

The Beginning of Estonian City Writing – a Bird’s-Eye Overview

“The city is a state of mind,” observed the American urban sociologist Robert Ezra Park (Bennett et al. 2008: 35). The mapper of several literary cities, the Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk, concludes in his memoir about his home town Istanbul that, instead of the southern sun, it is the warmth of people that glows around this city.

Nowadays Estonia is mainly characterized as an urbanized country. Although the city was for some authors a happy space as early as in the 19th century, beginning with C. R. Jakobson, it was generally common practice to disapprove of the city and city life in 19th century Estonian poetry and this lasted for quite a long time, until the 1920s (Kepp 2003: 378). How was the city portrayed in prose? This article concentrates on the beginning of city writing in Estonian literature: the transition from village stories to early urban prose. The first known original Estonian literary work was a poem, a lamentation titled “Oh, ma vaene Tartu liin!” (Oh Me, the Poor Town of Tartu!), dedicated to the town of Tartu, which had been ravaged in the Nordic War. The sacristan from the Puhja parish church, named Käsü Hans, wrote it in 1708, probably also inspired by a Biblical parallel, the destruction of Jerusalem. However, it was almost two hundred years later that the first equivalent efforts in prose occurred, during the original flourishing of Estonian literature of the National Awakening, in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Introduction: the background

In treating the *topos* as the deep inner structure of a text (Ungern-Sternberg 2003: 614), the sources of inspiration were the Estonian towns with their long history, founded and mostly inhabited by

strangers.¹ During the Middle Ages, a town was an impressive complex of a stone castle and houses around it, defended by walls and towers, incorporating mundane institutions and ecclesiastical power together with economic activity (Talve 2004: 66), an urban system to crystallize the forms of church and feudal power, a closed, pure system rich in symbols (Choay 1986: 165). Its successor did not emphasize the totality of cultural behaviour, and the system was to break completely apart during the Industrial Revolution: the modern, industrial city lost its external and formal structure, gaining quite the opposite meaning of a menacing wasteland; it was also a time of changes in population. Clearly, systems and structures fell apart in the middle of the nineteenth century, including the city structure of the Middle Ages, its cyclical concept of time dependent on its hinterland, and the national composition of the population. Other things were to emerge instead: industrialized towns with mostly Estonian populations, original literature and, at the end of the era, the (urban) novel genre.² In this process, there was always “the Other” to oppose or to imitate.

The Estonian prose townscapes that emerged did not have real forerunners in this region in other local languages. In the Baltic-German novel, the town space was static, unchanging, provincial, and gave no reason for a close enquiry regarding the town milieu –

¹ The National Awakening of the Estonians began, in the middle of the 19th century, with ideology concentrating on the idea of the nation being tightly bound to the country, to found a rural society. Big metropolises, such as St. Petersburg, were not unknown, but quite often the newborn Estonian intelligentsia moving into the towns or far-away cities lost their connections with family, nation and language, and the lower ranks saw their health destroyed in factories. Yet, the town environment was attractive due to its opportunities and promised freedom, and in 1915 there were already more than 100,000 inhabitants in Tallinn.

² The first Estonian (historical) novel appeared in 1885. The word “novel” itself was first mentioned in 1879 in a newspaper; the first novels were Jaak Järv’s *Vallimäe neitsi* (The Virgin From Vallimäe) and Eduard Vilde’s *Teravad nooled* (Sharp Arrows), both in 1885 (Kangro 1940: 332–334).

no streets, no railway station, no market place (Lukas 2004: 541, 546).³

The literary process was closely connected with self-recognition as a nation. According to Franco Moretti, the nation-states found the novel, and the novel found the nation-states (Moretti 1999: 17). Towards the end of the eighteenth century, several processes, such as industrial development, improved communications, mass conscription etc., dragged human beings out of the local dimension, throwing them into a much larger one, and national loyalty clashed with the local and required a new symbolic form in order to be understood (ib.).⁴ The novel functioned as the symbolic form of the nation-state, managing to turn it into a story (ib. 20).⁵ This process occurring in most of Europe was delayed here, but then developed very quickly.

