of her nation more firmly than the different nationalist "projects" which groups of men, urged by their thirst for power, ambition and nearly always bitterly quarrelling, have fostered in our history. In a poetic "fragment", published as early as in 1889 in the newspaper *Sakala* (No. 40) Liiv observes:

Aspiration divides the world,
feeling unites the world,
love consecrates all in oneness,
uniting it in the feeling's world.

In parallel with this, the main message of Wuolijoki's drama is the tragic drowning under male power of one of Europe's most alert women's voices of that era. Yet in the final episode of the play Wuolijoki lets the protagonist resume her spirited message and existence in a passionate speech:

There is a power in me that is mightier than your walls, you, prison-house! I have power that gives life to clouds in the sky and to trees in the forest! I fall into dust and you tread on me with your feet; but I will crawl up once again and find support in the clouds of the sky! You scorch in a living fire the sores of my heart; but even from fire my heart returns to my breast ... (*Quietly*.) Do you hear how they call me: Koidula! I am Koidula!³

Greatest works of world literature (or theatre) are seldom written in accordance with a clear-cut aesthetic programme either of Realism, Symbolism or Expressionism. A good example of this is Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (1943), perhaps one of his most mature achievements. His famous alienation effect is magnified wonderfully, almost exemplarily in the play, but at the same time the uncommon (not to say, "alien") Chinese scenery alienates the author from his habitual "lower" alienating means (coarse voices from "below" or directly from the "bottom" of society), forcing him to extract from himself a lyrical and emotional tonality – which clearly contradicts the prevalent ideological discourse. It does not let the expressionistic idea-scheme suppress and dictate reality. Reality – the "other" culture from its ancient depths – revolts against it.

³ As a writer and a poet, Lydia Jannsen (1843–1886) is known in Estonia by her literary pseudonym Koidula, a name derived from the word "dawn" (*koit*); she has also been called "the Singer of the Dawn".

Dr. Lucius ja Luuletaja, Wuolijoki's philosophic drama

Wuolijoki's *Dr. Lucius ja Luuletaja* belongs to those works in which the premise of success has been a symbiosis of Realism, Symbolism and Expressionism. Starting from the title of the play, one of its main characters, Dr. Lucius, carries a strong symbolism already in his name. It is not an Estonian name but a symbolic one. On the basis of the name's etymology, Lucius could be related to light (Latin *lux, lucis* 'light'), with the ambivalent Lucifer (originally, "the bringer of light", "the morning star" but who subsequently was identified with Satan, the chief of the fallen angels or evil spirits / demons). In Wuolijoki's play *Dr. Lucius* symbolizes reason and science – the human faculties that "register" and describe but at the same time because of their rational-intellectual dictate become alienated from love and nature. As Kruus mentions, one of the draft versions of the play had indeed the title *Lucifer and the Poet* (OK 139).

In the fashion of realistically inclined criticism, it is not difficult to identify and reveal Dr. Lucius's prototype. It is Juhan Luiga, a psychiatrist and intellectual, whom Ella Murrik knew very well. In her book of memoirs, *Koolitüdrukuna Tartus (As a School-girl in Tartu)*, she observes: "He was Juhan Liiv's doctor, in fact of the same type as Liiv, but born to different circumstances." (Wuolijoki 1995: 119) In the play she says that both men looked quite similar.

The latter remark should be borne in mind when interpreting the play. In the triangle of the main characters, any accentuated opposition or antagonism (like the one that separated Wuolijoki's Koidula from her German-speaking husband Michelson, who deprecated Estonian culture) seems to be consciously avoided.

With realism and looking for prototypes once should not go too far. Wuolijoki's goals were obviously different. They were not limited to the reproduction of the life stories of both Juhans, Liiv and Luiga, or to a description of Estonia's historical circumstances at the beginning of the 20th century. Maybe one should instead interpret the coupled characters, the Poet – Dr. Lucius, as an expressionistic alienating effect, similar to the one in Brecht's "*gute Mensch von Sezuan*" who was at the same time man and woman (rendered into English somewhat clumsily as a "person", in *The Good Person of Szechwan*).

One cannot ask the author, or her secretary (who made the typewritten copy of the play), if the initial capital letter in "Luuletaja" in the title of the drama was intentional. In any case, throughout the play it is used as a common name, without capitalizing the "l". Thus Wuolijoki did not let her "poet" become a part of the allegory, but placed him firmly in the context of Estonian history. All references of the play confirm that the "luuletaja", either with

a capital or small “l”, can be identified with Liiv, one of the greatest Estonian poets of all times (1864–1913).⁴

From the above-said one should not conclude that the “realness” of the character could be verified on the basis of Liiv’s biography (1927) written by the main establisher of Liiv’s canon in Estonian letters, the essayist and short story writer Tuglas. Wuolijoki creates quite consciously a different “poet”, highlighting in relation to the historical Liiv other aspects than Tuglas. Above all, Wuolijoki reveals Liiv as a thinker, a carrier of a certain philosophy and spirituality.

