

On the Way towards Modernity: an Estonian Poet's Relationship with the City

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THE LYRICAL POET AND MODERN TIMES

In 1912, a young Estonian critic decided he was living and, more importantly, reading in an entirely new age, and set about defining the ways this new age had for influencing poetry. The critic's name was Johannes Semper (1892–1970) and he published his thoughts in an essay titled *Lüürrik ja meie aeg* (*The Lyrical Poet and Our Times*).¹ One of Semper's principal convictions, repeatedly expressed in this essay, is that urban environment and lifestyle constitute an essential factor that shapes modern poetry. The process of shaping is dual in its nature: Semper aims to distinguish between the time-dependent and timeless components of lyricism² and reaches a paradoxical conclusion through the example of Émile Verhaeren. Obviously thinking about Verhaeren's book *Les Villes tentaculaires* (1895), he concludes that Verhaeren has a more profound understanding of the modern times than any other lyrical poet, but that the real power of his lyricism resides in the distance he is able to put between himself and the modern urban environment. The latter is the source of his poetical figures, but these figures take on a different meaning: Verhaeren transforms the city into a symbol and thus ends its prosaic and businesslike existence.³

¹ SEMPER 1912.

² SEMPER 1912, 148.

³ SEMPER 1912, 158–160.

Years later, in the preface to a collection of his translations of Verhaeren, Semper is much more fascinated by Verhaeren's realistic qualities, suggesting that the symbolic value of a figure does not necessarily remove the figure from the reality from which it is extracted, but brings out the symbolism of the reality itself: he believes that in the aforementioned book, the city in its material and social aspects has become, for Verhaeren, the very sign of human energy and potential.⁴

Semper's reading of Verhaeren thus grows and changes with time, and doubtlessly with his own experiences of the city. In 1912, he could speak mostly from his solitary reading experiences,⁵ in 1929 he was more or less a seasoned city-dweller, himself an author of urban poetry, and his Estonian public had become somewhat more familiar with the idea of city being an acceptable poetic subject. The following is an attempt to follow some lyrical and intellectual pursuits of an author thus involved in the process of learning to "read" the modernity and finding a way of giving a poetical form to the experience.

SOME ASPECTS OF JOHANNES SEMPER'S LIFE AND WORK

Johannes Semper was born in an essentially urban era in Europe, but still in a most rural environment in Estonia. Son

⁴ SEMPER 1929, 17.

⁵ Semper had begun his studies in the university of St Petersburg in 1910. It was his first time to live in a real city. It was also in St Petersburg that he started really serious work in literature and wrote his first texts that were published, but not in St Petersburg where he lived, his public remained in Estonia (SIIRAK 1969, 32–48).

of a country schoolmaster, he grew up in a small village, like the rest of his generation of Estonian authors. His schooling took place in small towns on the Estonian scale, practically villages on the European scale.

One of Semper's most vivid memories from school time is the day he read an album published by the *Young Estonia* movement.⁶ That movement was led by writers about 10 years his seniors and its aim was to bring the Estonian literature on level with the Western literature. Between 1905 and 1915, the *Young Estonia* published many articles about European literatures, translated a great number of texts from various literatures and contributed in other significant ways to the emancipation and modernization of Estonian literature. At the age of nineteen, while living and studying in St Petersburg, Semper already published in their magazines.⁷

His early essays show him to be a very powerful reader. For his article on symbolism he claims to have read every last bit of related material (literary text and criticism) that he could find in St Petersburg libraries.⁸ The same urge for exhaustive background reading is obvious from his later articles, some of which analyze rather massive works as those of Proust and Montaigne.

Also, it is obvious that Semper is almost obsessed with the subject of time, in every sense. He's interested in the perception of time, in the rhythm of life and in the way the modern environment, especially the city changes that perception. He's also

interested in the effect this has on the poetics: the rhythm of the text, the form of the phrase or verse, the development of figures. And he's also very aware of the fact that we all are living in a certain moment of time and that this implies a responsibility. As a being dependent on time, man must learn to choose, to make decisions, to act, to shape his time. The first to translate Sartre into Estonian (in 1938), Semper also shows these convictions in other than poetic practices. In the 1930s, he had a rather prominent role in the Estonian literary life. Later, his attitude of a man of action cost him dearly: always a socialist, he first welcomed the Soviet occupation and became the Minister of education in the first Soviet government, later to be disillusioned about his ideals, horrified at the course of events, repressed by the Stalinist regime, and finally, after the fall of the Soviet occupation, he has been quite severely criticized about his choices.