Transition in space: occasional visits

The beginning of describing the city in prose was marked by a fragmentary transition in space. The characters of village stories (by Koidula, for example) happened to visit or live for long periods in towns for several reasons. Occasionally, they came by train (to Narva) or by ship (to Tallinn), but mostly they arrived on foot or in horse-drawn wagons. They did not pay much attention to the

³ Although, the Baltic-German tradition seemed to change in autobiographical pieces: for example, in the memoirs of the Tallinn (Reval) town archivist Gotthard von Hansen and those of the artist and journalist Leopold von Pezold, the city space is filled with tiny details, emotions connected with its buildings and atmosphere, creating the illusion of an old film with its vivacious rhythm (Sprengfeld 1877, Pezold 1901).

⁴ And, it was the railway that defined the modern city and was instrumental in the nineteenth-century transformations of space and time (Gottlieb 1999: 235) – it made the space suddenly tactile instead of imagined.

⁵ Nancy Burke has concluded, after Richard Lehan, that the rise of the city has been seen as inseparable from various kinds of literary movements – in particular the development of the novel and subsequent narrative modes: comic realism, romantic realism, naturalism, modernism and postmodernism (Burke 2002: 304).

environment. In a village story by one of the first Estonian female writers, Lilli Suburg, a country girl named Liina goes to town to study, and as a lover of nature feels distressed because of the stony environment (Suburg 2002: 31–32) and the lack of greenery, and yet yearns at the same time for the intellectual freedom possible perhaps in Saint Petersburg (ib. 26).⁶ The education she receives from the town school makes it difficult for her to find her place – and somebody to share her interests – in village society.

A decade later, Elisabeth Aspe, an early realist from the outskirts of the town of Pärnu, knowing the environment of a little urban settlement rather well, described in her short epistolary novel *Kasuõde* (Stepsister, 1887) the obvious black-and-white opposition between the town and the country. The townspeople are bad, frivolous and in poor health; the country peasants are honest, good and strong, and finally win out with their morality, defending the idyllic country scene against the fascination of the city atmosphere. Soon the writer's attitude towards the city became more complex, not the simply negative environment originating from the possible vigorous ideology of her time: Aspe's next, most well-known short novel, *Ennosaare Ain* (Ain From Ennosaare, 1888) is much more interesting, moving its focus from the village to the town. The characters live in Pärnu and Moscow and here the previous opposition becomes suddenly vague and enigmatic. The protagonist has a kind of double identity, as an educated Estonian in the German and Russian society might have had and, as the story supports the National Awakening ideals, he recognizes himself at last as an Estonian. The writer briefly depicts the familiar townscape of Pärnu and also of far-away Moscow: the latter is as picturesque as an old fresco, an ancient, holy city, more like a book illustration than a description.

The reader of Aspe's works probably perceives the importance of some themes in the story: one of them is connected with the haunting repetition of the word *city*. A quick language-based study⁷ has shown

⁶ Lilli Suburg, *Liina* (1877).

⁷ The language-based study (Talivee 2010) was performed as a computer-assisted corpus-based analysis, in order to take a closer look at the language use of the author, using the software WordSmith Tools Version 5.0 (Scott,

that this word *city* (*linna*), in the illative case, is among the first one hundred words in the frequency list of this text, a lot more frequently used than in normal Estonian. It seems to be a keyword of this era, a word full of Bakhtinian polyphony, consisting of independent voices fully equal and dialogical, a communicative interaction between speaker and listener (Bakhtin 1987: 230), a leitmotif to accompany the whole story.