Thus the “poet” is made to stand for great yet socially alienated creative spirits in history. Liiv’s manly “double” Dr. Lucius adapts to society’s rules. The young lady Eie, the play’s main female character, enchanted by the ideas of women’s rights and social justice – identifiable with Wuolijoki herself – chooses the path of liberty, love and nature. Similarly with the poet, she does not fit into the established caste system, but is worried and anguished because of the society as a whole. She suffers for those who are excluded from social welfare. The motto of the play, borrowed from Vergil’s *Aeneid*, alludes to the same: “Infandum regina iubes renovare dolorem...”⁵

All three acts of Wuolijoki’s play happen in one and the same place. Unity of place, however, does not mean here an intimate psychological drama. Instead, Wuolijoki’s concern is the spiritual state of the Estonian society at the start of the new century. Eie has just returned for a holiday from Germany where she studies at a university. The sumptuous mansion of her father Andres hosts a group of visitors who represent quite fully the Estonian society of those times. As is characteristic of Expressionist drama, the minor characters are not introduced by their names, but instead their office and position determines their existence. They are shown as faithful servants of power. Their main goal in life is their personal welfare, though each in his own way attends to the “Estonian cause”. Andres, who from a tailor’s apprentice has risen to be a rich businessman, is proud that he is taking over houses and property from Germans, the former lords and governors of the country. Other visiting gentlemen feel offended by the fact that the main celebrated guest of the party is a poor poet who overshadows them. The tension created by social differences is visible from the very beginning of the play, but Wuolijoki avoids becoming too intense, instead, she softens the situation by means of humour and irony.

⁴ By today, two bilingual Estonian-English selections of Juhan Liiv’s poetry have appeared. *Meel paremat ei kannata / The Mind Would Bear No Better* was published by Tartu University Press in 2007, while a new enlarged selection, *Snow Drifts, I Sing* has recently come out in Toronto (Guernica, 2013). Both books include extensive introductory essays on Liiv’s life and work.

⁵ “Queen, you oblige me to renew an inexpressible sorrow” (*Aeneid*, II 3).

The poet comes from the circumstances the society of the rich would gladly delete from its memory: he comes from “below”, where “people breathe behind the mist”. He is accompanied by shadows that refer to one’s conscience, and by “the rustle of woods, the dark wings of a forest’s rustle” – the awareness of death, limits of life, as well as of the liberating totality of life. Finding himself in the mansion of the upstart⁶ Andres and the rich folk, the poet feels like Segismundo in Calderón’s drama *Life is a Dream*. In Liiv’s poem carrying a symbolically nuanced title “I walked towards the Forest” (‘Ma kõndisin metsa poole’) there is a strophe not much known to the Estonian public, because it was first published only in 1909, and then, more than a century later, in the major selection *Lumi tuiskab, mina laulan* (Liiv 2013):

Oh, I am afraid of open field roads,
they are full of court’s legal records,
and to be in a society,
oh, of what should one speak there?

Wuolijoki’s irony is aimed at the part of the Estonian intellectual elite that tries to situate itself close to power and forget its peasant origins. For the couple of young writers in the play a model could be found in the leading figures of the Young Estonia movement, Gustav Suits and Tuglas. The “Young Estonians” would have liked to have turned Liiv into a forerunner of Symbolism (as the embodiment of their own aesthetic ideal). Liiv rejected these attempts. This rejection is manifest in his poems “To Young Estonia” and “Don’t Ask Me For Poems”, as well as in his bitingly mocking short poems “Aeg on” (‘It Is Time’) and “To Fr. Mihkelson”⁷ – dedicated respectively to Suits and Tuglas. In his poem “Ööhulkumine” (‘A Nightly Wandering’) Liiv writes:

When sometimes at night
I wandered in Estonian letters
and even in newspapers,
as a writer,

then I kept silently apart,
I was silent – not to be noticed.
Then in the society of the upstarts
I felt as if blinded by sunshine.

⁶ In Estonian, the equivalent is *kadakasaks*, literally ‘a would-be-German’.

⁷ Until 1923, Tuglas’s family name was Mihkelson.

Everything in Liiv's being revolted against upstarts, including the imitators of foreign and "centric" fashions. Even the famous slogan of the Young Estonians, "Let us become Europeans, let us remain Estonians", ever since solemnly repeated and reiterated by educated Estonians, made Liiv suspicious. Wuolijoki intuitively grasped it, making in her play the poet, whom the young writers would have liked to have seen as "cutting a window to Europe", identify Europeanism instead with "killings and wars, filthiness, borders and passports".

