

*Tension in Modernist Art and Lyric Poetry
at the Beginning of the 20th Century
in Estonian Culture: Ernst Enno and Others*

ANNELI MIHKELEV
milennagm@gmail.com

Abstract. The Young Estonia group (1905–1919) was at the centre of Estonian literature at the beginning of the 20th century, when Estonian poetry was both experimental and imitative. Gustav Suits was officially the creator of modern Estonian poetry. At the same time there were poets who wrote original poems that did not imitate previous work. Juhan Liiv was one of these, and Villem Grünthal Ridala and Ernst Enno continue in the same vein. Enno's nature poetry is pantheistic and symbolic, emotional and sensitive to nature, at times suggesting transcendental cognition. He was interested in Oriental religion, which influenced his poetry to become less rational and more mystical. Ridala and Enno also used visual effects, and their texts have been set to music as well as becoming part of the visual arts in films and serials. The paper analyses the verbal texts of Enno and Ridala, and the interaction between visual and verbal texts.

Keywords: lyric poetry; modernism; innovations; symbolism; verbal texts; visual texts

Young Estonia in the centre

Modernism was a contradictory phenomenon, containing several paradoxes and tensions even in the first declarations and works of arts. The roots of these paradoxes existed in romanticism. Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), one of the predecessors of modernist art, in his work *The Salon of 1846*, stressed the idea that romanticism and modern art were united:

Romanticism and modern art are one and the same thing, in other words: intimacy, spirituality, colour and yearning for the infinite, expressed by all the means the arts possess. It follows from this that there is an evident contradiction between romanticism and the works of its principal devotees. (Baudelaire 2006: 53)

Baudelaire used the term 'romanticism' in a different sense than it is used by contemporary literary researchers.

Baudelaire's words explain exactly the essence of modernist art, and his words also predict what happened years later in art and literature. It seems that Baudelaire keenly sensed the essence of the new art, or, more exactly, how the new art would establish itself. Baudelaire's ideas are still vital in contemporary times, if we speak of modernity and/or modernism and postmodernism. One of the most typical modernist characteristics is the experimental quality, which is connected with the condition of living in a modern world (thinking of the scientific, industrial and technological changes in society). Modernist writers also created innovations in form and content in their literary works. Many groups in Western European countries espoused their innovations and explained their innovative ideas in different magazines through slogans, with several '-isms' representing these innovations. These innovations usually tried to establish new art and new poetic language (dada, imagism, expressionism, surrealism, etc.).

At the turn of the 20th century, the movement known as Noor-Eesti (Young Estonia) played an important role in the development of Estonian literature and culture. Young Estonians enthusiastically looked to the culture of Europe, taking new ideas from European countries and imitating them. Young Estonia's slogan was "Let us be Estonians, but also become Europeans!" (Noor-Eesti I 1905), which is the most popular and oft-cited sentence from the heritage of the Young Estonia group.

Jüri Talvet explained the situation as follows: "Noor-Eesti, which was born against a background of revolutionary unrest in tsarist Russia, indeed meant in Estonian circumstances a 'cultural explosion'" (Talvet 2007: 42; qv also Veidemann 2006).

Young Estonia (1905–1919) was in a central position in Estonian literature at the beginning of the 20th century. Although Young Estonians reacted to conservative nationalist ideas and the influence of German culture, the slogan contains opposites: Estonian and European culture. Estonian national culture and identity was based on peasant and conservative attitudes of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Estonia was a closed community with strong Baltic-German influences under the Russian Empire. Young Estonia's slogan was a call to make Estonian society more European (to be precise, more French) (Nirk 1970: 157).