However, Aspe's city is still a monolithic body of towers and walls, a remnant of a walled-in castle, often seen from afar. Eduard Bornhöhe, one of the founders of the Estonian historical novel, depicted Tallinn in his story *Tasuja* (*Avenger*, 1880) as a castle town that was burnt down by the peasants in the 14th century. Aspe's characters sense the changing of the town structure: the disappearance of the walls and gates, like losing the borders of the previous world which divided the world in two: the (free) townspeople and the peasants, the wild and the civilised. And, in *Enno-saare Ain*, the contrasts defining the world of characters are no longer clear. According to Franco Moretti, the birth of the urban novel presupposed an overcoming of the binary narrative matrix, and then a new kind of more complicated story arose (a deep structure which is *just as clearly delimited* as the binary one – but different, triangular) (Moretti 1999: 108). A third element could here be the changing of society and the urge to come to the city, seemingly an almost subconscious connection.

The need to come to the city was real, but the city itself in literature was more like an idea – and not a negative one. For example, in Christian Kannike's stories, the sought-after rich bride is several times found in the city, enabling debts to be paid off debts and ensuring a happy life in the country farmhouse. In Aspe's *Kasuõde*, one of the most beautiful descriptions, a kind of Bachelard-like poetic reverie (Bachelard 1999) arises together with the city girl's unhappiness in the country: she likes to sit by the dam of the watermill and listen to the roar of water, which seems to remind her of the loud voices and bustle of her home environment.

From a Picture to a Map: The Sound of the City

The Estonian geographer Edgar Kant once compared the field of influence a city has over its neighbourhood to the Doppler effect: a city has a voice, a sound whose frequency is higher in closer surroundings and lower as it recedes (Kant 1999: 493). Every city has a region surrounding it that is listening to that sound; the influence of a bigger city, a capital, may reach over the whole country. Every city has its own distinctive sound: Kant's research object Tartu radiates a whole key of educational opportunities (the university, the Pallas Art School, the higher music school etc.), reaching even beyond the borders of the state (ib. 502). Of course, besides education there were other reasons to go to the city: to find work, to see the doctor, to buy and sell things, even to marry. With the transition from village narratives to those describing all kinds of city experiences, the focus moved from the idyllic village to the townscape, the latter becoming more and more visible.

It is possible to follow the process of the widening of the world with the help of a literary map, asking which cities had their sounds in Estonian literature in the second half of the nineteenth century. In Aspe's works, besides her home town of Pärnu, other toponyms occur: her map is actually wide and in the course of three stories her characters travel a lot, despite being female. The map (Fig. 1.) is based on Elisabeth Aspe's four short novels (*Ennosaare Ain*, *Kasuõde*, *Anna Dorothea*, and *Aastate pärast*). While in *Stepsister* there are mostly initials signifying the towns, further on real toponyms replace them. Aspe's map of Europe clarifies the influence fields of the cities of her time: the capital is Saint Petersburg, the university town is Tartu, and the capital of Livonia is Riga. Tallinn seemed pretty marginal to the writer from the southern part of Estonia. In comparison, for Eduard Vilde and Eduard Bornhöhe Tallinn was their central scene, but the capital was still Saint Petersburg. The journeys of the protagonists are interesting to interpret: for example, they all leave the country to live elsewhere, but in Aspe's last novel, *Aastate pärast* (After Many Years, 1911), the heroine finally returns home to find happiness. Here, clearly the changed attitude toward distance is sensed: it is no longer something fateful, but perceivable.

