

## Brave New Estonia or Writing the World of Art

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Summary

**Abstract:** This article examines the aesthetic and social ideals in the early texts of one of the first integral Estonian cultural movements – Noor-Eesti (Young Estonia). The ideals are compared with the main texts of other major cultural movements of the time (e.g. the Estonian Literary Society). The aspirations of a small nation, influenced by the first great Russian revolution at the beginning of the century, can be mapped by means of two principles of culture-making: utopian, wishing to change society as a whole, and monadic or individual-focused.

**Keywords:** Young Estonia, the beginning of 20th century, cultural utopias

0. Inventing a new and better public or societal order is essentially a comprehensive project. It is usually a product of dissatisfaction with existing circumstances; the inventor is confident that he knows how everything could function better. Starting with the project, however, it soon becomes clear that it is not enough to improve only one part – the whole, with all its parts, must become better. A compact model of society naturally presupposes an attitude regarding high culture – science, literature and other arts. The function of scientists (or at least philosophers) in an ideal society has mostly been recognised, and they have even been offered ruling positions, whereas with the arts the matter is more complicated. The creators of ideal societies have typically got stuck on the social role of art.

The aim of this article is to examine the early ideas of the literary movement Young

Estonia regarding how to improve the existing society, Estonia. The analysis relies on two principles that tighten the self-regulation of culture: the utopian and the individual. The utopian principle of culture-making and self-reflection sees the purpose of an individual and group action in improving the conditions of society, their own country and people, the world or a social group. This is accompanied by dissatisfaction with existing circumstances, a belief in the necessity of changing them, and the projection of their own deeds against that background. The utopian principle proceeds, first of all, along a temporal axis, and then along a positive-negative axis. Faith in progress, in the chance of things getting better, is positive. The negative side contains, first of all, dystopia, which simultaneously constitutes a fear of radical changes. Another form is existential pessimism, acting despite presumed hopelessness. This kind of negative utopia characterised the late 19th century Russification period in Estonia, as well as the Soviet era, for example starting from the 1970s, when faith in the survival of the Estonian nation was on the wane, but people aspired towards it nevertheless. Time-wise, the positive ideal world is situated either in the past (a fondness for antiquity and an approach to the classical ideal as the only chance to improve things, e.g. Estonians' ancient fight for freedom) or in the future. The blending of the notions utopia and dystopia (also eutopia, anti-utopia and heterotopia) makes it possible to gather them under the notion\_topical principle that joins the opposites of topos (meaning 'actually

existing order').<sup>1</sup> The \_topical principle also includes atopia (meaning 'lack of place', 'placelessness'): a fictional world does not need to be situated in a specific place, or be present, thus showing its fictional essence in the most genuine way.

Another method of culture-making is focusing on the individual, and this is denoted in the current text as a monadic principle (instead, we could use the word atom-like, meaning initial, indivisible): this involves focusing on the interpretation of one's own activity and creative work, on developing one's mental and physical self. These two principles cannot, naturally, be totally distinguishable, one being hidden in the other: completely suppressing one's self is quite rare, as is the opposite, the lack of any faith in the world-changing power of your activities. However, they both exist, because any interpretation of one's activities, *autopoiesis*, self-reflection, is the inevitable foundation of any conscious activity and, via that activity, of culture.

1. This article concentrates on the earlier, programmatic texts of Young Estonia from the first to the third album (mostly written between 1904 and 1908), mainly dealing with the group interpreting itself, Estonian culture and society. The examined stage in the development of Young Estonia is characterised not so much by programmatic manifestos – the introductions of the albums are far too argumentative and long – as by a conscious wish to express the aims and starting positions.

The current article is based on the writing of four people, clearly connected with Young Estonia since its beginning: Gustav Suits, as the author of the programmatic texts, Friedebert Tuglas, Johannes Aavik and Villem Grünthal-Ridala.

There are not a large number of texts, but they are uneven and ideologically heteroge-

neous. Because of the writers' relatively young ages and other circumstances of the movement (e.g. the geographical distance between the leading figures<sup>2</sup>), there was never a compact and explicitly expressed Young Estonia movement as a world view or plan of action. Another background source is material in manuscript, primarily correspondence, now partly published. Thirdly, the external and later reception of the Young Estonia movement has been taken into consideration too. Fourthly, the historic context of Young Estonia is significant as well: if and to what extent the opinions of Young Estonians differed from contemporary aspirations and main ideas.

Two problems in fact intertwine here: (1) the ideals of Young Estonians, their opinions about art and art culture, their functions and works, and (2) their relations with ideas that were influenced by contemporary events and those of 1905, the changing society and cultural life, and those which also yielded their own impact. The first was set in rather strict temporal frames, whereas the second inevitably presumes temporal deviations in the past and future.

2. On the basis of this material, the following common features of the early aesthetic and social views of Young Estonia are delineated.

(1) Firstly the development of a new social layer, the intelligentsia, which could only hap-

1 See also the international conference based on a similar usage of notions, 'The City: \_topias and Reflections' (19.–21.09. 2002, [http://www.eki.ee/km/place/place\\_prog\\_3.htm](http://www.eki.ee/km/place/place_prog_3.htm)). Topia in that meaning was introduced by Karl Mannheim's classic work, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. San Diego, New York, London: A Harvest Book, 1936, p. 192).

