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## FOUNDERS OF MODERN ESTONIAN LITERARY CRITICISM

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In our century of growing intellectual scrutiny, questioning and awareness, we realize more and more that literary criticism is not only a mediator between creative literature and the reading public, but a constituent part of literary creation itself. Many of the great literary works of our century, like Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, are fiction and critical investigation of this fiction at the same time. Even the surrealist revolt against the straight jacket of reasonable evidence was a highly methodical, ideologically grounded movement. To be sure, the specialization of genres and the development of positivistic historical scholarship at the universities have widened the gap between criticism and creative literature, but more recent developments, such as phenomenological and existential approaches to literature, are about to narrow it again. A good critic is first of all a good writer in his own right.

Estonian literature is no exception to this status of literary criticism. In its development, it does furnish continuous examples of personal union between creative writing and criticism. Kristijan Jaak Peterson, its first true poet, was an enthusiastic critical promoter of Estonian mythology. The main literary figure in the 19th century, F. R. Kreutzwald, the author of the epic poem *Kalevipoeg*, was a critical philosopher, folklore scholar and journalist all in one person. The modernist cultural revolution at the beginning of this century, called "Young Estonia," was led by writers who were at the same time critics, literary scholars, social thinkers, philologists and aestheticians with a wide cosmopolitan education deliberately reaching beyond the customary German and Russian sources of enlightenment. They set the tone, created the language and marked the level and even the main direction of Estonian literary criticism as it has developed since. I would even venture the statement that next to poetry and the short story, literary essay is the genre where Estonian writers have best succeeded. In attempting to outline the main phases of this development, I shall concentrate on three major figures: G. Suits (1883-1956), F. Tuglas (1886-) and A. Oras (1900-). The poet Gustav Suits and the prose master Friedebert ' Tuglas, both leaders of the Young Estonia movement, are undoubtedly, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the founders of modern criticism in Estonia. It is necessary to link with their names that of Jahanness Aavik, the promoter of a linguistic reform, 1 largely aesthetic in character. Their fight against the cultural provincialism and parochial muralist which prevailed at the end of the 19th century coincided with the social revolution of 1905, culminated before the first world war, and reached its institutional if not spiritual objectives in 1918 with the foundation of the independent state of Estonia. Henceforth, the leaders of Young Estonia became holders of responsible positions in the national cultural institutions. G. Suits was professor of literature at the University of Tartu; F. Tuglas, editor of the state supported literary monthly "Looming", and president of the Writer's Union as well as the National Literary Society; Aavik, lecturer at the University.

Yet, it is characteristic of the Young Estonia intellectuals that none of them actually turned into a cultural bureaucrat, in spite of the heavy pressures of administrative and public responsibility, or even of their own age. They remained faithful to their initial commitment to a social and aesthetic conscience, inseparable from personal truth and intellectual honesty. Being among the most efficient elements of the rational and social emancipation of their country, they maintained in the new democratic society the position of an independent individual conscience inside and against the prevailing ideologies. But above all, they were committed to contemporary international standards of literary excellence, as opposed to journalistic commonplaces and an easygoing "laissez-aller" in the literary habits of the time. Indeed, the goal was to better catch up with Western Europe.

Gustav Suits was schooled at the University of Helsinki by the stern methods of Finnish folklore scholars and the modern aesthetics of "Einfuhlung" developed by the Finnish aesthetician Yrjo Him, of European repute. Suit's socialist radicalism, however, found its best support in the socio-cultural approach to literature of the great Danish writer Georg Brandes. Suit's first critical essays *Sihid ja Vaated* (Objectives and Perspectives), 1906, marked a turning point in Estonian criticism by the novel precision of his literary criteria and the sensitive analysis of the works of contemporary writers. In the twenties, as a

professor, he delivered several series of lectures on French literature (especially on Voltaire, Anatole France and Romain Rolland, the latter seen as the embodiment of social humanism immediately after the war) and on German and Dutch literatures, beside older Estonian literature. But the nucleus of Suits's critical activity remains with his course on Estonian poetics, taught through a period from the late twenties to the middle thirties. Widely attended, it spread its influence over the new generation of critics and writers. A rationalist, Suits shunned German metaphysical criticism, but admitted Oskar Walzel's aesthetic approach to the "Wortkunstwerk", as well as the method of Russian formalists of the twenties, Žirmunski, V. Šklovski, Tomaševski, showing at the same time a major interest in style studies and Gustave Lanson's aesthetically and psychologically inclined historical method. In his Estonian Poetics, he attempted to integrate under the traditional framework of a poetics of the literary genres modern perspective applied to the landmarks of Estonian literature. In discussing thematics, for instance, after distinguishing general themes from motifs, he divided the latter into three categories: (1) comparative literary motifs which run through various literatures and works, (2) structural motifs which constitute the intentional artistic pattern of a work and (3) psychological motifs, which reflect the author's intimate attitudes, constituting the unity of his "persona poetica", distinct from his real personality. In giving examples of the third category of motifs, Suits often gave fascinating lessons of psychological insight and verbal finesse, without resorting to psycho-analytical theories. Thus he laid the groundwork for an up-to-date specifically literary culture in Estonia. If his direct disciples or modern successors have not always matched his insights or verbal skill, (there was a whole school of flatly formalistic criticism in the thirties) many have developed to considerable length and depth the initial indications furnished by Suits. The main teaching of Suits was to direct our attention to the very texture of the work, as a necessary part of its meaning, in other words to the inseparable unity of form and content, neglected before and often forgotten afterwards.