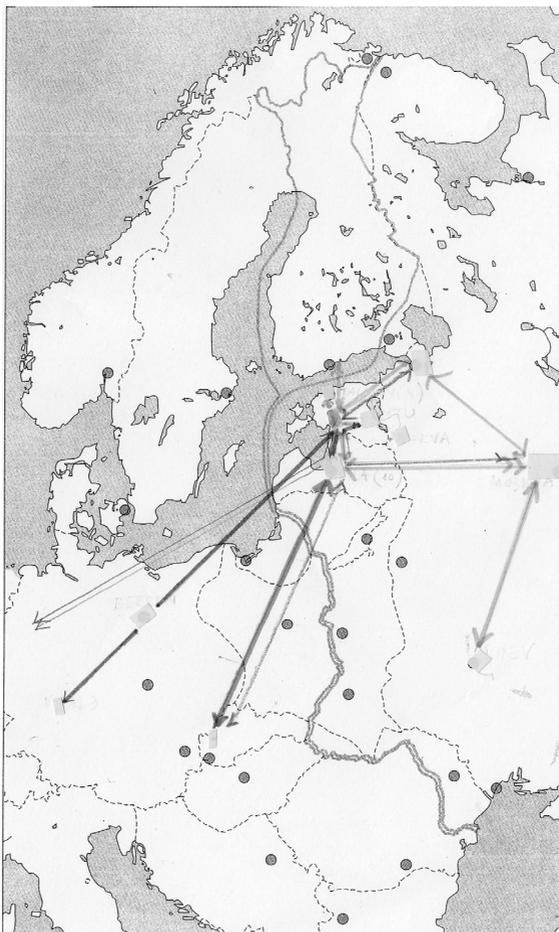


Figure 1. A map of three Estonian short novels from the eighteenth century. Aspe's map of Europe clarifies the influence fields of the cities of her time: the capital city is Saint Petersburg, the university town is Tartu, and the capital of Livonia is Riga. Important is also Moscow, where one of the protagonists lives for a long time.

Inside a town, individuals perceive and navigate through urban landscape, forming mental maps (Lynch 1960), like models of reality they mark with familiar elements. When the city lost its distance and found its sound, there was a need for closer mapping, sometimes even originating from the dark side of this environment. At the end of the nineteenth century, city descriptions, like fragmentary maps, appeared in Estonian detective stories. The bad characters were different from their counterparts in the country – not night robbers with a cudgel, but more cunning and sophisticated. It was, of course, easier to lose one's position in the city society – to lose a job or go bankrupt. The first literary attempt of Vilde, the detective story *Kurjal teel* (Going Wrong, 1882) about Saint Petersburg, gives a detailed description of a cash register robbery in a dark building in the middle of the night. One type of *flâneur* was someone observing the city like solving a puzzle, neutralizing its horrible secrets. In 19th century American literature, the literary metropolis brought with it the genre of detective fiction, with the first detective being created by Edgar Allan Poe, the rational observer of city life C. Auguste Dupin, who “read” the city and found answers for the darkest secrets – therefore minimizing the possible fears of the city jungle. And, to map and clarify the dark side in the considerably smaller Tallinn, the dramatist Aleksander Trilljäär wrote in his story *Keeweri* (Boiling-Hot Blood, 1893), within a quite detailed townscape, not only the detective's journey on the streets, but also through its social strata. His upper town is a German and Russian one, serving also, obviously quite realistically, as the goal to detach the two worlds in an alienating way, adding a stroke of mystery: the victim of the crime is the beautiful foreigner Josephine.

The street scene

What was the mapped townscape like? According to Lynch, landmarks, readily identifiable objects which serve as external reference points, are important. One of the landmarks of Tallinn in literature is definitely Kadriorg Park (Kadrantal), founded in the 18th century and situated next to the road to Tallinn (so the characters coming to the town see it, e.g. in Vilde's Tallinn novels). It can be a romantic place