"However, in the broader European context it represented rather how the imitative Young Italy, Young Poland, Young France, etc., movements had been born. In neighbouring Finland, the Young Finland circle had begun its activities in the 1880s". (Talvet 2007: 43)

There were also tensions between German and Russian culture in Estonian culture during the Young Estonia period because some intellectuals had studied

in the German cultural space, for example Marie Under, Henrik Visnapuu et al., while others had studied in the Russian cultural space, for example Gustav Suits, Friedebert Tuglas, Ernst Enno et al. (qv also Mihkelev 2011)

“The affection Noor-Eesti held for science was born in the aftermath of the 19th-century Western positivist rationalist-scientific ‘leap’. However, because German landlords and barons had governed and oppressed the Estonian peasantry for many centuries, Noor-Eesti tried to repudiate and overcome German influence in Estonian culture. Instead, French culture became the epitome. There was a conscious opposition to Romanticism, the paradigm for which was formed in the bosom of German idealistic philosophy and was the activity of the German cultural elite (Herder, Goethe, Schiller, the Schlegel brothers).” (Talvet 2007: 43)

The influence of Russian symbolism was quite strong in Estonian literature, and through Russian symbolism French culture also influenced Estonian culture (cf. Estonian prose writer and playwright, initiator of the Estonian realist novel before Young Estonia, Eduard Vilde (1865–1933) read Russian classical literature through German translations). Translations from different languages and cultures characterised this period in Estonian culture.

One of the main Young Estonia poets was Gustav Suits (1883–1956), who wrote his poems in a symbolist style and was officially the creator of modern Estonian poetry. Suits’ poetry is a good example of symbolism in its Western form, intellectually searching with much emphasis on a highly individual, sophisticated style. (Lange 2002: 24).

Suits’ poem “My Island” (1905) appeared first in his cycle of love poems:

MY ISLAND

Still I keep sailing and sailing,
And seeking an isle in the sea:
I have sought it long already
Where the random winds sail free.

The sea has many islands
And havens expectant with light,
But I cannot find the island
I dreamed in the dazzled night.

And still my vessel keeps scudding
On a swaying circular plain,
And the clouds above me go swaying,
And I seek my island in vain.

(Suits 1953; translated by W. K. Matthews)

The song “My Island” is similar to the song “Rändaja õhtulaul” by Ernst Enno (see below).

After the revolution of 1905, Suits’ poetry became more serious and melancholy. The title and main symbol of his most influential collection of poetry is *Tuulemaa* (*The Land of Winds*, 1913). This is a significant title which connects Estonian national romanticism of the 19th century with European symbolism. There are at least two meanings of the title, one representing Estonia, the author’s homeland, and the other the poet’s soul, his personal feeling. In fact, the land of winds could be any country with a complicated history and destiny (Finland, Ireland, etc.).

We can see how traditional patriotism or nationalism is mixed with international and revolutionary ideas and motifs in Suits’ poetry. There is a tension with older Estonian national romantic poetry, which was connected with the tradition of German romanticism, and also with French symbolism and modernism, for example the poem “Tuulehaud”, (“The Grave of Winds”, 1913):

I am singing a song after changes
Clouding sunlit distances of Time.

I am singing my song, and it changes
With the breakers, the fierce tempests of Time.

The years’ spinning wheel moves, it turns round and round.
The grave of cold winds buries gleam and sound.

Never ask for my dream or my vision:
Could they ripen to euphony or song?

Ask the winds or my loveliest vision:
It lies scattered, and the storm is my song.

Some gusts rang like flutes, but most blasts were shrill.
My flowers are sparse on the winds’ bleak hill.

Was it frail? Was its garden too open
Among plains, with the people winds?

Was my mind too impatient, too open
To all calls from the Commonwealth of Winds?

Who would know? Here I water my flower. Cold breath
From north-east sweeps bare rocks, my years’ home of death.
(Lange 2002: 27; translated by Ants Oras)

Ants Oras has written: “Although Suits stands head and shoulders above the other Young Estonia poets, some of them are of outstanding quality. Villem Grünthal-Ridala’s lyrical pictures of Estonian island scenery, intimately viewed through the eyes of a meditative recluse, have something of classical beauty in their slow, controlled form, which owes much to the poet’s Italian favourites Garducci, Leopardi and d’Annunzio... Another solitary person, of a more mystical cast of mind, Ernst Enno (1875–1934), preferred less distinctly outlined forms, and visions painted a wistful grey in grey.” (Oras 1963: 10–11).

