

## *Between Traditions and Innovations: Tensions in Modernist Art at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

### 1. Centre and periphery

The centre and the starting point of modernism was Paris. The most developed and structurally organized languages of modernism developed in Paris. In other words, Paris was the centre of the semiosphere in a semiotic, as well as a geographical, sense. At the same time, a centre–periphery relationship also existed inside modernism or, more exactly, in modernist language. These movements created several tensions inside modernist art and in society.

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. Matei Calinescu explained Baudelaire's opinion as follows:

Romanticism is, in Baudelaire's view, not only the 'most recent, the most contemporary form of the beautiful,' but also – and this point deserves to be stressed – it is substantially different from *everything* that has been done in the past. The awareness of this dissimilarity is actually the starting point in the search for

*novelty*, another cardinal concept of Baudelaire's poetics. (Calinescu: 1987: 47)

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 sensed very well 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 or also postmodernism. One of the most typical modernist characteristics is its experimental quality, which is connected with the condition of living in a modern world (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, and several '-isms' represented these innovations. These innovations usually tried to establish new art and new poetic language (dada, imagism, expressionism, surrealism etc.).

Paul de Man has also written about the contradictions between the concepts of 'modernity' and 'traditional', and between 'romantic' and 'historical' (q.v. Man 1996: 145). Paul de Man applied Nietzsche's philosophy (young Nietzsche's work from 1870s, *Of the Use and Misuse of History for Life / Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*) when he explained the relationship and conflict between modernity and history, and he also stressed that Baudelaire's conception of modernity was very close to Nietzsche's conception (Man 1996: 156). It is interesting that Man also talks about strategies of modernism:

As soon as modernism becomes conscious of its own strategies [- - -] it discovers itself to be a generative power that not only engenders history, but is part of a generative scheme that extends far back into the past. (Man 1996: 150)

Calinescu has somewhat different opinion of modernism:

My own opinion is that modernity in general, and literary modernity in particular, are aspects of a time consciousness that

has not remained the same through history, and that Baudelaire's theory of modernity cannot be enlarged to account for the whole of literature, simply because modernity is a rather recent invention that has little to say about varieties of aesthetic experience unconcerned with time. [- - -] There is indeed a conflict between modernity and history, but this conflict itself has a history. [- - -] Baudelaire's poetics of modernity can be taken as an early illustration of the revolt of the present against the past (Calinescu 1987: 51–52)

Calinescu's opinion is that Baudelaire's modernity is an aesthetics of imagination, opposed to realism (Calinescu 1987: 55). It seems that similar relation continues also between modernism and postmodernism at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, French philosopher and theorist of postmodernism Jean-François Lyotard expresses the idea that postmodernism and modernity are connected and post-modernity is a part of the modernity (Lyotard 2000: 1427).

Leon Surette, who has analysed modernism and occultism in his work, also sees the connection between romanticism and modernism:

I have argued that modernism continued the Romantic celebration of passion, revelation, and revolution, and found much of its inspiration in many of the same sources as the Romantics – in Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, the Kabbala, and Swedenborg. These sources have been obscured by modernist scholarship's fixation on nineteenth- and twentieth-century archaeology, anthropology, and comparative religion. (Surette 1994: 281)

Modernism also contained the aspect of revolutionary romanticism and rebellion as phenomena which establish something new. Consequently, Baudelaire described the code of modernism, and all Baudelaire's essays described situations in which modernism became the phenomenon of the centre or, in other words, he described how the aesthetic of modernism moved from the periphery to the centre. Romanticism and realism were at the centre before modernism. Although the language of modernism was fixed in the centre, new languages came from the periphery, which is the area of semiotic dynamism, according to Yuri Lotman (q.v. Lotman 2000: 134).

These languages from the periphery extended the area of modernism and added something new to the mainstream and cultural and political centres in West.

