

*End of Irony? Estonian Literature after
Postmodernism*¹

In their work published in 2001, “After Postmodernism” (López, Potter 2001), the editors Garry Potter and José López claim that postmodernism was the most influential intellectual trend of the last third of the 20th century, and one of the central trends in the Western cultural-theoretical thinking since the 1960s. Postmodernism managed to grasp the spirit of the time and at the same time challenge self-confidence, presented by the mind, objectivity and knowledge (ib. 3). At the same time the authors have to admit that by the beginning of the 21st century the heyday of postmodernism had passed, postmodernism was in the “stage of decline” and “out of fashion” (ib. 4).

Today, in 2011, we have to admit that the early-decade prediction of Potter and López has come true; postmodern society is retreating and the postmodernist theory is on the decline and losing its central role.

Diffusion of postmodern era and postmodernist theory

The beginning of the disappearance of the postmodern era has been associated with the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. Directly after the attack, on 24 September, Roger Rosenblatt, for example, wrote in the Times magazine that “the age of irony has come to an end” (see

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Fish 2002: 27). Julia Keller in Chicago Tribune found that “the end of postmodernism” has arrived, as no postmodernist can keep his views and at the same time admit that the plane hitting the towers was indeed real (see Fish 2002: 28). The terrorist attack was thus seen as the invasion of clear and undisputedly objective reality into the vague world of postmodern relativity and pluralist truths.

The impact of the 11th September terrorist attack on the whole era is not denied by the theoreticians of postmodernism either. In his work “The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers” (Baudrillard 2002), Jean Baudrillard said that after 11 September the world was totally different from what it was before. According to him, the catastrophe ended the previous age of pseudo-events, replacing them with new images and events. At the same time he saw the terrorist attack as an “absolute event”, which combines Western technological achievements and sacrificial suicide. He describes the September events as a hyperreal spectacle, so extreme that it adds a special stage to the fictionality, whereas the process recreates “reality as the ultimate and most fearsome fiction” (see Spencer 2005).

We could thus summarise that the terrorist attack on 11 September 2001 displaced the dominating postmodern discourse in the world. The most direct manifestation of this change was probably the shift in evaluations that occurred in the USA; the emergence of one certain idea, the “great narrative”; the dominating role of the state and the usage of such words as “morality” and “ethics” in public vocabulary. Similar processes could also be seen in Europe: a definite rise in conservatism, the decrease of liberal permissiveness, plus sharpening tensions in the issues of nationalism.

Conservatism and postmodernist all-permissiveness have emerged in recent years in Estonian society as well, whereas irony and playfulness are retreating. Ethics and morality have been discussed, and a yearning for a uniform, all-embracing narrative (e.g. for a national narrative) and religious topics have arisen. All this could lead to a conclusion that the changes in postmodern world starting with the 2001 terrorist attack, have also reached Estonia.

We could thus generalise and say that the 11 September attack seriously questioned postmodern pluralism and relativity, and

emphasised such values as truth, morality, ethics, state and other great narratives.

Similarly with the end of postmodern era, an end has been declared for postmodernist theory as well. José López and Garry Potter, for instance, find that although postmodernism managed to most congenially capture the spirit of the times in the last third of the 20th century, it failed to describe the contemporary world adequately in the early 21st century. Postmodernism had become a cliché, postmodernist challenges were no longer radical, i.e. postmodernism had blended with the disciplines, which it opposed in the past (López, Potter 2001: 4).

Jean Baudrillard, the leading theorist of postmodernism, announced the end of postmodern age in 2002. Another author of postmodernist theory, Ihab Hassan, also seriously criticised postmodernism in his article “Beyond postmodernism: Toward Aesthetic of Trust” (Hassan 2003), published in 2003. He stressed that postmodernist relativity had exhausted itself and we should all start believing in truth again. According to him, people had to believe there is truth, because “if truth is dead, then everything is permitted” (ib. 204–207). The end of postmodernism has also been acknowledged by some founders of postmodernist theory, such as Linda Hutcheon and Charles Jencks (see Kirby 2010).