(as for lovers), but also dark, lonely and dangerous (in Trilljärv's story, a murder takes place there), or desolate (mentioned as a place suitable for suicide (Trilljärv 1893). But, otherwise, hardly any detailed description of the town exists, except for some interiors and in Eduard Vilde's initial work.⁸ In the novel *Jõulupuu* (Christmas Tree, 1903), the most critical Estonian realist, Ernst Peterson-Särgava, depicts a cold little room in a slum, a cab, a reeking tavern full of dockers, a vicarage, and a charity Christmas tree for poor children in a school hall (Särgava 1989: 243–280). Aspe writes about dismantled town walls and gates of a smaller town, and a park established to replace them, a market place, an ugly tavern, small and large shops, some new buildings, and the sound of church bells over the town (Aspe 1888). Eduard Bornhöhe is more specific: his old Tallinn in *Kollid* (Bugbears, 1902) is sleepy, quiet and lazy, with church bells ringing on Sunday: like “an old crow's nest” (Bornhöhe 1903: 4), from the sea looking like a northern Naples. There is also Kadriorg, mentioned for romantic reasons, and even the poetic beauty of the city, which is compared to a working class slum. As for the real sounds of the town, two should be mentioned: the uproar of a bustling crowd and church bells. The exception is Vilde, a bit scary in his depiction of reality: in the first working class novel of Estonia, *Raudsed käed* (Iron Hands, 1898), the town of Narva, with its cotton factories, contains the iron hands of machinery and earsplitting noise; each day starts with a factory whistle. The town of Narva is transformed here from its previous role as a war machine into a machine of work (Viitol 2009: 79), paradoxically fascinating, very visual and film-like.

Vilde was seemingly interested in “seeing and noticing things”, and he had the experience of living in big cities – in Saint Petersburg, Berlin, Copenhagen etc. As early as 1891, in his story *Kuul pähe!* (A Bullet Right Into the Head), he described the city more precisely: as a ghastly place where you might fall ill, get injured while working and die, or work for a pittance. It is a place of low, dark moist rooms and meagre food, with factories devouring its

⁸ Vilde's *Kui Anija mehed Tallinnas käisid* (When the Men From Anija Came To Tallinn, 1903) plunged into the essence of this period town.

workers mercilessly, although still filling them with hope; if only the children do not die, they can study and live a better life. The townscape of Vilde's slum is disconsolate: narrow muddy streets, rotten wood and low roofs within the city gates, little houses almost falling over. Vilde maps the town, naming toponyms, as most of his characters spend a lot of time walking around. It differs from the Berlin Vilde records, in the same year, quite merrily, poeticizing the local market women.

As Istanbul draws its strength from the Bosphorus (Pamuk 2006: 47), in the Estonian literature of the 20th century the River Emajõgi becomes immensely important; before it was seldom mentioned. Tallinn, however, has a connection with the sea as a seaport. Kannike mentions the end of the navigation season and the cargo boats (1904: 219). The inhabitants of Pärnu go on board more often while travelling to Riga, their almost only way to the outer world: "It was already twilight when the ship skimmed quietly past the foot of the town and the sleepy waves fled, terrified, to the beach, from where they at once ran back to watch how the town welcomed its visitors. The town is not now and was not then in regular connection with any place except the town of Riga and, as the townsfolk of Pärnu are of a grateful nature, they came, if at all possible, to welcome the ship, the only one to bring news a couple of times a week" (Aspe 1910: 8).⁹ In this excerpt, the word *city* is repeated very often, as though an evocation of a city.

Generally, some repeated details from different authors are humorous: for example going into the wrong apartment in the wrong house after drinking.

Beginning with Koidula, one of the motifs in coming to town (Tallinn or Tartu) was the song festival, a great national choral event celebrated since 1869. In 1894, Vilde wrote the carnivalesque,

⁹ *'Ämarik oli juba kätte jõudmas, kui laew tasamalt linna alt mööda libises, ja kokkudes põgenesiwad pool unised lained kaldale, kust nad aga sedamaid jälle tagasi jooksiwad waatama, kuis linn külalised wastu wõttis. Linn ei ole nüüd, ega olnud sel ajal, peale Riia linna kellegi muuga korralises ühenduses; ja et Pärnu linnalased tänulise loomuga, siis tulewad nad, kui iial wõimalik, ikka "laewa" wastu wõtma, kes ainu üksi neile paar korda nädalas uudist toob.'*

