

## The images of town and countryside in the poetry of Heiti Talvik

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Heiti Talvik (1904-1947) was a member, often even called the intellectual leader of a circle of young Estonian poets called *Arbujad* (the Soothsayers). *Arbujad* were not united by an explicit literary manifesto but considered themselves modestly a group of friends who – regardless of their in some aspects quite different literary production – shared some basic principles on the nature of literary art, its functions and the role of poet. They mainly stressed that a poet must be completely free in his expression, he should neither follow the subjects of daily politic life nor should he put himself at the service of some distinct ideology. The only rules the poet must obey are the intrinsic rules of poetry itself. In the name of perfect aesthetic achievement the poet may even sacrifice his life, as has written Betti Alver, another distinguished poet of this circle: in one of her poems she depicts an artist who in a desire to get a perfect painting of a lion, decides to enter the lion cage not knowing if he will survive or not.<sup>1</sup>

In those aspirations this group of poets is by Estonian literary critics sometimes considered somewhat of an equivalent to the European art for art's sake movement and an opposition to another tendency in the Estonian literature of the 1930s, namely to the more or less realistic or naturalistic

authors who tried to be, as it was said, close to life and among whom quite many wrote in accordance with the official propaganda of Estonian government, praising physical labour and the brave farmers and in this way trying to strengthen national consciousness of Estonians.

It is quite arguable how justified it is to see in Heiti Talvik and his adherents only the pupils of the French Parnassian poets such as Théophile Gautier and others striving to perfect, sculpturally calm forms as, despite of Talvik's unconditional subjection to the severe demands of art, he nevertheless starts to see the aims of art outside the art itself. For him art becomes sort of an epistemological tool to sense the true meaning and depths of life and being a poet acquires so an ethic value.

But even more frequent and obviously more justified are the cases of comparing Heiti Talvik with another legendary French poet, Charles Baudelaire; so far the most extensive, although too general treatment of this subject is Aleksander Aspel's lecture "Baudelaire and the poetry of Heiti Talvik" held in the academic year 1968-1969. Talvik himself has admitted that when he started to write he was under great influence of Baudelaire, but later his interests changed, as he himself said, his preferences turned from decadent authors to classics, for example Dante.<sup>2</sup> This evolution and movement in his thought and expression – from decadent anxiety and self-torturing to a much more balanced and harmonious view of life – is also traceable in his poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> ALVER 2005, 132.

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<sup>2</sup> KAELAS 1936, 8.

Talvik and the other members of Arbujaad are considered to represent in Estonian literature the same phenomenon which in Europe is called modernism, but it stems from quite different contexts. Modernism is unanimously seen as being essentially related to urban and industrial environment but we can't speak of real cities in Estonia in the 1920s and 1930s. The urbanization had taken place and was slowly continuing (in 1934 29 % of Estonian population lived in towns) but Estonian towns, which didn't have high buildings and consisted mostly of 1-2-storeyed wooden houses, are not comparable with the European cities with populations of several millions, for example in 1934 Tallinn was the only town in Estonia that had more than 100,000 inhabitants, in Tartu this number was 58,876 and in Pärnu, the hometown of Talvik, 20,334.<sup>3</sup> Besides, if to rely on contemporary fiction, moving from the countryside to the towns didn't always have the most enviable reputation among the farmers: for example in one of the most important epopees in Estonian literature, A. H. Tammsaare's "Tõde ja õigus", written at the same epoch, one of the leitmotives is the ironic assertion that sending one's son to town means that he will become a horse thief.

Consequently, when speaking of modernism in Estonian literature from Noor-Eesti to Arbujaad the intertextual contexts, as reading Baudelaire for example, have an important role, the experience of the real city life comes more through the texts than through personal experience. The fact was already claimed by Friedebert Tuglas in

1912 when he wrote that the time of realism depicting the farm and village life is over and a new, urban and intelligent culture is about to be born, but he admitted that Estonians are only theoretically Europeans because the urban atmosphere and city moods are here known indirectly, through education and foreign literature.<sup>4</sup> During the next decades the situation changed of course noticeably, both with regard to the socio-economic sphere as well as the respective developments in the artistic sensibility, psychology and use of language, but still it is obvious that Estonian towns did not reach the same intensity of virtues and vices accompanying urbanization in great cities like Paris, London or New York. What concerns Heiti Talvik, it is not known that he had travelled abroad. He lived mostly in two Estonian towns: in Pärnu, a beautiful small resort town by the Baltic Sea where he was born, and in Tartu where he came to study in the university and where he staid for the rest of his life. Bernard Kangro, one of Talvik's fellow young poets, remembers that Talvik liked hiking very much. For example in the beginning of summer he often walked from Tartu to his hometown Pärnu, which is 178 km away, and not always choosing the most direct way.<sup>5</sup> Impressions gathered from those tours have inspired some of his most optimistic poems.