The suitability of postmodernist theory for describing today’s cultural situation is therefore actually doubted even by the initial founders of the theory. This certainly proves the fact that postmodernist theory is no longer in the lead or topical.

Possibilities of a new theory after postmodernism

What, then, comes after postmodernism? This question has been actively debated on different forums (see e.g. Stierstorfer 2003; Rudaitytė 2008). It is paradoxical that when the term “postmodernism” contained pluralism and there was no single, clearly defined postmodernism, but instead “postmodernisms”, whereas similar pluralism characterises the period following postmodernism and also theoretical approaches that attempt to analyse that period and cultural situation.

According to López and Potter, one theoretical possibility to interpret today's world is critical realism. They regard it as a new theoretical trend, which offers a better and more sensible framework to understand the philosophical, scientific and social reality of the new century. According to them, critical realism is a wide concept that enables to interpret literature, cultural theory, politics, sociology, psychology, anthropology etc. It once again appreciates logic, truth and science – all these terms rejected by postmodernism (López, Potter 2001: 5–9). In literature, critical realism would mean replacing postmodernist playfulness with realist literature. Scientific truth and knowledge oppose relativist scepticism. The authors find that cyberspace could be realist as well, because despite the world being virtual, computers and the internet are mostly used not anonymously, but as tools; after all, computers are palpable and real gadgets. At the same time López and Potter admit that realism is not a fixed concept, and today's world is rather characterised by the plurality of realisms.

The prominent literary theoretician Terry Eagleton, among other researchers, has found that postmodernism exerted great influence in its heyday, but was losing its topicality today. In his book “After Theory” (Eagleton 2004), Eagleton remarked that the era of theory was over and it was time to focus on significant truths, denied by postmodernism – for example love, evil, death, morality, metaphysics, revolution – because these were more important today than ever before. From theory back to literature – this seems to be the aim of quite a few researchers (see Kirby 2004).

In their treatment postmodernism, which is sceptical towards truth, unity and progress, denies any possibility of objective truth and values pluralism, disruption and heterogeneity (Eagleton 2004: 13), therefore constitutes the past and offers a theoretical approach that no longer suits the contemporary world.

A number of authors, however, associate the cultural situation after postmodernism with the concept of modernism. The umbrella term “post-postmodernism” is generally used, although there are more specific definitions deriving from modernism and modernity – e.g. neomodernism, remodernism, metamodernism (Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker), altermodern (Nicolas Bour-

riaud), hypermodernity (Gilles Lipovetsky), automodernity (Robert Samuels), digimodernism (Alan Kirby).

Let us now take a closer look at some theoretical approaches.

Nicolas Bourriaud defines the “altermodern” as a culture shaped by the forces of economic globalisation. In a contemporary world buffeted by multiculturalism, travel and a condition of near-universal exile, Bourriaud sees the artist as a “cultural nomad” (cf. Kirby 2010).

Gilles Lipovetsky describes “hypermodernity” in more sociological terms as the successor to Lyotard’s postmodernity. The epoch of postmodernity “is now ended”. Hypermodernity, our contemporary state, begins when modernity’s promises of limitless individualism and freedom from social obligations and structuring conventions are finally fulfilled. Lipovetsky believes that the maximisation of modernity is today being experienced across a society dominated by hyperconsumption (cf. Kirby 2010).

“Neomodernism” and “remodernism” emphasise opposition to postmodernist irony and cynicism, appreciate beauty, simplicity and closeness.

Raoul Eshelman introduced the new theory of “performatism”. For him, performatist texts (e.g. Yann Martel’s 2001 novel *Life of Pi*) frame their reader so that s/he accepts for their duration a set of values and practices that postmodernism treated with notorious suspicion, such as identity, transcendence, love, belief and sacrifice. They “bring back beauty, good, wholeness and a whole slew of other metaphysical propositions, but only under very special, singular conditions that a text forces us to accept on its own terms” (cf. Kirby 2010, Eshelman 2008).