In many ways, Dr. Lucius is wiser than the "Young Estonians". As a scientist, he would like to "extract" from the poet all he is capable of as a creator. Differently from the younger writers, he is preoccupied with the national genius, regretting that it had always remained an "unfinished" project. Yet, as a scientist, he is more interested in "registering", reproducing and describing reality than changing it. Also in the poet he sees merely an "attractive case history", while he is reluctant to recognise him as a living person. In the course of the play he attempts to impose himself as a "male" – seeking to be superior to the poet in the eyes of Eie (who in his view is simply a woman, sexually fated to her role of the inferior "other").

The difficulty is that Eie is not a traditional Estonian woman, but a young lady enlightened by her studies abroad, awakened and rebellious – like Wuolijoki herself. Eie feels from the very beginning a spiritual proximity, one could even say, identity, with the poet – even if the poet himself confesses his wandering in the mist of existence and his scepticism about changing the world order.

Act Two moves to a more intimate ground. Now Eie's marriage or, more exactly, her being "given to a man" is in focus. A radical divergence can be observed between socialist Eie's and her upstart capitalist father. With the poet revealing to Eie his amorous feelings, a lyrical tonality is introduced. The cynical man Dr. Lucius, though at times capable of self-irony (which at least to some extent shows him as a lonely spirit in the rich people's society) in his manly earthiness repels Eie. However, as the poet in a fit of anger takes a knife and wounds his rival, Eie seems to accept the idea that in accordance with her father's wishes she indeed could become the wife of Dr. Lucius. She says of Lucius the scientist, whose manly charm and even wisdom she cannot deny:

Here we have but a great registerer, and he is not evil. He only registers both evil and good, poetry and flowers. He is not evil, but maybe he just isn't able to show him as good.

The third and last act is separated from the events of Act II by two months – there has been time enough for Lucius to heal his wound. In all probability also Eie as

well as the poet himself have recovered from the sudden physical conflict. The wedding party begins. The society introduced in Act I resumes its place – as if hinting that the philosophic-ideological conflict has no solution at present. All seems to follow its rightful course but Lucius commits a fatal mistake by betraying his earthly desire and considering Eie as his property even before the marriage has been contracted. In the episode in which Eie, refuting him, utters the famous phrase going back to the late Middle Ages “vade retro, Satana”, Lucius becomes clearly identified with Lucifer. Meanwhile the poet who with his comrades, the symbol-characters from Liiv’s prose work, *Kägu* (Cuckoo) of Käkimäe and the Shadow, is hailed by Eie as the Son of Man and Liberator.

The end of the play could have become excessively pathetic, had the author (at the moment when it appears that the return of the poet is not a part of a play in the play) not let a true feeling of love be born in Lucius / Lucifer. Suddenly the earthy and cynical man discovers his longing for something that cannot be “registered”, purchased or sold, something invisible and fragile that nonetheless persists in the depth of existence – in the same way as it is impossible to erase one’s shadow, either the consciousness of death or the feeling of guilt. It confounds the society’s ritual as well as the scheme by which the play until then seems to have developed.

Thus from the realistic and earthly circumstances the end of the drama creates a potent generalizing image that has not lost its validity despite all changes that have taken place on the surface of life. Lucius in his final speech confesses that even though the call for a different love has been awakened in him, he would never be able to follow the poet / Christ. One could interpret this as realism, or fatalism, had Eie (symbolically, as historical woman) not taken a firm decision to choose, despite all realisms, the path of liberty.

Wuolijoki might not have been mistaken in anticipating the course of recent history. Rapid changes that impatient men would long for, cannot be seen anywhere, or their success has turned out to be short-lived. On the contrary, male-kind has meanwhile lost some of its ancient privileges. At the same time woman in her increasingly multiplied roles has ever more actively become present on the stage of history.

Jüri Talvet

juri.talvet@ut.ee

Tartu Ülikool

Maailmakirjanduse õppetool

Ülikooli 17–403

51014 Tartu

EESTI

References

- Vinkel, A., ed., 2000. *Juhan Liiv mälestustes*. 2000. Tartu: Ilmamaa.
- Liiv, J. 2013. *Lumi tuiskab, mina laulan*. [J. Talvet, ed.] Tallinn: Tänapäev.
- OK = Kruus, O. 1999. *Hella Wuolijoki*. Tallinn: Virgela.
- Rähesoo, J. 1998. Modernsuses kasvanud kultuur. – *Õhtuleht*, 16.1.
- Rähesoo, J. 2008. *Estonian Theatre*. Tallinn: Estonian Theatre Union.
- Rähesoo, J. 2011. *Eesti teater. 1*. Tallinn: Eesti Teatriliit.
- Tam Kwok-kan. 2006. Ibsenism and Feminist Awakenings among Early Modern Chinese Writers. – *Interlitteraria*, 11.1, 113–128.
- Wuolijoki, H. 1995. *Koolitüdrukuna Tartus*. [L. Viiding, transl.] Tallinn: Eesti Raamat.
- Wuolijoki, H. 1996. *Ülikooliaastad Helsingis 1904–1908*. [Linda Viiding, transl.] Tallinn: Eesti Raamat.