

*Aare Pilv*

## LITERARY HISTORY AS AN ARTISTIC PROJECT

Literary history is a paradigm that is also a paradox, because, on one hand, it is a quite influential discipline of literary criticism and, on the other, it is a powerful pattern for poets and writers, which participates in the modification of the actual literary process. We could hardly find a clearer example of a field where lines of power both of literature itself and literary criticism meet and intersect. The literary history, like any kind of history, is a field, where a fight for and against authority of heritage is being fought, a field in which conceptualization of the present state in the light of different traditional lines of the past is taking place.

The usual picture, as is widely believed, is the following: literary historians 'create' literary history with its power lines, center and periphery, and writers attempt either to match it, or (in stronger cases) to react to it. Here we could remember the theory of 'the anxiety of influence' by Harold Bloom, where the 'strength' of a poet is defined by his paradoxical ability to make his predecessors seem to be imitating him<sup>1</sup>. The literary history cannot thus be only the business of literary historians, because their activity makes them intervene into the field of practice where creators of literary texts are acting. Literature as such consists of 'art' of poets and writers and of 'interpretation' or 'objectivization' by criticism. From a certain angle we could see the process of literature not as two-level activity where there is a primary level of art and a secondary level of meta-literature, but as the activity oriented to the third *telos*. In that case the two levels are equal for the achievement of the aim. We can bring forth different kinds of these aims that all are actually variations of one – we could say that the *telos* is 'true literatu-

<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997 (1973), p.141.

re', 'closeness to the Beauty', 'adequacy of the language to the world', 'constant freshness of perception', etc. However, one way to see the movement towards the aim is possession of means. There is always a struggle between different declarations of having the best means to achieve an aim, of knowing the road that does not end before the ultimate aim. And when we think of literary history, it is probable that the picture of literature created by literary history is somewhat teleological in one or another way. It means that literary history always has something to do with giving mandates to the possession of means, i. e. mandates of power.

Now, what about literary history as an artistic project? Literary history is an artistic project as soon as artistic activity of writers reveals features of fight for power – and I think, it almost always has them. Artistic/aesthetic gift is a special kind of knowledge, and possession of the gift while others recognize the fact gives a writer the position of power in a specific literary discourse. In some more refined cases the recognition of the possession must take place in the future, and the less recognition is achieved in the 'spoiled' present, the better for a writer. This is in accordance with the paradoxical nature of symbolic economy of culture- as it is used by Pierre Bourdieu – deprivation of the recognition in the present increases the 'credit' that would be 'paid back' in the future, thus increasing the symbolic capital<sup>2</sup>.

The struggle for power is in most cases quite modest, not manifest, often even denied, but at a certain point it becomes visible – when it takes the form of open thematization (oppositional or affirmative) of the literary history. Basically, there are two ways to gain authority – first, following the tradition, by modification of it in a unique way, 'improving' the movement towards *telos*, or, second, by opposition to the tradition, re-articulation of the aim. With some simplification, it might be said that there are traditionalist and futurist ways of dealing with literary history. Literary history is always imaginary past of each writer, and the past can be wiped out. But here is always an ambiguity – the traditionalist way can in fact be an innovation, because in its attention to the tradition it takes a distant viewpoint and somehow consciously tears itself off from the past and brings the past out of self-evidence into the consciousness of present, thus changing the

<sup>2</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Transl. S. Emanuel, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 255–256.

nature of the past. The futurist way again is bound to pass through negation and its novelties are often traditional patterns turned the other way round; the ways of depending on the past escape from the conscious sight. What is most important, both ways move in the ambivalence of literary process where new literary works cannot be absolutely original (or you are not understood) nor absolutely traditional (or you are overlooked). When the ambivalence is thematized or attempts are made to resolve it in literature, then it may result in a viewpoint from which it is possible to see that literary history is an artistic project. Literary history becomes a phenomenon that has no more power of describing the reality, but is instead the field of figurative manipulations that are distributing the power of artistic authority. Or, more clearly – the mechanisms of artwork and of historiography melt in one, the imaginative character of art and ‘actuality’ of literary history swap their places (or, maybe, take overtly over the places, where they actually, but covertly belong?).