2 The mentioned quartet meet and were able to start their joint activity in time and space only in Helsinki beginning in September 1906, when Tuglas arrived there as well.

pen by creating a suitable semiotic environment. This required a new language for translating culture, and new types of texts based on that language that would join the topic of the intelligentsia to the relevant style. Aavik ('Our language and literature must become the language and literature of the intelligentsia...') was most persistent in that area.

(2) The second common feature is the natural-geographical distance of the ideal from Estonia. This is evident in the rhetoric of the ideal among the Young Estonia leaders, in the poetry at the time of Suits's first collection 'The Fire of Life', and in the fiction of other authors.

A popular metaphor, for instance, is the image of climbing a mountain. This is programmatic, with a hint of Nietzsche in the background, but it associates the metaphor of verticality with consciousness, social condition and evaluation, and is certainly a wider principle that organises structures of thought.<sup>3</sup> Climbing a mountain is associated with rising waves, ascending in general and especially to the skies.

Another ideal location, in addition to the mountains, is 'one's own island'; in parallel with the mountains, Italy and the Alps are mentioned as well. The third temporal-spatial ideal location is *Põhjala*, the Northern Land. The earlier ideal place – Kungla – was separated by a temporal distance, being located in a dreamy past; the Northern Land was separated spatially, and Italy lies at a distance both temporally and spatially. What matters in all three is placing the ideal, which is marked only with its name, emphatically far away; it is not at an accessible distance (from Kungla), either spatially or temporally.

(3) A third common feature is the request for cosmological entirety: the text and all its parts had to be subjected to the same principles, while form and content had to be in

correspondence, and the style in accord with the narrative and characters; an artistic whole, emerging from tensions of dissonance or multilingualism, was excluded.

Entirety was achieved by the unity of the plan of content and the plan of expression. Besides being linguistic, the form of the text also had to be beautiful. The entire environment, including different arts and other spheres of human activity, had to be compact and harmonious as well. Such an all-embracing project was typical of the late 19th century/early 20th century world view. This is obvious in *Jugendstil* – its approach to the world view and not to style.

(4) The most radical orientation towards the future and a desire for everything new was represented by Aavik. Above all, we should mention Aavik's linguistic innovation, which had to produce a foundation for a new communicative system: firstly, the means of creating texts – the language – had to be perfected, and thus the style typical of the language, and texts, would be perfected as well. A kind of end point of the ideal was J. Randvere's (Johannes Aavik) treatise-short story 'Ruth' (1909). Here the monadic principle is realised, and the demand for harmony is developed to the end. 'Ruth' displays an accord of the male and female principles, the co-existence of different kinds of art and science, summarising and attuning all the Young Estonia urges.

3. The above showed that the earlier texts of Young Estonia do not present a clearly and fully developed ideal, although there are frag-

3 Compare e.g. George Lakoff's orientation metaphors: G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 14–19, or G. Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 283.

ments of the ideal in Tuglas's and Aavik's desire for wholeness, Suits's state of intermediation, opposition to the existing conditions (the slave mentality, and blind surrender to the existing rules of morality) and in nominalistic images (stormy seas, islands, mountaintops, Kungla, the Northern Lands, and Italy).

These elements can be gathered into four typical groups:

(1) the ideal is not the realisation of the interests of the existing class/group (workers, young people), but it emerges as something totally new in the intermediate place between the opposing interests;

(2) the semiotic totality of the ideal that presupposes its 'foundation' from the most primary basis, language; thus the realisation of the ideal is a similar 'endless curve', such as in Aavik's later linguistic innovation;

(3) the clear temporal and spatial distance of the ideal;

(4) the harmony and entirety of the ideal: a kind of cosmological unity of social classes, cultural spheres, and the text and its parts. Hence the connections between the arts and society – i.e. via the development of the cultural sphere, the whole society develops as well – the connection of language with the act of language, the harmonious accord of various arts etc.

Not all ideals and utopias were shaped at the early stage of Young Estonia. Suits realised one possibility in his later idea of an Estonian republic of work; Ridala does the same in the serf-nation's self-surpassing by associating breed and nation; Aavik in building language, the basis of his total semiotic project. The activity of marginal Young Estonia members could be added here as well: Bernhard Linde's ceaseless efforts in realis-

ing a Young Estonia-style art world; Peeter Rubel's social ideals; Rudolf Lesta's urban utopias; and Jaan Sarv's concepts of creative science, which are, in turn, connected with the principle of beauty.

4. The activity of the members of Young Estonia and their contemporaries mostly belongs in the principle of \_topian culture-making. Individual freedom can only be achieved via class freedom. The utopian intermediary area of Gustav Suits, the emerging desire of Tuglas for total perfection, and the semiotic aesthetics of Aavik and Grünthal as the guarantee of its inevitable foundation all joined in the aspiration for a society where the monadic principle would be realised as well. However, this is not only the freedom of traditional oppressed classes, workers and peasants, but also the development of a totally new social layer – the intelligentsia and especially artists. The main aim of Young Estonia, as they moved towards monadic freedom, was to create a compact cultural sphere, a world of art, and in that aim they moved in concert with other contemporary cultural activities.

Some alternations took place in the views of Young Estonia during the examined period, but there was no radical change. The change occurred inside the \_topian principle, and did not involve its replacement with the nomadic dominant. The ideal society was thus one that made it possible to also develop to perfection the principle of monadic culture-making.

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