Some authors, on the other hand, connect the interpretation of the post-postmodernism cultural situation with technology and especially with the development of computer technology. Robert Samuels thus talks about “automodernity”, which sees a new world formed by the encounter between digital automation and personal autonomy. For him, the concept of automodernity unites automatism and autonomy, and technological and cultural automatisations creates individual autonomy (cf. Kirby 2010, Samuels 2009).

One of the main promoters of the role of technology is Alan Kirby, who launched the term “digimodernism” (see Kirby 2009; his earlier term for the same phenomenon was “pseudo-modernism”). Digimodernism marks a new relationship between text and computer, and according to Kirby, a new form of digital textuality has emerged. Digimodernism is especially linked with the spread of Web 2.0 in the early 21st century: blogosphere, Wikipedia, Twitter, Facebook, i.e. with everything where an active interaction between authors, readers and users in general takes place, and where the user actually creates a large part of the web content.

There are thus quite a number of terms replacing postmodernism and each of them focuses on different layers in cultural analysis. Two main trends however dominate: 1) aspiring towards simplicity, clarity and beauty; 2) considering changes brought about by the development of digital technology.

In sum, we could say that most of the new definitions are characterised by their attempt to oppose postmodernism, i.e. the postmodernist cynicism, playfulness, irony. Instead, they try to offer something new to replace the existing clichés, such as truth, simplicity, clarity and beauty – all values that postmodernism had abolished.

Similar theoretical treatments are supported by cultural phenomena, now determined by terms such as “new simplicity” and “new sincerity”. Some views can be somewhat extreme; for example those expressed by the “new puritans” in a joint anthology published in 2000 (*All Hail the New Puritans*, editors Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne). Their work primarily focuses on textual simplicity, temporal linearity, grammatical purity, truthful depiction of reality, and the conviction that the published works are also historical documents. They also stress morality and require the texts to be ethical (cf. Blincoe, Thorne 2000).

Estonia and postmodernism

Estonia’s position in all these theoretical trends is ambivalent. On the theoretical level, postmodernism has never been the leading discourse in Estonian cultural theory. It would thus be possible to

claim that in Estonian cultural space postmodernism survived in its initial, pure form – as one “small narrative” amongst others. It is also paradoxical that the first overview treatments about postmodernism appeared in the Estonian language only in the mid-2000s, when postmodernism was already in the “stage of decline” and “out of fashion” (Janek Kraavi’s *Postmodernismi teooria ja postmodernistlik kultuur* (Postmodernism and postmodernist culture, Kraavi 2005) and Piret Viires’s *Eesti kirjandus ja postmodernism* (Estonian literature and postmodernism, Viires 2008). Postmodernism has probably been most prominent here in cultural practices. Nor has postmodernism ever been the dominant trend in Estonian literature, but merely one amongst the others, a “spot”.

However, the number of postmodernist works certainly increased in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium (e.g. Kivisildnik, Jan Kaus, Berk Vaher and others). This trend continued in the 2000s: for example Bartol Lo Meijor’s *Popdada 2007–2008* (2008), Erkki Luuk’s *Pideva and Silmnähtava Pöögelmann* (Constant and Visible Pöögelmann, 2008). In his series *Jl*, Kivisildnik also continues publishing authors who are associated with postmodernism (e.g. Toomas F. Aru, Chaneldior). Some writers of the youngest generation, members of the group called *Purpurnust.org*, have also published postmodernist books, e.g. Robert Randma and Eia Uus. These young authors define themselves as a cosmopolitan generation and link their work with traditions of world literature (e.g. Douglas Coupland, Chuck Palahniuk), rather than Estonian literature. The earlier prediction that postmodernist textual play was probably going to continue in the work of some Estonian authors (see Viires 2008: 99), has come true. However, at the same time we can confidently claim that there has not been and never will be an all-embracing “postmodern turn” in Estonian literature, because postmodernist discourse is losing its vitality and significance.

