

The Author and Artistic Creativity

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The postmodern turn in cultural studies, from the 1960s onward, has ever tried to subvert the authority of „modern“ tradition, as a supposed construct of Renaissance humanists. Instead, it has tried to establish its own authority in which the interpreter (re-reader, re-conceptualizer) as well as (linguistic) anonymity and (cultural) plurality of creation has a dominant role.

However, by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, postmodern thinking, despite its initial novelty, seems to have come to a standstill, in the sense that in its discourses a strong tendency to tautology is revealed, while the object of its oppositional discourse has undergone a regrettable simplification. The question about the author is no exception in this sense.

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Yuri M. Lotman and His “Semiosphere”

In one of his early, important, and seminal works, *Analiz poetičeskogo teksta* (Leningrad, 1972), the late head of the Tartu (or Tartu-Moscow) school of semiotics, Yuri M. Lotman (1922–1993), established a basic division of literary texts: one type of texts, mainly narrative, is governed by *syntagmatic* relations, while in the other type of texts, above all constituted by lyrical poetry, the organizing principle is *paradigmatic* (93).

As a highly significant hint at the scope of his study (and not excluding hidden irony), Lotman admits that “the poetic text in the present treatment will not be handled in [...] the totality of its cultural meaning, but only from a much narrower point of view, accessible to contemporary science”²¹ (5). And in the preceding passage he claims, visually stretching out the word “scientific”: “but science cannot offer anything else beyond scientific truth” (5).

The point of the irony is that Lotman, in fact, was passionately interested in the “totality of cultural meaning” from the very beginning of his research. A close reading of his allegedly “scientific” texts reveals many

passages in which he “slips” or “leaps” into the realm of philosophy, beyond the rigid bounds of science.

In this book, Lotman hardly applies the notions of “semiotics” or “semiotic”; rather, they emerged gradually, as the Tartu school was expanding. It remained forever suspect to the official Communist regime. Therefore, in parallel with “semiotics” an euphemism was applied by Tartu scholars, denoting the primary object of semiotic research: “secondary modeling systems”² (Lotman, *Kultuurisemiootika* 3–4).

There is no denying that Lotman, at least until the end of the 1970s, could sincerely believe in the capacity of science to expand to the realm of the arts not only in the formal sense but grasping also its content which, traditionally, has been the object of metaphysical-philosophic and metaphoric speculations. In those times Lotman seriously dealt with the interrelations of both hemispheres of the human brain, the possibility of “artificial reason” and in some articles went as far as to identify culture with “collective reason” or “collective intellect” (cf. Lotman, *Kul'tura kak*).³

However, as an essential background fact, one should not forget that while science and reason enjoyed a truly deified position in the official ideology of the USSR, contemporary Western philosophy was flatly rejected. Dismissive commentaries of Soviet or Eastern block Marxist philosophers on Western “decadent” philosophy abounded, while original philosophic texts proceeding from the West were never translated or published, at least until the start of the *perestroika* in the USSR in the mid- 1980s.

What I claim here is that Lotman, starting from the 1980s, in accord with his own theory of “semiospheric” “leaps” and “explosions”, effectuated in his late work a genuine “leap” to a new quality. Lotman the scientist-semiotician ever more openly became in the last ten years of his life identifiable with Lotman the philosopher. In a gradually more liberal socio-ideological condition he could at last deal with the object of his life-long passion, culture and artistic creation, without externally imposed restrictions or prescribed self-restrictions.

There is a co-occurrence in the late Lotman with postmodern currents of thought deriving from the Western centres in the sense that both overcome the formalist rigidity of structuralism. However, there is also a substantial divergence of Lotman’s late thought from the postmodern mainstream of theory. It directly concerns the position and understanding of the role of the author in artistic creation.

In 1984 Lotman published the article “O semiosfere” (About the Semiosphere). He introduced the notion of “semiosphere” without providing any clear-cut definition of it. The point of departure was Vladimir Vernadski’s terms, “biosphere” and “noosphere”, but Lotman warned

against drawing parallels with the “noosphere”; rather, he saw an analogy for the semiosphere in biosphere, in the sense that, as he says, the semiotic universe or semiotic space can be treated as “a homogeneous mechanism or even an organism”. Such a “great system”, in which all ingredients and components are in an open state of dynamic interrelations, can be called the “semiosphere” (Lotman, *Kul'tura i* 13).⁴ As Lotman further claims, “the semiosphere is the semiotic space beyond which the existence of semiosis is impossible” (13). Lotman admits that the “semiosphere” is an abstract phenomenon, yet he denies that its essence is merely metaphorical (12).