humorous *Muhulaste imelikud elamused Tartu juubeli-laulupeol* (*The Strange Adventures of Muhu Islanders during the Great Jubilee Song Festival in Tartu*) about the islanders of little Muhu going to the big song festival in the city of Tartu. It seemed to be an effort to subvert the fears and fixed ideas the people from the country had of the city environment through the liberating attitude of humour. On the journey, even before reaching Tartu, the smith Siim Sikusarv has told his two bride candidates absolutely different stories about this town: to the lovelier one he has depicted it as a spring of happiness, but to the other he has described it as almost the most dangerous place in the world. All three main characters experience town life differently after losing each other in the crowd in the railway station. It is most interesting to follow how their hazy ideas of this environment change and how they perceive different things. It is a humorous overview: their mishaps are mostly funny and end well.

And yet, the same topic was treated in the completely opposite manner six years later in Ernst Säreava's short story *Issanda kiituseks* (Praise the Lord), in the collection *Paised* (Ulcers, 1900), about a girl named Miina's miserable journey to the next song festival in Tartu, where she is seduced and the city is again the "nest of all evil" (Tuglas 1959: 373). Miina stays in the town as a tavern singer. This could be a response to Vilde, or a parallel: they even share a very similar scene in the Tartu railway station, although it is absolutely different in tonality. Säreava's story was widely criticised because of its attitude towards the song festival.¹⁰ The town of Tartu is here described weirdly with the help of citations from newspapers, promoting it metaphorically and unbelievably, even comparing the event to the ancient Olympics. Distinctive aspects of the Tartu townscape are the taverns named *Jerusalem* and *Bethel*.

¹⁰ Friedebert Tuglas once compared the two mentioned authors as follows: "Here are two outstanding Estonian writers: one a tourist and the other a schoolteacher, one by nature portraying the phenomena of life and the other being the critic of them" (Tuglas 1909: 117).

The colourful city dwellers: a gallery

Bornhöhe's beautiful foreigner Josephine dies in a murder of passion and is not analysed as a character; but other interesting types emerge in the newborn urban prose. The writer J. Liphart, probably of Estonian origin, in 1890 published the story *Narwa posatski* (A Tramp From Narva) about an idler living in the town of Narva. The protagonist is not malevolent; rather, he is a very lazy person with a very interesting attitude. The story is told in the first person by a young merchant, who becomes interested in this tramp's way of seeing the world and tries to change the tramp's life-style through quite burlesque methods, to make him earn money instead of begging and stealing. The road to salvation is painful. In the background, the castle-town is depicted with few details, but very true to type, and the city catches the reader's attention because of the errands of the tramp, probably a Germanized Estonian, like a *flâneur* sauntering on the banks of the river dividing the town into two parts. The tramp is a fraudulent artist using his acting talent to make a living, taking his roles from the human gallery of the town, always ready to change.

The townsfolk at that time were mostly not Estonian. In Eduard Bornhöhe's *Kollid* (Bugbears, 1902) characters from two social strata meet in a realistic detective story. The solver of the crime, the Estonian Paul Jostson, comes home from America, where he has lived for many years, and is therefore able to notice things the locals cannot see. He walks through the streets of the city, visits almost every part of the town, and meets different social classes. The slums he descends into are miserable because of the hard work its dwellers are engaged in, having no opportunity to educate their children. The crime itself is rooted in this condition. Dostojevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is mentioned in the book. The protagonist almost sympathises with the criminal, who has no way out of his slum. Sherlock Holmes in London stayed in the West End (Moretti 1999: 134) instead of the really "vicious, semi-criminal" areas of the city, as in detective fiction crime must be precisely an *enigma* (ib. 136). While Trilljäv follows this principle, Bornhöhe's criminal character has his reasons as did Raskolnikov. This diminishes the enigma, but

probably it is more expressive and reasonable, and is seen from the point of view of the reader. Paul Jostson marries a daughter of a bourgeois family, and in the end the father of the bride confesses: “I am actually an Estonian by birth.”