Today’s Estonian literature thus faces the question whether the trend towards simplicity, clarity and recovering old values in post-postmodernism theories is at all present in Estonian literature?

New sincerity in Estonian literature

“New sincerity” is not an altogether alien concept in Estonian literature. Writing an overview of prose in 2002, Jan Kaus for example yearned for more lucid and simpler and simultaneously more hopeful stories, without however using the term “new sincerity” (Kaus 2003: 415). Jan Kaus’s call brings to mind Raoul Eshelman’s analysis of *Life of Pi*, where he said that the reader is carried along with the text with the aim of “making us believe and experience beauty within its own closed space” (Eshelman 2008: 56). From the point of textual strategy, “Life of Pi” could at first glance be considered post-modernist, but Eshelman’s analysis proves that the novel in fact represented a new trend – performatism. The Estonian poet Jürgen Rooste seems to be moving in the same rhythm with the currents of world literature. He talks about the phenomenon of new honesty in Estonian literature (Rooste 2010). Amongst others, he mentions the poetry of Kristiina Ehin and fs as an example. Rooste fully believes in the significance of new honesty: “... I am quite certain that as far as readers, culture consumption and some sort of mainstream is concerned, our time is characterised by an aspiration towards “new honesty”” (ib. 108).

There are many examples of new simplicity in today’s Estonian literature. Mention should be made here of Tõnu Õnnepalu’s books of recent years: verse diary *Kevad ja suvi ja* (Spring and Summer and, 2009) and *Paradiis* (Paradise, 2009). Both offer simple descriptions, details of everyday life, photographing of reality. The different nature of the poetry collection *Kevad ja suvi ja* is immediately obvious when we compare it with Õnnepalu’s other, earlier verse diary – the baroque and exuberant *Mõõdi* (The Measure, 1996). *Paradiis* is simultaneously very personal and honest, describing real events and real people.

New simplicity is evident also in Hasso Krull’s poetry collection *Talv* (Winter, 2006). Compared with his postmodernist poetry of the 1990s, the poems here have become precise and brief pictures of simple things, nature and the surroundings.

Regarding new simplicity, we should mention the young poet Andrus Kasemaa, whose work might be called “poetry of loafing

around". His poems are characterised by simple things, pictures and just the pleasure of existing. Unlike Krull and Õnnepalu, Kasemaa did not go through a change towards the new and sincere, as he immediately and successfully started with appreciating simplicity (see also Tintso 2011). Reviewing Kasemaa's poetry, Tõnu Õnnepalu said: "However, Kasemaa's simplicity emerges not as a reaction against complicity, but straight from simplicity itself. It clearly relies on the previous generations' seeking for the simple" (Õnnepalu 2009).

On the other hand, realistic descriptions and aspirations towards simplicity and honesty can easily be found in the increasingly popular biographies and travelogues. Autobiographies in Estonian literature truly boomed in the 2000s, along with the growing confessional needs. These features are well illustrated in blogosphere, i.e. in blogs where people (including some writers) describe their thoughts and everyday life. Various professional writers are no longer bothered with inventing characters and instead reveal their own autobiographical "self" (e.g. the above-mentioned Õnnepalu's *Paradiis*, as well as his *Harjutused* (Exercises), Kalev Kesküla's *Elu sumedusest* (The Mellowness of Life), Viivi Luik's *Varjuteater* (Shadow Theatre). All this could be regarded as manifestations of "new sincerity".

The question arising here is the same as in postmodernist literature. Everything, after all, has occurred before. Simple, sincere and precisely worded poetry is quite common in Estonian literature (e.g. Juhan Liiv, Ernst Enno, Debora Vaarandi's *Lihtsad asjad* (Simple Things), Jaan Kaplinski's *Õhtu toob tagasi kõik* (Evening Brings Everything Back), Sass Suumann and others). Realism and faithful description of facts have indeed constituted the mainstream of Estonian literature for decades. There had been no lack of the autobiographical and sincere personal touch either – for example in Friedebert Tuglas's *Väike Illimar* (Little Illimar) Is everything happening in the first decades of the 21st century really something new, so we could call it "new sincerity"?