In Talvik's first poems the representation of location is more concrete than in his later poems, it means, when speaking of his early poems – poems written before 1934 – the

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<sup>3</sup> PULLAT 1978, 78; 81-83; 118.

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<sup>4</sup> TUGLAS 1996, 445.

<sup>5</sup> KANGRO 1981, 77.

question “where it takes place” has an answer and makes more often sense than when speaking of his later poems. Regarding the aspect of location and its connection with the moods of lyrical I, we can in general distinguish 5 types of poems. First the poems which give us no indication of location, they treat several more or less abstract themes without putting them in concrete surroundings. The number of that sort of poems in Talvik’s creation grows in time.

Secondly the poems which are near to the first group, namely, in quite a lot of poems we can from some hints deduce that the speaker isn’t a farmer or a miner but somebody who lives in the town, for example in the poem “Pihtimuskilde” (“Fragments of a Confession”, 1928) it is mentioned that when looking out of his window he sees the roofs of other buildings,<sup>6</sup> sometimes the lyrical I is positioned in a town by the sea, like in “Before the Thunderstorm” (“Eel äikest”, 1924 ) – it seems to be a similar person to the real Talvik himself –, but in this group of poems the town is only the modest and discreet decoration, it is not thematised and doesn’t acquire independent importance.

Thirdly, some poems which are written in a youthfully light and cheerful mood. They are few because young Talvik is mostly tormented by decadent spleen and anguish, but if there are some optimistic moments, which are only slightly touched by melancholy, then such moments are always connected with the countryside (often specially with the sea, like in the “Legen-

dary” (“Legendaarne”, 1925)) physical movement and openness. For example in the poem “Spring song” (“Kevadelaul”, 1924) he says that while in the woods and mountains the pain inside of him abates.<sup>7</sup> Or when describing the girl who he loved so much the source of all the metaphors or comparisons is nature: the girl’s limbs smell like white birches, her look is clear as a spring where the lyrical I can still his thirst like a lark *etc.*<sup>8</sup>

These poems don’t contain explicitly the opposite negative pole, the freedom and hope felt walking in the countryside is not directly opposed to anything although it is quite easy to add this negative counterpart implicitly because in his most depressed texts – so to say – the “action takes place” in the town. But in this group of poems, which would be the fourth in my division, we would neither meet the trivial, perhaps even expected town-countryside opposition. In fact, in one of his earliest poems “Dusk” (“Videvik”, 1924) which is not included in either of his collections of poems but what is in this aspect very exemplary, Talvik dismisses this as too naive. The lonely, physically sick and extremely sad speaker is positioned in the park somewhere in the suburbs from where he glances at the gloomy town down in the valley and depicts it, mentioning the noise of the factories covered with fog that resembles to a snake, the stench of the alcohol store and the screams of drunkards. This introduction is followed by the existential question whether he should return into the

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<sup>6</sup> TALVIK 1988, 87.

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<sup>7</sup> TALVIK 1988, 11.

<sup>8</sup> TALVIK 1988, 18.

black throat of the town where even the light is filthy and hitting the eyes or should he turn around and leave the town, but – unfortunately there is no solution in this direction either, because all he sees there is a grave for him in the swamp or in the ditch.<sup>9</sup> Like in the earlier mentioned texts the optimism, the pessimism here is equally overwhelming. Another Talvik's early poem, "Vision" ("Nägemus", 1924), contains a constitutive opposition but this is not spatial, contrasting town and countryside, but temporal, opposing the present state of things to the lost golden past. And the present is of course presented in the example of the unfriendly and spleen generating town where we would meet no human being, only carriages, cars, cranes that make a lot of noise and smog. Suddenly, in the middle of all this oppression and dimness the speaker gets a vision of the order of things in the past: long time ago there used to be an idyllic valley with the silvery spring, limes and oaks, large blue skies over them, an atmosphere absolutely calm and serene, even solemn.<sup>10</sup> In this early poem Talvik introduces the opposition that he uses in several later and more mature poems: the present urban decadence versus the nostalgia of the lost golden age which, relying on some given hints – Talvik mentions temples and market places – could be recognized as some antique Greece or Roman city-state. But even this dichotomy – the present lowness and decadence and the vital and valuable past – doesn't remain always untouched because in one of his cycle of poems, "After

the revolution" ("Järel revolutsiooni", 1930-1931), he gives the markers that start creating this scenery of antiquity, and what the reader would expect to be something happy and harmonious, but then shows all that in ruins too.<sup>11</sup>