Soon the city slicker enters the scene, and he is often a nasty character. In 1909, in a short story by Vilde, his character Martinson describes his adventures to a rich and elegant friend, summarizing his city experiences: “He told us about the events of his wild life in every corner of the realm, anecdotes about the Warsaw Jews, Odessa Tartars, Tbilisi Armenians, Turkmens of Ashgabat, business stories and stock market jokes, heard and read jests about women, priests, nuns, monks, officers, stories about brothels, harems, theatres, the obscene places of pleasure in metropolises”¹¹ (Vilde 1983: 166). This description creates a sharp contrast with the scene of their meeting in a quiet park tavern in a smaller town, and the friend manages to make their meeting later on a lot more disgusting than were the stories told in the first place: good appearance and the newest vagaries of fashion do not hide the beast inside.

The woman in the city might be a worn-out wife of a docker (Vilde 1891), a prostitute (Särgava 1903), a maid (Aspe 1888), a factory girl (Vilde 1898) etc. But the most interesting characters are those who through their inner freedom and strength start to defy the conception that the city is the greatest danger to women, breaking “the opposition of the amoral city woman and the virtuous girl from the country” (Kepp 2008: 15). (Even the best of women may fall, as in Vilde’s monumental novel *Kui Anija mehed Tallinnas käisid* (When the Men From Anija Came To Tallinn, 1903), where the baron seduces a girl who had cleverly managed to escape from him in the country.) But at least some brave girls are already present: for example, the half-Estonian, half-German girl Helene in Bornhöhe’s detective story: she is intelligent, eager to learn and work, tolerant

¹¹ ‘*Ta jutustas juhtumisi oma ulaelust igas riiginurgas, ankdoote Varssavi juutidest, Odessa tatarlastest, Tiflisi armeenlastest, Ashabadi turkmeenidest, – ärilugusid ja börsinalju, kuulnud ja loetud naljatusi naistest, pappidest, nunnadest, munkadest, ohvitseridest, – jutukesi avalikest majadest, haaremeist, teatreist, suurlinnade nilbeist lõbukohtadest.*’

and compassionate, and with her internal warmth she is a predecessor of Vilde's "sunny women". After the turn of the century, Vilde introduced city women striving for education and self-reliance, and becoming mature personalities (Lindsalu 2008: 31).

The City on Satan's Carousel

This was the beginning. In the first decades of the 20th century, the Young Estonia movement is said to have founded the city culture of Estonia, and the members were naturally inspired by it: factories and modern technology (Sarapik 2008: 242), being the first generation to live in towns and to urge the formation of the Estonian intellectual class and desiring to experience the real city atmosphere in a foreign metropolis (ib. 245). The Neo-Romantic authors mostly tried to see the positive side of the city (ib. 248), and the result was rather idyllic: with parks, theatres, museums and quiet apartments opening to green gardens (ib. 257), suitable for an artist to create in. It was an illusion destroyed by World War I.

One of the traits common in describing the city in Estonian literature seems to have stemmed from the lament of Kāsu Hans: the cities are fragile. The pre-war idyllic city found an influential response in a novel by August Gailit, where he no longer described a familiar local townscape. Gailit, a writer with a vivid imagination who constantly juxtaposed beauty and ugliness (Vaiksoo 2002), in 1924 wrote an anti-utopia titled *Purpurne surm* (Purple Death) about the island town of Varria, belonging to a man named Toomas Moor. The island town is destroyed by a terrible illness that has already hit all the cities in the world and kills only men. Before the plague, the city is like "the European granite and metal heart", "a spinning and vicious merry-go-round of sin", "naked flesh", "an abortion of a leprous woman" (Gailit 2001: 25, 62), a conglomerate of all images of cities. The protagonist compares it to Sodom, Pompeii, and Alexandria. It is like a piece of gloomy post-war literature with shattered illusions, allegorical and symbolist, influenced by Oswald Spengler and, in addition, for the writer, the possibility of acting as a demiurge: the opportunity to create a city, assemble in it the reality and the dream of the Young Estonians of a European city, let it