The answer probably lies in comparison with the preceding period. During the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium, post-modernist playfulness, irony and intertextuality in Estonian literature

increased considerably, further enhanced by the Estonian society moving towards postmodernity. Every literary trend is usually followed by a movement in the opposite direction like a pendulum. We can therefore confidently talk about new sincerity in comparison with the rise of postmodernism in Estonian literature in previous decades.

In the opinion of Fredric Jameson, the radical changes between periods do not actually result in a significant breakthrough, but instead in a certain restructuring of elements. The features that were secondary in the previous period or system, now become dominant, and the formerly dominant features in turn become secondary (Jameson 1983: 123).

We can thus conclude that new sincerity was a secondary phenomenon in the previous period, but became dominant in the 2000s.

There is, however, a counterargument to this claim – postmodernism has never been a dominant in Estonian literature, but a small “spot” amongst others. Equally, new sincerity is not a dominant at the moment either, but exists alongside all other trends.

What is new here is the fact that more attention is being paid to “new sincerity”; it is no longer “old-fashioned” literature, opposed to the postmodernist avant-garde. The tables have turned – “old-fashioned” now includes postmodernism, experimentation, playfulness, irony, scepticism, fragmentariness and abolishment of truths. Literature that values truth, clarity and beauty is innovative and certainly on the rise. This trend is also supported by tendencies in world literature and in new theoretical approaches, which have great respect for beauty and the sublime.

Transitional period

In sum – when we were wondering in 2008 what might happen to postmodernism in the future, it was not possible to offer one definite answer. However, the current author was convinced that as Estonia was no longer a closed society, and was actively participating in the world trends, fluctuations and changes, the future of our postmodernism was directly connected with whatever was happening with postmodernism in the world (see Viires 2008: 99).

This has now proved true. The importance of postmodernism has faded in theory and world literature, as well as in Estonian literature, but what exactly has emerged instead, is not yet quite clear.

Perhaps we are currently in a kind of transitional period. One era, the postmodern, has finished, and the other has not quite yet started. Besides, the other era has not been clearly defined either. The new era is mostly associated with modernism (remodernism, neo-modernism, metamodernism, digimodernism), and also with realism (critical realism).

Two principles are certainly valid. Firstly, cultural theoreticians appreciate technological achievements and analyse cultural situation from that basis. Secondly, postmodernist relativism has been abandoned and beauty, truth, realistic and honest descriptions rule once again.

The paradox is that although postmodernism abolished the truth, and the current era has supposedly restored faith in the truth, there is alas nothing certain and truthful about the transitional period.

However, today's theoreticians seem to confirm the existence of the current transitional period. Raoul Eshelman, for example who developed the performatism theory, wrote: "...we feel the presence of an epoch whose contours are just barely visible and in which we can perceive only simplicity or simple-mindedness. The main thing, though, is to already be in love with it" (Eshelman 2000/2001).

In any case, we are witnessing a change in eras and cultural paradigms. The age of irony is over, as is the era that could best be characterised by the keywords familiar from Hassan's table of oppositions: play, chance, anarchy, antiform, anti-narrative, schizophrenia (Hassan 1982: 267–268). After all, Ihab Hassan himself, the creator of postmodernist theory, is announcing the demise of the era, believing there is truth and we have to be committed to it (Hassan 2003: 204–207).

What era has actually arrived is not quite clear. We find ourselves at the beginning of a new cultural situation, and it does not yet have a name. Expectations of the new, however, do exist both in the world and in Estonia.

The feelings of expectation, changing of the two worlds and existing on the border, might best be characterised by the lines in the

poem “Lõpp ja algus” (The beginning and the End), written by Gustav Suits, one of the most prominent Estonian poets: *We are standing at the gates of two states:/ one is darkness and the other is light* (Suits 1905: 6).

We are therefore at the borderline of eras and cultural situations; what actually happened in our era will only be established afterwards, when we will be looking back at the current moment.

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