Suits's work was substantiated and in many ways broadened by Friedebert Tuglas, who after 1905 went into exile, to Finland. During the years preceding the first world war, he traveled to France, Italy and Spain, learning a great deal about contemporary art and literature, while perfecting his own story writing into a highly stylized symbolic art, reminiscent of Flaubert's, but indebted also to Nietzsche's poetic and aphoristic prose. In the eight volumes of his critical essays *Kritika*, published between 1919 and 1936 and in longer monographic studies, Tuglas elaborates a whole literary Weltanschauung and ethics, actually based on the same concept of organic unity of form and content which guided Suits's poetics. He denounces his predecessors' artistic weakness, especially the formless and weighty developments in the realistic novels of the time, as human failures, as immaturity and lack of responsibility before the truth of the writer's own world. Far from applying any outer rules or criteria, Tuglas carefully studies the style and structure of a given work, adopts the viewpoint of the author, and then confronts him with the requirements of this perspective. Himself a symbolist, he admits the naturalist's concern with crude reality, but does not allow him to indulge in easy sentimentality towards the same reality. The evidence of an inner form has never been brought closer to the Estonian reader as in Tuglas's patient, careful and luminous criticism. But he also extended his scrutiny to folklore and such venerable works of the past as Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg*, denouncing in many of its aspects what he called "raskuse vaim" (the spirit of weightiness, of lethargy, or rather "the pull of gravitation", but also of crushing fate). Tuglas thus has initiated a cultural criticism of national psyche and of its particular sense of destiny. This, however, could not be adequately conceptualized in critical terms. In order to exorcize the feeling of a fatal gravitation, he makes it one of the main themes of his fictional work. So criticism and creative fiction stem, in his case, from the same inner need to give form to the haunting anxieties of what we obscurely feel as being our truth, still untold. With these concerns, Tuglas also introduced into our criticism metaphysical inquiry, very much in the line of a Nietzschean emancipation of man. But above all, the increasing part played in his criticism by symbolic descriptions, later condemned in some quarters as vague impressionism, resulted in a truly poetic style of criticism, where the critical word nearly matches the evocative power of the poetic. This style culminated in a fascinating allegorical dialog entitled "The Poet and the Idiot", 1924, a dialog about the absurdity of man's condition. It is probably the first expression of the philosophical absurd in Estonian letters. Tuglas, now 87, lives in Estonia as the Nestor of modern Estonian criticism, seemingly a problem to the Soviet establishment, as Professor Jaan Puhvel has put it so aptly in a recent review of Nigol Andresen's monograph on Tuglas, which in an otherwise sound, even if restricted study, altogether avoids Tuglas's criticism.

We have to forego a closer discussion of the modernization of the Estonian language promoted at the same time by Johannes Aavik, an aesthetically inspired linguist, who at the age of 89 now lives in Sweden. Let us say at least that in the climate of revolutionary changes of the first three decades of this century, he succeeded in introducing into the Estonian vocabulary some one hundred new root words, partly borrowed from Finnish, partly from Romance languages or purely invented by himself. These were short, striking words, immediately felt as "normal", as perfectly consonant with the sound system of the language:

"laup" (forehead) for "otsaesine"  
"roim" (murder, evidently from "crime") for the old word "mortsukatoo"  
"seik" (a fact) for "tosiasi".

These words and some morphological changes replaced many cumbersome translations from German or heavy handed original forms and gave to the modernized language, indeed, a swifter pace, lighter and sharper contours, and an "elegance", to use Aavik's own term, which contributed essentially to the creation of a new style, an intellectual dynamism. One of its earliest manifestations was in the hey-days of the 1917 revolution, a modern outburst of sheer verbal joy in the production of the short lived literary movement "Siuru", Estonian name of a mythological bird.