flourish and fall into decay, and then destroy it, full of the joy of creation, spinning the carousel of Satan. The powerful myth of lost cities, as though an answer to Käsü Hans, has since then emerged again and again in Estonian literature: literary cities are delicate. Bernard Kangro's magically realistic Tartu in his novel cycle beginning with the book *Jäälätted* (Springs of Ice, 1958) is delicate, a town standing in the fire of World War II on the other side of the Styx, and Tiit Aleksejev's Narva in the play *Leegionärid* (Legionnaires, 2010) is very fragile: devastated in the same war, never to be rebuilt like it once was.

It was then the beginning of the era of writing about the cityscape and its essence as a familiar space and background, and for the city to become the main character of novels soon to be born – for example in Karl Ristikivi's "Tallinna-triloogia" (Tallinn Trilogy),¹² or in the descriptions of the outskirts of Leida Kibuvits' Tartu, which was characterized by literary critics as "breathing", in the harsh slum pictures in the late 1920s and early 1930s, describing the national variety of Oskar Luts' human kaleidoscope of the backyards of Tartu, the townfolk of Russian, Estonian and Baltic German origin, or even as a city based on the grave in Baltic-German literature (Bergengruen 1939).

Conclusions

In this article, the works of several writers of the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth were examined.

The period had several prominent features: there was the fight for Estonia's own town space as well as an attempt to make this space immanently familiar. It was a period of mapping, describing and

¹² Karl Ristikivi wrote three novels, which would come to be known as the Tallinna-triloogia, between 1938 and 1942: here the changes in the town structure and the comprehensive panorama of the country's urbanization are interesting to follow.

exploring with curiosity and eagerness; also it was a period of warning, a socially critical period. The idea of a city evoked a host of contradictory images and connotations, and it is sensed in the discourse of a hell for the poor, the dramatically exciting machinery of industrialization, something contradictory to nature and the natural state of being, a powerful magnet.

The contrast with nature, although it existed, is not a diagnostic feature. More distinguishing is the separation of two different worlds: the townspeople and those from the village, as well as the contrast between the solidity of the town centre and the condition of the poor slums depicted by Eduard Vilde and Eduard Bornhöhe. The city is occasionally a diseased body, although an efficient machine with its distinct noise, the cityscape with smoking chimneys. The protagonists are not yet young heroes or heroines of the *Bildungsroman* coming to the big city and finding their way of living there, but the urge to come to town is notable. The picture is still static, but mapped with curiosity both geographically and socially. A *veduta* had not yet been born, but the literary townscape was largely visual: the landmarks mentioned in one book after another, and the beginning of detailed description that would appear later. And yet the cityscape and its essence remain enigmatic: it could no longer be a binary opposition of black and white, but had to be a lot more complicated because of the changing society and the urge to come to the city; a leitmotif and a keyword of the era.

The townscape of this period's literature is largely visual, and seems to have all the universal meanings. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, the ancient city was the symbol of the Cosmos, an image of the City of God (Tuan 1990: 150). The literature of nineteenth century Estonia seemed to be ready to experience the divinity of this phenomenon, as well as to understand its frailties, but it was still in a phase of feeling out, of finding and understanding the warm glow around their towns.

While the poetry of the period emphasized, at times, the need to leave the city (Kepp 2008: 15), in prose the city was an invitation, with distinctive sounds. But this was still largely an "extramural" attitude; the end of this period marks the beginning of the texts that would be born within, depictions of the city itself as a character, as a

living creature, or as the background of the reflection of modern man's soul.

Symbolically, the era may have ended with August Gailit's novel *Purpurne surm*, with a utopia fallen in a cataclysm.

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