T. S. Eliot’s views might serve as a good example of the traditionalist attitude. His well known essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’<sup>3</sup>, written in 1919, represents an approach, according to which the real aesthetic value of a writer or a poet comes forth only in the context of predecessors. To understand the value of a text, we must put it against the background of patterns created by tradition. Maybe Eliot’s attitude can be seen more clearly in another text, the introduction to Ezra Pound’s ‘Selected Poems’<sup>4</sup>. There are some interesting sentences, where Eliot protects Pound from the critics, who accuse Pound of excessive modernity. Eliot says that Pound’s originality is actually the ‘logical’ development of earlier modes of verse and Pound’s versification is not, according to Eliot, ‘revolutionary’, because it is an inevitable outcome of the tradition, at the same time not being imitation. The opposite example to Eliot is Walt Whitman, whose new kind of verse was ‘illogical’; Eliot says (maybe with some irony) that Whitman’s texts are a logical development of English prose, but in respect of poetry they are somewhat rootless and have no aesthetic depth. We should mention Eliot’s opinion, that it is always very hard to dis-

<sup>3</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, in: *Selected Essays*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950 (1932), p. 3–11.

<sup>4</sup> Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems. Edited with an introduction by T. S. Eliot*, London: Faber & Faber, 1949 (1928).

tinguish between logical development and illogical novelties. When we ask, what the basis of such division could be, we could find the shortest answer in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent': 'the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past', and that expression is followed by the famous lines: 'What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he [the poet] is at the moment to something, which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality'<sup>5</sup>. However, 'the consciousness of the past' is not an 'objective' criterion, it is derived from such texts, which meet this criterion. Although Eliot's thinking is of the essayist type and does not attempt any strict analytic approach, we could still see here a certain vicious circle. And it is natural, if we think about Eliot's critical activities as a parallel background of his activities as a poet (I do not want to diminish the Eliot's share in modernist critical thought, I only want to point to the aforementioned fact that critical activity is often the artistic activity using other means – I cannot help mentioning the sentence 'Politics is the continuation of war by other means' – and I think that it is inevitable, therefore may not be condemned).

In that case the literary history is a permanent unconscious inter-text of present artistic acts; certain streams of past literary process define the present one. In fact, we cannot say that it is not vice versa – that present does not define past for establishing its own identity and authority. The present artistic project is in its roots the fulfilment of a certain picture of literary history.

The contrary view or the contrary accents may be seen in modernist avant-garde, for example in Futurist or Dadaist movement. These movements carry the pathos of denial of the literary history. We could remember the slogan of Russian futurists 'to throw the classics overboard'. This attitude whereby it is possible to start literary history from the beginning could be defined as usurpation of power, which also means usurpation of the past. It is not surprising that the leaders of Italian and Russian futurism became important ideological figures of the later regimes in the states where the new interpretations of history

<sup>5</sup> Eliot, op. cit., p. 6–7.

<sup>6</sup> An interesting approach to the problem is in: Борис Гройс, *Gesamtkunstwerk Сталин*, in: *Искусство утопии. Gesamtkunstwerk Сталин. Статьи*, Москва. Художественный журнал, 2003, с. 19–147.

became one of the most important grounds of ideology. The spirit of utopist revolution (i.e. the will to restart the history) is closely connected with avant-garde movement in European art at that time<sup>6</sup>. The pathos was to look forward, not back, and the claim was to be actually the future, not to move into the future. Literary history becomes a completely virtual value, which can be destroyed and reconstructed freely; it is not valid as a real field of power, but as some material for artistic shaping, since the reality itself was the material for such free shaping. This is direct fictionalization of truth; the truth of past and present is not something to find out or unearth from hidden places, from behind something, the truth has to be made up. The power is not the matter of heritage (as in case of monarchist Eliot), but of self-declaration; the performative speech itself creates the reality.