However, Semper was a misfit long before socialist views lost their respectability among Estonian intellectuals. At the beginning of the 20th century, most of those were socialists, and Semper among them. Back then it was his poetics that was difficult to accept. His first book of poems, published in 1917, was found to be too intellectual and of a too literary inspiration, not from the "life itself".⁹ Both accusations followed Semper throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Another aspect of his poetry that has found little congeniality among his contemporaries is his sensibility to urban landscapes and atmospheres. Here criticism was not so fast to arise, but he had

⁶ SEMPER 1978, 162–164.

⁷ SEMPER 1911, SEMPER 1912.

⁸ SEMPER 1978, 178.

⁹ SEMPER 1978, 275.

next to no analogues or followers. In his youth, Semper studied in several European cities (St Petersburg, Moscow, Berlin, Rome, Paris) and that experience influenced him deeply. Since his earliest writings he tries to understand the modernity: the urban lifestyle, the rhythm of the cities, new patterns of perception and their influence on poetics. His poems also do not just use urban landscapes as props or background, they deal with fundamentally modern and urban experiences, which was rather rare in the Estonian poetry at that time (and even a lot later), even though there were, of course, other poets whose biography includes such experiences.

THE FIVE SENSES AND THE CITIES

In 1926, Semper published a book of poems with the title *Viis meelt* (*The Five Senses*). It consists of nine sections. The eighth of them is called "Suurlinnad" (The Cities), thus explicitly turning his reader's attention to the not-so-familiar subject. As the English language opposes *city* to *town*, Semper's title makes it also clear that it is not just any urban landscape he has in mind, but that he's really speaking of great metropolis, such as there has never been in Estonia. He, however, had closely known five of them. He calls these cities his "signposts" and he takes four different journeys along the road these signs point out.

In "Viis viita" (The Five Signposts, poem 1) he addresses mostly the physical, material reality of the city (steel, stone, concrete, smog, shops and stores, money etc.). In "Oo teie mu linnad" (O My Cities, poem 4) he turns to the social and cultural reality (jazz, somewhat fancy, but

essentially vain and empty people on the streets, cabarets, public speakers, scholars, revolutions etc.). These two poems draw a general portrait of cities.

In the two others, "Armastaks tundi..." (I Would Love the Hour..., poem 2) and "Autobiograafilist" (Something Autobiographical, poem 3), he looks at the individuality of each of his five cities. "Something Autobiographical" is a journey through time. The passage from one space to another is practically imperceptible, except that he points out, more or less discreetly, that the here-and-now of St Petersburg has been replaced by that of Moscow, then Berlin, then Rome and finally Paris. The emotional and intellectual surroundings also change: the young poet, reader of symbolists from St Petersburg is replaced by the student of architecture from Moscow, he in his turn by a bookish scholar from Berlin, who studies enthusiastically the psychoanalysis and then suddenly has doubts about his intellectual pursuits. In Rome and Paris we see already a maturing, self-confident subject who has learned to balance the knowledge acquired in his journeys with his own thought, with his five senses and joys of life.

In "Armastaks tundi..." he proceeds differently. Here we catch brief sensations, memories from all the five cities, never named but recognizable from the landmarks that have impressed the poet. This is a journey through space, through five different places that coincide and open simultaneously in one moment, in the hour that the poet would love, in his love for these places. This merging of the space brings us to the same conclusion Semper himself draws repeatedly: he has

been in those cities, but now the cities are in him. They are far away, but he cannot be separated from them.