But one is sure, if in Talvik's poems the urban surroundings are explicit and thematised, the lyrical I is not feeling well in this environment. The town is most certainly ugly, foggy, noisy and spleen generating, not offering solutions or remedies to the intrinsic problems. The most the town has to offer is some moments of forgetfulness which can be reached by the aid of alcohol, cigars and cruel and indifferent women wearing red high-heeled shoes. But the price for those sensual, self-forgetful and delirious tango parties is high: when waking up in the next morning the closeness of death and final fall has become more evident.<sup>12</sup>

When looking at the relationship of the lyrical I and the town, one more aspect can be noticed. In his first poems it is obvious that the speaker doesn't feel himself part of the urban environment, certainly he lives in town, yet he stays somehow on the distance, contemplating it from the sides, for example, as it was in the aforementioned poem "Dusk", where the speaker walks in a suburban park feeling that he doesn't belong neither to the town nor to the countryside. This image of the park on the edges of the town repeats itself in several of Talvik's poems, being an ambivalent space: not quite the town anymore nor the rural fields and woods, being so in accordance with the

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<sup>9</sup> TALVIK 1988, 16-17.

<sup>10</sup> TALVIK 1988, 15.

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<sup>11</sup> TALVIK 1988, 41-42.

<sup>12</sup> TALVIK 1988, 43.

ambivalent and confused identity of the speaker who has reached the limits of everything known to him and standing there on the edge, disappointed, tormented and not knowing where to turn to find solutions and new values to admire. In slightly later poems where his depression and anguish are about to culminate, like in "Pariah" ("Paaria") the speaker is already definitely part of the town, completely ruined by urban vices: he has spent all his money in the brothels, has got syphilis and lots of scars from the knife fights, he has long ago lost his job and now the only way to get some money is to steal it on the streets. He is no more the contemplative and lonely walker in the parks but he sneaks in the biggest crowd as a pickpocket and later drinks in the hotel bars in the centre of a town.<sup>13</sup>

This close connection with the town will loosen in the course of time, to the point of completely disappearing. As already mentioned, in Talvik's later poems we often don't meet the concrete details that would let us determine exactly the space. And parallel to this is the abating of the internal turmoil, the opening of horizons, understanding that after the grim autumn and the freezing winter follows inevitably the spring with new and fresh blossoms. Not that Talvik would completely change his pessimistic view on the human nature and history and its perspectives but he finds in himself the strength to defy it. When in those new contexts he here and there mentions cities, his relationship with them isn't personal any more. The city is no more the concrete surroundings of his lyrical I where

he is tangled and that suffocates him but he has moved to a more abstract level and is dealing with more general problems. For example in one of his cycle of poems ("Dies irae", 1934) he is not dealing so much with a suffering individual but pointing at the general threats over the world and humanity; the city jungles are here seen as the bearers of the bloody sun of the revolution.<sup>14</sup> And perhaps it is worth mentioning that now he uses the word "city" (*suurlinn*) instead of "town" (*linn*), obviously being himself aware that in Estonia we didn't have them at this epoch, so he is consciously speaking not any more on such a personally local but on the more universal level.

Before reaching the conclusion the last, fifth group of poems must be shortly described. As mentioned before, we don't meet in Talvik's poetry the simple spatial town and countryside opposition, where the town would have all kind of negative connotations and rural life would offer the redemption. As already hinted in the poem "Dusk" the lyrical I would not find a new life in the fields and woods, instead they could only offer him a wet grave. This subject is treated in more detail in the third part of Talvik's first collection of poems. Here the decadent moods have not disappeared yet, on the contrary, in some way they are reaching their climax, but now the sufferings of an individual are not merged with the gloomy atmosphere of the town, towns are not mentioned here by a word, instead the personal anguish grows here step by step up to the point that all the country is seen in the grasp of death and demise: the windmills

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<sup>13</sup> TALVIK 1988, 48-49.

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<sup>14</sup> TALVIK 1988, 108.

have stopped working because there has been a crop failure, the villages are attacked by maddened rats, the farmhouses are full of dying hungry people and on the fields are lying dead bodies which are collected and burnt on huge stakes. The lyrical I, additionally tormented by his personal crises, is looking at all this and decides to leave all the miseries of the world and to die alone somewhere in the cold waters of a foggy swamp. So, to the third group of poems which offered some gentle and cheerful pictures of country life, met by the lyrical I mostly by passing not by belonging to it, we have here the heavily depressed counterpart.

To conclude it has to be said that in general the poetry of Heiti Talvik reflects the worldview of the urbanized person who is unsatisfied with the present order of things in the world. But we can't say that he would see urbanization as the main reason for this dissatisfaction. This is neither the case in his early poems, where he presents his personal pain, nor in his later texts where he deals with more general topics. We wouldn't find in his poetry the simple spatial opposition of town and countryside, the latter bringing solutions to the problems generated by the former. Of course, it is true that when he depicts a town he sees nothing pleasant: towns for him are noisy, unfriendly, dim, foggy and often corrupt places, and as he has mentioned in several poems, surrounded by walls, it means closed, clearly defined areas where free movement is limited.