The avant-gardism was one-time revolution. In some sense, we could see the attempts to arrange the avantgardist principles into a more steady principle of art in the activity of Russian formalists. Their concept of de-familiarization invented in 1917 by V. Shklovsky<sup>7</sup>, as the basis of literariness implicates the concept of such literary history that can be dealt with as a permanent row of novelties, permanent lineage of saying and seeing the world otherwise than earlier, that is – of renewal of the world itself again and again. Literary history then opens up as continuity of little revolutions of expressive abilities (we can immediately oppose it to Eliot's evolutionist approach).<sup>8</sup>

These are two extreme possibilities of perceiving literary history as a phenomenon, which contains different principles of stating what literature is and how literature should act in the present time – whether it should fit into evolutionary patterns or try actively to alter the perspective of literary possibilities. And whereas the mode of seeing the past of literature is an unavoidable condition of any creation of a text (although often unconscious), the literary history is always subject to artistic conceptualization. Maybe we should not ask, whether the conceptualization of literary history by artists is simply a theoretical background of their art – this seems to be trivial. Maybe we should

<sup>7</sup> See Виктор Шкловский, *Искусство как прием*, in: *О теории прозы*, Москва: Советский писатель, 1983, с. 9–25.

<sup>8</sup> About artistic implications of Russian Formalists see in: Ян Левченко, *История и фикция в текстах В. Шкловского и Б. Эйхенбаума в 1920-е гг.* Dissertationes semioticae Universitatis Tartuensis 5. Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2003.

ask instead whether conceptualization of literary history by a literary historian is not his participation in the creation of art – isn't he committing an artistic act? In the latter case, there is no essential hierarchy of primary and meta-texts, the hierarchy and difference is only linguistic, not the essential one. Maybe it is too daring to say, but when there is an approach, whereby the literature itself is unconsciousness and criticism is consciousness (it is the dominant approach), then where is the actual guarantee that literary history as a discipline of criticism is not at the same 'dream-level' where literature itself is. The answer is the matter of conventional beliefs, no more.

The aforementioned examples of possibilities of attitude towards literary history have been taken from the modernist culture. I would now like to give an example of a postmodernist and local context of Estonian literature. At the end of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s an ideology called Ethnofuturism came into existence in Estonia<sup>9</sup>. Initially it was perceived as some quasi-ideology, which simply had to function as a playfully shaped vivifier of the literary thought. But now it has become a surprisingly serious concept, especially for other Finno-Ugric nations in Russia, also Finnish Finno-Ugrists handle it as a serious pattern of cultural life and in Estonian criticism it is an argumentative term, too.

Ethnofuturism was brought into being by several young poets and writers in Tartu; three names could be given here – Karl Martin Sinijärv, the author of the term, Kauksi Ülle, the main and most effective ideological leader of the movement, who represents more the 'ethno-' part of the term, and Sven Kivisildnik, who represents more –'futurism' part of the term.

What is meant by the concept? The short definition could be the following: to express ancient and nationally archetypal content in modern form, or vice versa, to express modern content in the forms, inherited from deeper layers of cultural identity. That is the wider meaning of Ethnofuturism, as it is also accepted outside Estonia, but

<sup>9</sup> See about Ethnofuturism: Anneli Mihkelev, „Ethnofuturism: the Bridge Between National and International in Estonian Poetry”, in: *Estonian Literary Magazine*, no 15, autumn, 2002, p. 4–9; [www.einst.ee/literary/autumn2002/15\\_01.htm](http://www.einst.ee/literary/autumn2002/15_01.htm) [22.12.2003] and Maarja Päril-Lõhmus, Ülle Kauksi, Andres Heinapuu, Sven Kivisildnik, 1994; *Ethnofuturism: Mode of Thinking and a Possibility for Future*. – <http://haldjas.folklore.ee/ugri/kirjandus/ef01.html> [22.12.2003], also a special homepage [www.suri.ee/etnofutu](http://www.suri.ee/etnofutu), which contains materials in Estonian, Russian, English and Finnish.