## 2. The Lands of Winds

Peripheral languages and cultures, for example Estonian, Finnish and Irish, try to move to the centre. This process was very intensive, because these cultures also form the boundaries of the semiosphere, i.e. they are ambivalent, which separates and unites, according to Lotman:

The boundary is a mechanism for translating texts of an alien semiotics into 'our' language, it is the place where what is 'external' is transformed into what is 'internal', it is a filtering membrane which so transforms foreign texts that they become part of the semiosphere's internal semiotics while still retaining their own characteristics. (Lotman 2000: 136–137)

So, it is understandable that the group *Young Estonia* had the slogan "Let us be Estonians, but also become Europeans!". Although *Young Estonians* reacted against conservative nationalist ideas and influences of German culture, the slogan contains opposites: Estonian and European culture. Estonian national culture and identity was based on peasant and conservative attitudes in the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Estonia was a closed community with strong Baltic-German influences under the Russian Empire. The slogan of *Young Estonia* was a call to make Estonian society more European (to be precise, more French):

Anxious to overcome the narrow provincialism that stifled the growth of Estonian culture, the followers of *Noor-Eesti* endeavoured to get into touch with the latest developments in modern West-European literature, especially French literature. In formulating an aesthetic programme of their own, they were particularly influenced by the current of neo-romanticism, which in many respect set itself up as the antithesis of realism. [- - -] It was their aim to evolve an intellectual type of literature, similar

to those of the West, catering for a refined and highly educated public. (Nirk 1970: 157)

The *Young Estonia* movement brought to Estonia cultural translations: French culture through Russian or German translations (the main languages that members of *Young Estonia* read in the original were Russian and / or German).

The poetry of Gustav Suits (1883–1956) is a good example:

Symbolism in its Western form, intellectually searching, with much emphasis on a highly individual, sophisticated style, characterises the verse of Gustav Suits, the real creator of modern Estonian poetry. (Lange 2002: 24).

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the poetry of Gustav Suits was revolutionary and romantic, with pathos and optimism:

His first collection, *The Fire of Life* (*Elu tuli*, 1905) is the simplest of all his poetry books, the most popular, reader-friendly and appealing, due to its youthful enthusiasm. It was a kind of preparation for the readers of that time for more demanding lyrical works. The manner of the young poet betrays the influences of Friedrich Nietzsche and the Finnish poet Eino Leino, but it also reveals traces of 19th century Estonian national romanticism. (Süvalep 2003: 18)

Some poems were also written in a symbolist style, as “Minu saar” (My Island, 1905) which appeared first in the cycle of love poems:

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

After the revolution in 1905, Suits' poetry became more serious and melancholy. The title and main symbol of his most influential collection of poetry is *The Land of Winds* (*Tuulemaa*, 1913). This is a very significant title which connects Estonian national romanticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with European symbolism. There are at least two meanings of the title *The Land of Winds*. It represents Estonia, the author's homeland, but also the spirit of the poet's soul:

The personal feeling of Suits as someone living away from his native land is also strongly felt. It can be said as well that *The Land of Winds* expresses something universally human or typical of 20th century man: doubts, disappointment in rationalism, feelings of insecurity. The wish to find a place of one's own in the windy world – or to create one's own Land of Winds – nevertheless persists. Contemporary, as well as later, reviewers have paid great attention to the meaning of the image of the Land of Winds. Is this Estonia, suffering in the winds of time, or the refuge of the poet's own mind and spirit? The symbolist image allows both interpretations, being simultaneously a general vision of the whole world and life as an unpredictable and forever changing domain of winds. The only choice is to accept this volatility which, for a man who has distanced himself from nature and traditions, means finding the lost unity again. [- - -] It is truly stylish, precise in form, closest to French literature (Gautier, Baudelaire, Verlaine) and Russian symbolism. (Süvalep 2003: 20)

Actually the 'land of winds' is 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, e.g. the poem *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 for 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; trans. by Ants Oras)

I still believe that the new meaning which was created in this poem is much more significant for Estonians than for the French. Although Suits translated foreign culture, it was still Estonian culture, although with French influences. It seems that, thanks to French culture (symbolism and modernism), Estonian culture discovered its own character, which had been overshadowed.

It is also significant that while the cultural centre in Paris declared the idea of pure art, on the periphery symbolist melancholy might also express political disappointment. At least in the Estonian context the result was paradoxical and innovative; the style in which the sorrow was expressed was innovative.