Innovations and symbolism

There were also poets who were accepted with reservation by the narrow circle of Young Estonia, although they were still very interesting and important. One impressive figure from this period was Villem Grünthal Ridala (1885–1942). He wrote impressionistic and innovative nature poetry and romantic alliterative ballads. He was born on Muhumaa Island and graduated from the University of Helsinki in 1909, he studied Finnish language and literature, and the folklore and history of the Scandinavian countries, attaining a PhD in 1941. He was arrested during the revolution of 1905. From 1923 to 1942 he worked as a lecturer at the University of Helsinki.

Ridala uses different neologisms and archaisms from dialects and the Finnish language to express the moods and impressions of landscapes. His poetry enriched the Estonian language; at the same time he tried to create his own poetic language, which also included archaic grammatical forms. He created many nuances and connotations to represent, for example, the night in winter or the day in summer; the sunrise and sunset, the sea and forest. For example his poem “*Talwine õhtu*” (“*Winter Evening*”) from the first Young Estonia album:

Above twilight, dark from shadows,
 soft and bluish snow
 cast by the rolling, fading sun
 a reddish glow.
 Across the boundless snowy field,
 so empty and bare
 a single road leads
 over the river,
 where brown willows
 has fallen asleep. [- -]
 (Ridala 1905: 152; my translation)

Ridala's favourite motifs are drawn from the Estonian island Saaremaa, where he lived in his childhood and during the summer. His poetic 'ego' is a romantic and a dreamer who longs for remote places and the openness of the sea. The visual effect of his poems, how the verses are placed on the page, especially free verse, was extremely important to him, although he used classic poetic forms as well. Ülar Ploom says that, "there are several texts in Ridala's early and middle creative periods in which the iconic-diagrammatic level dominates, ... This allows us to regard Ridala's iconics in the key of symbolist allegory, even in several examples that appear to be realistic natural landscape pictures of the homeland." (Ploom 2008: 304)

In his ballads and long poems Ridala used alliterative verse and motifs from folklore. His ballads are romantic and mysterious, the main topic being the relationships between nature and man and between society and the individual. A descriptive aptitude characterises Ridala's poems, especially in his ballads. Ridala also wrote essays on Estonian writers such as Anna Haava (1914/1915) and Ernst Enno (1925).

Symbols and nature

Ernst Enno (1875–1934) was another important figure from this period. He was born in south Estonia near Tartu. His nature poetry is pantheistic and symbolic, emotional and sensitive, very impressive and suggestive, and at times suggests transcendental cognition. On the surface, Enno's poetry seems to be nature poetry: he describes beautiful landscapes, forests, villages, fields, lakes, seasons and the sea. His texts are hearty, simple, romantic and lyrical. His poetry was very original, but paradoxically Young Estonia did not accept his works at all.

The Young Estonia magazine declared itself a modern art and culture magazine, but there was antagonism between this declaration and the translated texts, between the Young Estonia group and reality. Enno's poetic style was too different from Gustav Suits' and Friedebert Tuglas' (the principal members of the Young Estonia group). His favourite motifs are his home and memories from his childhood, roads and houses. At the same time his poetry originates from his theosophical philosophy: Enno was interested in Oriental religions and this influence gives another dimension to his verse, making his poetry more irrational and mystical.

Enno was influenced by Maurice Maeterlinck and Rainer Maria Rilke. Enno was one of the first symbolists in Estonian poetry, but at the same time he continued Juhan Liiv's style. Liiv's greatness as a poet arises from an

exceptional intensity of feelings and unrivalled uniqueness. For example, Liiv's poem "Lumehelbeke" ("A Small Flake of Snow"):

A small flake of snow,
silence silence,
drifts past the window,
silence... silence...

As if it were waiting,
silence, silence,
as if contemplating:
silence, silence!

My heart, why beat so?
Silence, silence!
Peace waits for you –
silence, silence...
(Liiv 2007: 61; translated by H. L. Hix)

Jüri Talvet has written that, "Another early poem, 'A Small Flake of Snow', also reveals Liiv's tender and intimate relationship with nature. Liiv is able to reproduce the beauty of the defenceless and the ephemeral, to make it reflect the fragility of human life and, especially, of spiritual aspirations in the background of cosmic cruelty. Repetitions, so characteristic of Liiv's later poetry (here "silence, silence") accomplish an effect comparable to that in Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem 'The Raven'." (Talvet 2007: 46–47).