The countryside may sometimes offer temporal relief but at the same time it may be the decoration to the utmost doom. Solutions to the problems of the lyrical I don't

come, for example through moving to the countryside. We can't say that he has completely lost contact with country life because in his early poems and in some of his very last texts he gets there his rare joyful experiences but it is obvious that he himself doesn't belong there essentially, he is only the passing traveller, on his way from one town to the another. And more importantly, he explicitly says in his poems that his tormented soul wouldn't find peace in the woods and fields, where he can't see the idyllic calm scenes but instead, a few of his most powerful visions of complete disaster are staged in a rural environment.

Consequently, Talvik can't see the way from his decadent and urban anguish to the redemption in the simple movement in space. As mentioned, rather than opposing town and country in his poems, the explicit opposition is generated between the present and the lost age. But as it is obvious that we can't get back the days gone, besides, as shown, their perfection may be more the result of our imagination than a historical fact, so the solutions must be found inside the lyrical I itself, regardless of his location in concrete space. In Talvik's case it means that one day he discovers that the autumn, his preferred season in early poems, isn't only the culmination of fall and decadence but also the season of fruits.

And finally, if to compare what has been said about European modernist poetry and what occurs when reading Talvik, an interesting discord appears which also happens to slightly undermine the current conviction in Estonian literary criticism which considers Talvik as some sort of local equivalent to Baudelaire. In Talvik's case, as his de-

pression grows so grows his consistency with the concrete town, and when he finds solutions to his intrinsic turmoil, the markers of (urban) environment would leave his texts: the more concrete the pain, the more concrete are the spatial images. This characteristic trait of Talvik's poetry is completely contrary to the European modernist poetry of the city with its great founder Charles Baudelaire, because, as claims G. M. Hyde, in modernist poetry "Cities get less real as they get closer: or as one gets closer to them."<sup>15</sup> Or, as has written Claude Pichois commenting Baudelaire's poem "The Swan" ("Le Cygne"), which is one of the key texts in European modern urban poetry, Baudelaire moves from clarity to mysteriousness.<sup>16</sup> In those contexts reference is usually made to Baudelaire's verse from "The Swan": "Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie" (Baudelaire 1975: 86). The beginning of the poem "Seven old men" ("Les sept vieillards"): "Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves"<sup>17</sup> has the same explanatory and illustrative power. The objects Baudelaire meets in the city activate his imagination that he will very soon dive into his inner world of personal memories, associations and hallucinations to the extent that it is completely impossible to speak of a clear line between them and of a so called objective reality. In Talvik's poetry we would not meet that sort of interfusion of (urban) reality and imagination, on the contrary, in his most depressed texts the reality has the strongest grasp

on him and the only alternative to it seems to be death. Baudelaire, often considered as the first poet to express the really modern sensibility, will remain in this unstable and confused and also frightened state as for example in the end of the aforementioned poem "Seven old men":

Vainement ma raison voulait prendre la barre;  
La tempête en jouant déroutait ses efforts,  
Et mon âme dansait, dansait, vieille gabarre  
Sans mats, sur une mer monstrueuse et sans  
bords!<sup>18</sup>

In Talvik's poetry, in accordance with the already mentioned movement from concreteness to abstraction on the level of spatial images, runs the more general shift from anxiously decadent moods to the more harmonious and, as Talvik himself said, classic (and as could be inferred from this specification, obviously less modern) world view. The moment when he finds this ability to defy all the chaos around him and expresses his belief in the poet's ability to work out the order and sense from it, is depicted in the last part of his cycle of poems "Dies irae" which is sometimes also considered as a sort of manifesto of Arbujad. When Baudelaire's boat is bobbing with no direction because the reason is incapable of grasping the steering wheel, Talvik whoops and demands the contrary:

Hädalipp kas vinnata varda  
või alandlik selga küür?  
Ei! Kõhklejad kõik üle parda  
ja kindlamalt pihku tüür!

Trotsides katastroofi  
tormipuskarit rüüpad me laev.  
Meie kohus on sundida saledasse stroofi  
elementide pime raev.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> HYDE 1991, 337.

<sup>16</sup> PICHOS 1974, 1004.

<sup>17</sup> BAUDELAIRE 1975, 87.

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<sup>19</sup> TALVIK 1988, 111:

Shall we flash on SOS?  
Shall we cower, defeaed and humble?  
No! Let go by the board those who flinch with distress  
And steer straight through the rough-and-tumble!

No catastrophe made us yet squirm.  
It takes stronger storm-brew to stay us.  
We were born for stanzas, slim-built and firm,  
To impreson the fury of Chaos.

*Trans. by Ants Oras*

*(Six Estonian Poets 2002, 105)*