in the case of these writers it goes together with openness to styles and texts of different epochs of the past literature, without the sense of obligation to follow the spirit of that past. The appearance of Ethnofuturism is now interpreted as a reaction to the situation of national culture, which is called Ethnosymbolism as in opposed to Ethnofuturism. The Ethnosymbolist constellation of culture reached its peak in 1980s as a form of national resistance, and it meant a certain quasi-sacral system of national, ethic and aesthetic values with the refined system of Aesopian speech. The position of culture and especially of literature was extremely high in the society and had taken over the places, which in a normal cultural situation are filled with political and social ideologies.<sup>10</sup> This high responsibility gave literature the status of a field that was under high pressure of ethical demands and was codified in a very specific and multiple system of expression. Ethnosymbolism was also directed towards the past, it was the tradition-oriented type of literature with the idea seen in earlier literature (especially in neo-symbolist poetry and realist prose of 1930s – poetess Betti Alver and novelist A.H. Tammsaare can be mentioned as the key-authors).

The activity of Kauksi Ülle is mainly connected with the revival of Võro-Seto dialect, the variant of Estonian language that is spoken in south-eastern part of Estonia and is most distant from the official written language based on northern dialects. She has achieved that Võro dialect acquired its own orthography, different from Estonian, and expression 'Võro language' (instead of 'Võro dialect') is usual in Estonia. She writes her poems, ballads and prose works only in this dialect and, of course, the basic tradition to support her is the ancient folklore and heritage of powerful Võro female singers. However, her literary activity consists in not only finding the ancient roots of national identity, but also building up of a new local identity, new language and possibility creation of a new literary tradition within the bigger Estonian literary culture. She has already many followers, who basically are not so busy with creating the patterns of ancient heritage but write in Võro dialect about contemporary life, showing that the

<sup>10</sup> This peculiarity has been characteristic of the Russian culture, e.g. in the 19th century, when the main works concerning philosophical and political thought were presented in the fictional form. The unconscious following of the patterns of Russian cultural practice in the Baltic states during the Soviet time is an interesting, yet largely undiscovered area for cultural studies.



regional cultural identity can be the mark of spiritual wealth and not any more the sign of periphery and outclassing (it must be taken into account that the official variant of Estonian language has been for a long time in a strongly dominant position and local dialects had very low prestige in public cultural life). Traditional background of her poetry grows out of quite different consciousness of the past compared to that of 'common' Estonian literature. The old folklorist roots are much closer to the present of Võro literature than the Baltic German ground, which is the basis of general Estonian national culture, as it was established in the center of the 19th century. It is not wrong to say that the history of Võro literature is in some sense much more profound than the history of Estonian literature. The latter is clearly defined as 'art', which is based on German romanticist ground, the former has (not completely, of course) skipped that ground and finds it in mentality, which in Estonia is sometimes called 'boreality' (a semi-mythical approach that relates Estonian culture rather to shamanist nordic cultures than to Christian Europe).

This kind of approach is still strongly declarative, not in the sense that it is illusionary, but in the sense that it is valid as far as it is declared, not by its descriptive force. This presents the view of literary tradition that sees it as something which is constantly made, not as something already existing and can only be stated.