### 3. Mysticism

Before the *Young Estonia* movement was established, the *Nuori Suomi* group (Eino Leino, Akseli Gallen-Kallele, Jean Sibelius, Robert Kajanus, Pekka Halonen *et al*) existed in Finland. Eino Leino (1878 – 1926), who was one of the main members of the group, was also Gustav Suits' friend and influenced Suits' poetry (q.v. Süvalep 2003: 17 above).

We can find many similarities between Estonian and Finnish literature at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Eino Leino used very old national motifs in his poetry, and there is a tension between the older romantic tradition and his contemporary styles, mostly new-romanticism. By the way,

...both Leino and Yeats spoke of themselves as 'the last Romantics': while in England, France and Germany Romanticism had developed into such movements as Symbolism and Realism, in smaller countries like Finland in east and Ireland in the west Romanticism was predominantly the voice of national aspiration, even when these cultures were touched by the more sophisticated influences. (Branch 1978: 7)

We can find mystical elements from the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, as well as fairy-tales or folk songs, in Leino's poetry. Leino was influenced by the German poet Heinrich Heine. Mysticism is the most important characteristic of Leino's poetry. The Estonian researcher August Anni feels that the strongest features of Leino's works are a hidden style and language: his style is musical, and its sound is very beautiful. His ballads in the collection *Whitsongs* (*Helkavirsiä*, 1903 and 1916) express that musical style best (Leino 1922: 11). Leino's poetry contains a tension between old folk songs



and a contemporary modernist style. It is different from Gustav Suits' poetry, and actually the old ballads and mysticism, combined with the author's originality, make Leino's poetry modernist – this is the paradox of modernism. It seems that modernist art use old motives and fragments, but the most important thing is to interpret these old motives in very individual style, and the personality of the author is very important.

The ballad *Ihalempi* is the first poem from the collection *Whitsongs*. Leino uses actually quite a well known narrative or story from oral tradition of several nations. Michael Branch explains that poem as follows:

In Leino's poem, the girl is carried off by Demon Jack, symbolising death; she is found by the Creator in another world where she has witnessed the plunging of a star into a bubbling spring (a fertilisation symbol). For this reason and because she has experienced other miraculous phenomena the Creator makes her the bearer of a star, a hero, a great man. (Branch 1978: 17)

I think that there would be also parallels with Bible (Mary) and *Kalevala* (Marjatta story). As for the content of the ballad, we can see different conflicting relations between the characters of the ballad: the girl and the god, the girl and her relatives, although she is silent and does not answer to the relatives' questions; girl's relatives and demons:

Her brother set off.  
Demon Jack lit his lanterns.  
'Where have you dropped, poor sister?'  
The boy foundered in marshes.

Her father went to find out.  
Demon Jack lit his lanterns.  
'Where have you walked, foolish girl?'  
Father became Kalma's guest.

Her mother went off in search.  
Demon Jack lit his lanterns.

Where is my little darling?  
 Mother knew heaven's welcome.  
 (Leino 1978: 23; trans. by Keith Bosley)

The tension grows step by step in every strophe. The dramatic dialogue in the first part of the ballad is very significant: brother, father and mother ask the questions, but the girl does not answer because she is already in another world. The girl's answer is like a pause in music which expresses the expectation and tension. The only dialogue in the poem is between the girl and God:

The maiden, mother's pet, sat  
 on a heaving swamp;  
 the true God asked her:  
 'Why do your cheeks burn?'

The forest's choice one answered:  
 'A cloud moved high in heaven  
 and the sun stained the cloud red:  
 my cheeks were kindled by it.'  
 [ - - - ]

And the Judge of hearts inquired:  
 'Why is your bosom on fire?'

The shy one of the woods said:  
 'A golden star plunged  
 down into a bubbling spring:  
 my heart was shaken by it.'

And then the good God declared:  
 'Because the cloud was moving,  
 you, girl, shall be a cloud-girl,  
 because the dew has fallen  
 you shall be a blessed maid,  
 and because the stear has plunged  
     you shall bear a star,  
 a hero of warlike kin,  
 a great man, a sword-lover.'