There is also a fifth poem in this cycle, "Veduri enesetapp" (The Suicide of a Railway Engine), but I will turn to this poem later. The number of poems coincides, perhaps not very significantly, but still charmingly with the numeral in the title of the book itself. In "Suurlinnad", Semper actually seems somewhat obsessed with the number five, and in the third poem ("Autobiograafilist") he directly refers to the figure of the five senses¹⁰ that first appears in the title of the entire book. This is not a very profound observation, but it still underlines the importance the city has in Semper's perception of the world: it is the very place of perception, having the same structure. However, the moment he calls for the opening of all the five senses, he's suddenly transported from Rome to the seaside, and finds there again the meaning of the soil, the water, the sky and the air. This is the constant structure of his relationship with the city: exaltation is followed by doubt or withdrawal, and vice versa.

The present position of the lyrical I is never clearly established in the four poems briefly described, but it is clear that his relationship with the city is not that of a subject with his present surroundings. The city is absent. The most explicit description of the present, and a rather vague one at that (at the end of the first poem), hints that the lyrical I is confined to a small town, removed from among the crowds of millions of people, and is not entirely happy with it. Instead, he

continues to walk in the great cities, aided by the city maps he's holding in his hands.¹¹ He's thus attached to an absent environment to which he almost desperately expresses his love. The desperation of his love and need for the cities is underlined by the fact that he often perceives the city as something not entirely wholesome and reliable. There are the obvious remarks about the emptiness of the bourgeois life, about the dirtiness and ugliness of industry, about the dehumanizing effect of technology etc. In the first poem, Semper most clearly makes an attempt to escape from the city. He asks a "numbered" messenger boy to accompany him back to the country where they could run with puppies and sheep, free from all restraints and conventions imposed by the city.¹² The messenger boy laughs at him and he himself finds his protests and attacks against the city quite vain.¹³

He has trouble accepting all the facets of urban life, he doesn't want to be "numbered". He sometimes feels trapped in the city, resents the emptiness and lack of unchanging values. The rhythm of the city is consuming. And yet it is difficult to determine whether he really is a country man taking flirting excursions to an urban space, or a city man clinging to the remnants of the illusion that country would be a happy place and free him from the dangers and fears of the city. Semper speaks of the city with passion, and yet this passion seems charged with some trouble or guilt. The easiest way would be to attribute the guilt either to the fact that

¹⁰ SEMPER 1926, 105.

¹¹ SEMPER 1926, 101.

¹² SEMPER 1926, 99-100.

¹³ SEMPER 1926, 100.

the passion isn't quite real, that he's only acting the role of the urban poet, flirting with the modernist poetics. Or – to the fact that he actually feels his true world to be that of countryside and nature, but is still drawn to the city and feeling uncomfortable with this fascination.

The real problem, however, seems not to be the falseness of one of his feelings, but the simultaneous authenticity of both. Semper is not just playing with images (already the organic rhythm and the energetic flow of the phrase in these five poems are a sign of conviction and passion), he's honestly reflecting on an authentic experience. But the very experience is paradoxical and full of tensions. Coming from a culture and from a poetic tradition where nature, non-urban and pre-modern qualities and values were very much appreciated and the urban experiences unfamiliar, Semper reflects a lot on his own rather vast and intense experiences of that kind. He loves the city in general and the five cities where he spent his youth and his maturing years, in particular. He keenly feels the absence of that beloved environment which he has left behind in order to return home: it is from this point of view that the urban landscapes' cycle in *Viis meelt* is written.

THE LIVING MONSTER

In a more detailed analysis of the five poems, a specific group of figures becomes visible: the images of food. The city can eat (for instance, department stores lurk on the street corners, as if looking for prey, their teeth all brushed white,¹⁴ but it can also feed those in it. The

poet has also eaten the food offered by the city, for example, his brain has been fed the truth made of concrete.¹⁵ It is not entirely certain that this food is good, but eating it is inevitable and it transforms the eater. Semper's love for the city is a love for a terrifying but utterly fascinating creature – a creature that has turned himself into such a creature as well: he wonders whether or not to take a poisoned arrow and kill the "city-bull" in himself.¹⁶

Thus, a powerful synthesis is born: the urban environment depicted in a most realistic manner, with many startling details is, at the same time, a magical, wild organism or jungle, where the very elements of its modern reality turn gradually into living creatures. But even if the city is monstrous in many respects, it is a living monster, or a cluster of living monsters, as we see in the fifth and last poem of the cycle, "Veduri enesetapp".