On the surface, Enno's poetry seems to be nature poetry: he describes beautiful landscapes, forests, villages, fields, lakes, seasons and the sea. Enno's simple verse longs for the experience of divine plenitude.

"Tuul käib" ("The Wind Walks", 1933)
On an empty shore the wind is roaming
searching for shoes, softly moaning,
beyond the wood it makes its way –
summer was buried there yesterday ...
...
On an empty shore the wind is roaming
searching for shoes, softly moaning,
beyond the wood it makes its way –
...

The shore has felt the storm's great rage,
 and cold creeps through the small village:
 rime and ringing round the meadow strolling
 on a desolate shore the wind is rolling,
 softly crying, fleeing from cold –
 forever seeking shoes of gold.
 (Bird 2018: 168–169; translated by Hilary Bird)

One of the most important motives in his poetry is 'the way', which is a symbol of the path of life with the individual as an eternal wanderer seeking light, or his/her mental place or home. Sometimes the force of suggestion in his poetry is very strong, so it seems transcendental. He wrote mainly in free verse, although his poems are musical and individual with a number of his poems being set to music.

His poem "Rändaja õhtulaul" ("The Night Song of the Wanderer", 1998) is well-known from the movie *Toomas Nipernaadi* (1983, director Kaljo Kiisk), based on August Gailit's (1890–1960) novel (1928):

I walk on the gray endless on the way,
 the grain filled with a central grass.
 I walk and walk on the way,
 after all, as a child, the ways loved the mind –
 the roads sing late in the evening.

These paths, how are they as hard as the jams,
 these endless call lines, –
 I walk and walk, roads hard like jams,
 so gray and dusty all these paths,
 these wanderer houses.

After all, as a child, the ways loved the mind,
 after all, as a child to hear the story –
 after all, as a child, I loved e mind,
 Your song to sing on a gray road,
 If it wasn't in the world quickly.

Hour late now, sings infinitely way –
 the mind longs for the dustless beach.
 Hour late, the road is hard as a necklace,
 I am kept as a bride on myself –
 however, it cannot be carried out.

I walk on the gray endless on the way
 the grain filled with a central grass.
 I walk and walk on the way,
 If the road song, make a ringing mind,
 and everything is so late in the evening,
 (Enno 2008: 134–135; my translation)

The main character of the novel and movie is Toomas Nipernaadi (Tõnu Kark) who is “travelling around Estonia, in summertime, from one adventure to another. Nipernaadi rejects routine life and duties and only stays at a place as long as it gives him pleasure. He is the embodiment of the human yearning for freedom.” (Annus 2009: 86). The novel *Toomas Nipernaadi* consists of seven stories about summer adventures told through a fantasy of Nipernaadi, who was also the writer. Gailit’s novel is based on a contrast between boring everyday existence and the romantic life of fantasy. “*Toomas Nipernaadi* marks a complete break with the solemn, didactic conventions of the Estonian novel by portraying the fantastic adventures of a Bohemian itinerant on the road in summertime.” (Bird 2018: 264; Nirk 1987: 178).

August Gailit (1891–1960) was born into a Latvian family, but studied in both Latvia and in Estonia. He was a writer who used grotesque motifs in his short stories, published at the beginning of the 20th century. Gailit was an exceptional figure in Estonian literature. He belonged to the Siuru literary group, together with Friedebert Tuglas and others. Ants Oras has written: “Gailit retained his delight in stories as stories, picturesque, fast-paced, pointed, full of suspense and surprise, amusing and amused. ... Gailit’s bohemian colourfulness had always made him seem an exotic bird in the more soberly coloured landscape of Estonian prose.” (Oras, Kangro 1967: 33). The film *Toomas Nipernaadi* belongs to the contemporary time (1983), although the novel itself belongs to the 1920s.

It is significant that the music used in the film is very impressive, producing perhaps one of the best-known songs from all of Estonian film, “The Night Song of the Wanderer” (1976). Before the film the song had appeared in “Veli Joonatan” (1976) at Vanemuine theatre in Tartu. The singer Anne Maasik (b. 1951) is first of all a very original singer. Her songs are characterised by a total immersion in the text and a very sensitive and powerful performance. Her style combines the traditional Finno-Ugric song tradition and a deep feeling for nature (see Maasik 2012).