He said, raised whom he had brought  
to the highest place  
and upon the highest cloud.  
(Leino 1978: 23 – 24; trans. by Keith Bosley)

The language of the ballad is similar to Finnish folk songs: Leino uses alliterative verses and specific words which stress the lyric aspect of the ballad. The end of the ballad is ambivalent and it is also as a symbol of the destiny of human being: the death and happiness are mixed and connected.

But in the context of modernist art it is significant how M. Branch interprets the poem:

If we consider this poem in the context outlined above, it would seem that Leino is opening the collection with a fanfare of clear, strong notes: a fantasy of how he would wish the poet's creative process and his position in society to be. (Branch 1978: 17)

#### 4. Occultism and rebellion

Mysticism and occultism also characterize Irish poet William Butler Yeats' (1865 – 1939) works. W. B. Yeats was an innovator in Irish poetry and drama. He connected national myths and fantasy with a symbolist style, and the main pathos in his poetry is connected with the freedom of Ireland. Yeats' cultural and political nationalism was a reaction to the late Victorian world:

Yeats was one of the main forces in the creation of the Irish Literary Theatre in Dublin in the 1890s. This became the Irish National Theatre Company in 1902, and it found its eventual home at the Abbey Theatre in 1904. The theatre's *raison d'être* was the creation of a space for the exploration and celebration of Irish cultural, historical and political identity. (Wilson 2007: 83)

Yeats' aim was to establish a special and original Irish poetry. So, traditional motifs and an innovative style distinct from the European

cultural centre created a new innovative and high-styled poetry, which also carried national meaning. This is a paradoxical phenomenon: nationalism as a traditional and conservative phenomenon is combined with modernism.

Irish mythology, with its heavenly beings, gods and simple peasant culture, creates the tension in Yeats' poetry). The earthly and heavenly, the high and low, are always combined in Yeats' literary works (e.g. *The Cold Heaven*, 1914). Especially at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Yeats used Irish mythology and folklore in his works (e.g. *The Stolen Child*, 1889; *The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland*, 1893; *The Hosting of the Sidhe*, 1899). His poems are passionate and full of contrasts (e.g. *The Lover Tells of the Rose in his Heart*, 1899). The red rose is a symbol of freedom which occurs again and again in Yeats' poems, for example *The Rose Tree* (1921) where the dialogue between two Irish freedom fighters is:

'O words are lightly spoken,'  
Said Pearse to Connolly,  
'Maybe a breath of politic words  
Has withered our Rose Tree;  
[ - - ]

'It needs to be but watered,'  
James Connolly replied,  
[ - - ]

'But where can we draw water?'  
Said Pearse to Connolly,  
'When all the wells are parched away?  
O plain as plain can be  
There's nothing but our own red blood  
Can make a right Rose Tree.'  
(Yeats 1990: 92)

According to Leon Surette, Yeats was involved in occult ideas: "Occultism sees itself as the heir of ancient wisdom – either passed on from adept to adept or rediscovered in each new generation by mystical illumination." (Surette 1994: 6–79)

Yeats searched for wisdom in old myths and folklore, in tradition. Such old wisdom is cyclical: it returns again and again, like the seasons, and it is connected with mythical thinking; rebirth is the motif which connects old pagan mythologies with Christianity, as well as nations who have the experience of losing freedom, and who hope to regain it.

## Conclusion

On the periphery of Europe (on both the eastern and western edges), one of the common features of all '-isms' and movements was the concept of freedom. However, this was freedom more in terms of social and political life and only secondarily in the artistic work and freedom in life that was common in the centre of Europe. Modernism on the eastern and western periphery was more layered: on the one hand, it tried to go to the centre, to be similar to the mainstream, and tried to create 'pure art', while, on the other hand, it was more influenced by historical and political events: revolutions, wars, the fight for freedom and nationalism. So, modernism in small peripheral countries preserved old traditions more, although the old motifs and elements were applied in a modern style. But romantic elements with rebellious power, tensions and dynamism always existed in modernist art.

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