In that poem, a railway engine goes mad, it jumps off the rails and runs amok in the streets. We see the sidewalks press themselves into the walls of houses in terror, the houses close their "eyes", people fade into the walls or get pressed into the pavement as so many collars, the cars scream out,¹⁷ the whole city is in panic. Then, at one point, the engine realizes its tragedy: loneliness. There is no other "animal" like itself to love and to make love to, everybody and everything hates the engine, so at last it decides to commit suicide. The whole city then calms down and forgets at once about the

¹⁴ SEMPER 1926, 99.

¹⁵ SEMPER 1926, 98.

¹⁶ SEMPER 1926, 100.

¹⁷ SEMPER 1926, 110.

incident, except for the carriages that mourn for three days.¹⁸

Thus Semper projects all the qualities, all the feelings mostly associated with the non technological, human, natural, pre-urban landscape to the elements of this new landscape. The city has transformed him, so he transforms the city. Since his passion for the city is mixed with some fear, his city also acquires that torn quality: the elements of the urban landscape take on a human face, they also experience a longing for timeless, pre-modern values such as love, friendship or freedom. Therefore, they also experience despair and fear when faced with their own modern existence, but it is obvious that the only way out of that existence is self-destruction. There is no innocent and effortless escape to the nature that Semper had half-heartedly suggested in the first poem. It is impossible to be something or somebody else, the choice is between suicide (the way of the mad railway engine) or acceptance and admission of the modern identity. In search of this acceptance, Semper makes the city his accomplice and also an object of compassion and empathy. Even a monster can be a beloved partner for the poet, whereas an entirely lifeless object or environment could not.

TRANSLATING MODERNITY

This brings us back to Semper's readings of Verhaeren, in a continuously paradoxical manner. In his earliest remarks about Verhaeren's urban poetry, Semper had mentioned the personification of the city, saying that Verhaeren calls the

city a monster¹⁹, only to reject in the very same sentence the significance of such a figure: "It is not important [...] This personification by Verhaeren is a consequence, not an objective" (*idem*). However, when he's later translating a choice of Verhaeren's poems, half of the texts he chooses from *Les Villes tentaculaires*²⁰ represent this aspect of Verhaeren's city: *La plaine* and *Vers le futur*, the first and the last poem of the book. The other two poems from that book – *La révolte* and *Une statue (apôtre)* – concentrate on the social aspect Semper found important at the time of composing his selection of Verhaeren's poems.

In a way, Semper was right at first, when he said that the personified city has no particular importance in Verhaeren's poetry: it is much less prominent than in his own poems, written and published between these two excursions to Verhaeren's work I have been referring to. That is, Verhaeren's personification is different: *Les Villes tentaculaires* contains a lot of metonymic figures that identify the city with the people in it: people in movement, people's hearts beating etc. The actual persons in the city lend their life to their environment. In Semper's case it is the other way round: the lifeless objects acquire human qualities. Verhaeren does that, too, but quite marginally. Here Semper's selection rather adds to the importance of this technique and this type of perception in Verhaeren's poetry.

Semper's journeys to the faraway cities and to the works of the faraway authors show that learning to "read" something

¹⁸ SEMPER 1926, 112.

¹⁹ SEMPER 1912, 159.

²⁰ VERHAEREN 1929, 110–120.

new – a new environment, a new experience, a new poetics – requires translation. Verhaeren, one of his favourite poets, first serves him as an interpreter of the modern urban culture. Later on, translating Verhaeren shows him new ways of understanding the poetic transformations of that culture. The poetic experience has obviously helped him to translate his own real life experience of the European metropolis'. Semper's first modernity, the one he described in 1912, was largely borrowed, an intellectual construct based upon his first inklings of the urban reality and the modern poetics. In the following years he did a lot in order to make this modernity his own and also to share it with his fellow-countrymen. But in so doing, he himself moved on, became different. And, of course, every such personal transformation contributed to that new and modernized Estonian literature Semper and his colleagues had set out to create. Although, as in the case of each individual discovery of modernity, the way from the goals set around 1910 to the achievements reached around 1930 was marked by several moments of redefinition and revaluation.

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