Conclusion

Estonian poetry was both experimental and imitative at the beginning of the 20th century. The Young Estonia movement wanted to imitate Western culture, French culture in particular, but they used German translations. At the same time there are poets who wrote original poems that did not imitate previous work. Juhan Liiv was one of them, Villem Grünthal Ridala and Ernst Enno continued in the same vein. It is interesting that Young Estonians accepted Juhan Liiv, but not so much Ernst Enno, and that these poets (Juhan Liiv, Ernst Enno, Villem Grünthal Ridala) were very popular in their own times as well as in the 21 century: several songs with lyrics by these authors are well-known choral songs at our song festivals. Young Estonia was ambivalent, and it is paradoxical that the best poets were also authors who did not belong to the centre of the movement but rather had their own individual original styles.¹

References

- Annus, E. 2009. Gailit, August. – E. Eglāja-Kristsons, V. Gasiliūnas, A. Mihkelev, eds., *300 Baltic Writers: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania. A reference guide to authors and their works*. Vilnius: Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore.
- Baudelaire, Ch. 2006. *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*. Trans. P. E. Charvet, ed., London: Penguin Books.
- Bird, H. ed., 2018. *An Introduction to Estonian Literature*. Bloomington, Indiana: Slavica.
- Eesti Teatriliit 2023. http://etbl.teatriliit.ee/artikkel/maasik__anne3 (23.03.2023)
- Enno, E. 2008. *Rändaja õhtulaul*. Tartu: Ilmamaa.
- Lange, A. 2002. *Six Estonian Poets in Translations of Ants Oras. Kuus Eesti luuletajat Ants Orase tõlkes*. Tallinn: Tänapäev.
- Maasik, A. 2012. *Folgialbum. Rännak lauluvainule*. <https://arhiiv.err.ee/audio/vaata/folgialbum-rannak-lauluvainule> (23.03.2023)
- Mihkelev, A. 2011. Between Traditions and Innovations: Tensions in Modernist Art at the Beginning of the 20th Century. – *Interlitteraria*, 16 (1), 123–136. <https://doi.org/10.12697/IL.2011.16.1.8>
- Nirk, E. 1970. *Estonian Literature. Historical Survey with Bibliographical Appendix*. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat.
- Oras, A. 1963. *Estonian Literary Reader by Ants Oras. A Brief Survey of Estonian Literature (1)*. Bloomington: Mouton & Co., The Hague, The Netherlands, Indiana University Publications.

¹ For more on Anne Maasik's works: http://etbl.teatriliit.ee/artikkel/maasik__anne3 (Eesti Teatriliit 2023).

- Oras, A., Kangro, B. 1967. *Estonian Literature in Exile. An Essay by Ants Oras With a Bio-bibliographical Appendix by Bernard Kangro*. Lund: Estonian PEN-Club, Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv.
- Ploom, Ü. 2008. Ridala ikoonikast sümbolismi esteetika taustal. – *Methis. Studia humaniora Estonica. Noor-Eesti kümme aastat: esteetika ja tähendus*, 1/2, 71–85. <https://doi.org/10.7592/methis.v1i1-2.481>
- Ridala, V. G. 1905. Talwine õhtu. – *Noor-Eesti I*, Tartu: Kirjanduse Sõprade Kirjastus, 152.
- Suits, G. 1953. *Flames on the Wind*. Trans. W. K. Matthews. ed., London: Boreas.
- Talvet, J. ed., 2007 Juhan Liiv ja tema olemasoluluule. Juhan Liiv and His Existential Poetry. – Juhan Liiv, *Meel paremat ei kannata. Valik luulet eesti ja inglise keeles. The Mind Would Bear No Better. A Selection of Poetry in Estonian and English*. Trans. J. Talvet, H. L. Hix. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.
- Veidemann, R. 2006. Addition to the Comprehension of Noor-Eesti (Young-Estonia) as a Receptive Explosion of World Literature. – *Interlitteraria*, 11, 294–304.