This linguistic and aesthetic dynamism, first produced by the Young Estonia movement, also played a significant part in the new generation of writers and critics which emerged in the middle and late twenties and dominated the literary life of the thirties. This new generation gave the renewed language the status of contemporary idiom. It had started out with a protest against the social establishment, but soon also turned against its older literary predecessors who were accused of now betraying their humanistic ideals and ending up in a sterile aestheticism, exemplified by Tuglas. In the mid-thirties, however, dichotomies appeared within the rising generation itself, leading to a polarization of attitudes between the "social realists" on the one hand and the "poetic idealists" on the other. The late thirties were the battleground of this literary fight. From it emerged the full stature of the third major figure of contemporary Estonian criticism, Ants Oras, who defended the idealist cause.

Born in 1900 at Tallinn, he received his degrees at the University of Tartu and Oxford, and became professor of English literature at the University of Tartu in 1932. He left his country in 1942 and since 1949 has been professor of English literature at the University of Florida. A Milton scholar and student of metrics, he has translated poetry into Estonian from nearly all major and many minor languages, starting with Virgil and ending with Paul Valéry, including the main works of Shakespeare, Goethe and Puškin.

In substance, as a critic Oras carried on Young Estonia's struggle for the dignity and spiritual autonomy of art and literature against its subservience to any particular doctrine or social opportunity, not in the name of "art for art's sake", but for the sake of genuine humanity. The ethical responsibility of the writer, of the poet, towards his art, already stressed by Tuglas, in the context of structural and stylistic unity of the works, is broadened and deepened by Oras to a central principle of creative integrity. Oras's notion of spiritual integrity implies first of all participation in and responsibility towards the best in the humanistic heritage of European civilization. In a penetrating study, "T. S. Eliot's Critical Ideas" (1932), the first of its kind on Eliot and one of the most important texts expressing literary Weltanschauung in Estonian, Oras also elaborates his own outlook on literature. He admits Eliot's concept of Western, especially Mediterranean classical tradition as the nucleus of our humanistic heritage, but has reservations about Eliot's intellectual "puritanism", his skepticism and "elegant aridity", which end up in the feeling of doom and lead the author to seek refuge in the fold of Catholic dogmatism. Oras, as other Estonian critics, reacts with vigor against Spengler's vision of "The Downfall of the West". He feels, on the contrary, that the deepest wells of European heritage are full of vitality. Eliot's and Valéry's pessimism, the drifting social consciousness of Auden and Spender, as well as the surrealist revolt in the thirties, strike him as forms of intellectual over-saturation, loss of balance and finally abdication of the intellect. He shares Julien Benda's accusation of modern intellectuals as betrayers of their rational vocation. Subscribing to Gide's and Valéry's notion of "modern classicism" defined as "tamed romanticism", Oras relentlessly stresses the importance in any literary creation of "intellectual control", identified with classical discipline. In this perspective Oras might have remained in the line of modern classical reaction to "romantic modernism", yet his deeper concern has been with the genuine truth of our inner experience, with the very core of our sense of existence, which are the stuff of which true poetry is made. And indeed, especially in his later criticism of contemporary poetry which in the fifties and sixties has continued to galvanize our literary life in exile, the scrutiny of the inner center of the work plays an increasingly important part. It leads him to use the romantic notion of heart as the source of all spiritual energy. And in the depths of the heart of the main line in Estonian poetry, he discovers as a depository of a tragic and crushing experience, not void, nor despair, nor dread, but beyond them hope and a determination to achieve spiritual rebirth. In Oras's view of the essence of Estonian poetry, the tormented yet luminous poetry of Marie Under is the very embodiment of this quest.

It is evident that with these perspectives, Oras considerably emphasizes the instinctive romantic element in his judgment. Actually he has sought to maintain a just balance between intellectual vigor and instinctive urges, possibly guided by the example of Goethe, his lifelong devotion. Yet the notion of tamed romanticism hardly covers the full breadth of Oras's critical work. He has been concerned with nearly all the bewildering varieties of contemporary literature, especially in English, German, French, Finnish, and Swedish. Classical balance has been his mature choice and perhaps his defense against the more aggressive forms of the fermentation often felt by himself as chaotic. *Laiemasse ringi*, (Towards the Widening Circle, 1956), the title of Oras's collected essays, clearly points to his underlying faith in the expansion of our creative potentialities. It is a modern humanist's faith. Moreover, beyond the firm intellectual framework of Oras's criticism, we feel the impact of the very texture of his thought and sensitivity. It is a shimmering texture, rapidly reflecting multiple facets of a work with joyous ease. The curse of fate, the pull of gravitation which Suits and Tuglas had attempted to exorcize, and Aavik to combat with new words, seems in Oras's critical prose to be totally transmuted into a transparent light which affects us as a liberating verbal joy, quite apart from his particular judgments or reluctances — which have been contested by others. Oras's criticism has thus demonstrated once more, and perhaps definitively in Estonian literature, that the critical essay, in its modern development, reaches the same depths of our consciousness as poetry. Working through the channels of our intellect it can be a poetry of the mind.