Sven Kivisildnik, scandalous figure of Estonian literature of 1990s has even sharper relation with the literary history. Some of his texts may serve as a direct manifestation of Ethnofuturism. For example, they follow the metrics of Estonian folk songs, but are filled with some absurd or irritating content. In general, he has propagated the mode of writing that actually follows the contaminative essence of Estonian folk song technique – free association of earlier texts and negation of strict authorial self, whereas the textual material itself takes the place of authorial subject of artwork. So among Kivisildnik's texts there are many longer cycles in which optional fragments from Estonian classical writers are used (Friedebert Tuglas, Juhan Liiv et al) and mixed according to some invented pattern (like tankas made of optional sentences of Tuglas's short stories). Such texts and his disrespectful artistic behavior carry the message that literary history in its very essence is arbitrary and unbinding. This method of handling the literary history was a sacrilege for many people, because it destroys the accepted system of authorities, but in the core the approach is childishly



innocent, full of enthusiasm of being at the initial point of any literary history. Kivisildnik's activity reminds quite clearly the pathos of futurists in the beginning of the 20th century. The ideal of Kivisildnik, if possible, would be literature that consists only of circulating texts without signature that everybody could use according to individual textual technology of each without any claim to any power over the outcome. This is very similar to the way the old folk songs were permanently given over and remade, mixed with one another and changed in time. This would be the literature without fixed history, but with open future. Instead of the linear cumulative literary history, this kind of approach returns to the mythical time of ancient culture, thus emptying the ambitions that are characteristic of the historicist thinking.

Kivisildnik's phenomenon is actually far more complex; in addition, he presents very authoritative self-image, but this can also be interpreted as incarnated sarcasm towards the cult of artist's individuality in modernist culture.

Karl Martin Sinijärv is not such an arrogant figure, but in his technique of poetry the free interaction of different styles and layers of literary history is also present; quite often elements of pastiche in his poems have no clear 'moral' attitude towards the texts of literary past he is quoting, either affirmative, or negative. For him the literary history is not some linear and hierarchic order, but amorphous mass of different forms of potential new poetry.

The most important in Ethnofuturism as far as literature is directly concerned is maybe the belief that literary history somehow forms the basis of identity of contemporary literature, but not as some order which is in search of self-fulfilment, but as scattered substratum of literariness. Being clearly post-modernist this approach differs from the attitudes mentioned in the first half of this paper. This approach is neither evolutionary nor revolutionary – it does not see the present state of literature as an outcome or 'logical' development (if so, then only in larger social context and not in the aesthetic sense); and the literariness is not understood as a permanent search of new expressions on the background of history that should be abandoned after new ways of expression have been discovered. Literariness is understood as any earlier element of literature that can be contaminated in a new way; and literary history is understood not as temporal and progressing phenomenon, but as mythical and timeless field of all possibilities. In case of Ethnofuturism it is very postmodern and at the same time very

characteristic of the deeper strata of Estonian identity, as it was recognized when there was a need to define certain Estonian-ness apart from (Indo-) European-ness. So in addition there is one more interesting moment: postmodernist cultural mentality may well correspond to the ancient mythical Estonian mentality.<sup>11</sup>

As far as literary history as an artistic project is concerned – the Ethnofuturist handling of literary history is a purely artistic act. Its purpose is primarily to clear out the field of such literary art that would not be predetermined and controllable by some imaginary teleology of literary history. If we define art as something that always exists on the borders of its very preconditions, – that is art does not contain any predetermined teleology, it rather creates new teleologies, without actually denying former ones and therefore without being subject to any positive or negative causal row of literary progress, if we see art in such way, then Ethnofuturism might be said to serve as a good example of understanding literary history as a phenomenon that must be construed and solved in an artistic realm, because literary history is the unconsciousness of art and not vice versa. How in that case must literary critics act – must they reduce the approach to some specific and temporary event in literary history and risk losing the very essence of that artistic project, or must they follow the essence of that phenomenon and risk the reduction of the traditional literary history to a specific modernist project of critical institution – that remains a question. And answer to that question produces impact not on literary history as a discipline, but on literature as art; since actually the question to be answered is – what art the literary historians choose to make?

Iteikta 2003 10 24  
Parengta 2004 12 20

<sup>11</sup> It is not surprising – postmodernist phenomena often show the characteristics of the mythical world-view.