Lotman's key notion in the same article is the “semiotic border”. This functions as a bilingual translation mechanism adapting signals from the “outer space” into “our space”. He adds that only by means of the “border” can the semiosphere establish contact with the “non-semiotic” and the “foreign semiotic” space (14–15). All translation mechanisms that serve to intermediate foreign contacts belong to the border structure. Lotman also claims that semiotic processes are accelerated in the periphery of the cultural ecumene (15), that they are more dynamic in comparison with those developing in “centres” or nuclei (16). The interrelation between the nuclei and the periphery is never rigid, but changing. What has been considered a “non-semiotic” space can appear as another and different semiotic space. There is a tendency in semiospheric processes towards becoming internally ever more varied, without the semiosphere losing its unity (20).

In what follows, Lotman deals with the conditions of the dialogue that takes place on the border. He admits that semiotically different spaces, to establish a dialogue, need invariants or common elements. He speaks of palindromes, mirrors, the right and the left side, as structural models for dialogue.

In his last book, *Kul'tura i vzryv* (Culture and Explosion, 1992), written shortly before death, Lotman almost abandons his former semiotic vocabulary in order to discuss much more openly the processes taking place in culture. The book, however, can in retrospect illuminate important aspects in Lotman's thinking, as regards the semiosphere and Lotman's late philosophy, on the whole.

Already in a short article published in 1985, when Lotman still identified culture with “collective intellect” and “collective memory”, the idea of revolutions in the system of the “cultural grammar” appeared. Lotman's emphasis gradually shifts from “collective intellect” to “collective memory”. He speaks of informative and creative memory, of how actual texts are illuminated in memory and non-actual texts are left in reserve or as a potential.

In *Kul'tura i vsryv*, Lotman centres on “explosions” and “leaps” in the systems and processes of culture, as well as in creative minds and created texts. Also, literature, as a whole can be regarded as a text (179). The key issue continues to be the “border” as an intersection of different cultural encodings, but now it is not so much a condition for a dialogue, but for “explosions” and revolutions. Lotman became explicitly interested in the irregular and the unpredictable, which were considered by him the very core of cultural semiosis, in the sense that totally new signs, meanings and perspectives emerge as the result of “explosions” and “leaps”. At the same time Lotman admits that for development (the “leap”) both explosiveness and stability are necessary, the former allows for renovation and the latter, continuation (16, 20, 26). He also mentions that some cultures develop only by means of a gradual change, avoiding explosions (17).

Lotman observes a gradual degeneration of “explosions” from the 18th to the 20th century (22). In this context he contrasts technical-mechanical explosions with spiritual and philosophic explosions. It becomes clear that Lotman in his last work is not interested in the regular, the product of logic and technique, capable of merely imitative explosions (21) but, above all, in the conditions under which genuine explosions in artistic creation take place, or, in other words, how and why an author can become an Author, a supreme creator, and why other authors, the great main body of creators, are destined to drift in a current or fashion, until a new explosion drives them virtually into a cultural oblivion.

Arts and religion, as we read in *Kul'tura i vsryv* (60) are the highest forms of conscience. Quite contrary to his earlier belief in “collective reason”, Lotman now defies Vladimir Lenin’s saying that religion is the “opium of the people”, claiming that it is, instead, a “powerful means of self-organization” (224). In the same book, Lotman also deals with feminist emancipation and revolution, as well as with dreams, which he calls “a semiotic window”.

Many other important philosophical ideas can be found in the book, but now I will try to resume briefly why I consider Lotman’s late philosophy more productive, as regards the interpretation of the author, than the thinking which has drifted to the start of the current century with the mainstream of postmodern attitudes, since Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

First, Lotman, in a sense, himself represents the “periphery”, the zone par excellence for dialogue as well as for cultural “explosions”. The French thinkers, on the contrary, represent the “centre” and to a great extent have been dependent on its language. They have relied very confidently on the French language – their “own” language – not much taking

into the account the language of the European “others”, not to mention more distant “others”. In another text (2007) on contemporary translation philosophy, I have tried to show how excessive confidence in one’s “own” language, especially in philosophers who are so keen about language and discourses formed by language, tend to debilitate their conclusions about translation.

By declaring the written language and discourses accumulated in the written language almost the only meaningful reality, the French thinkers, to my mind, strongly restrict the field of cultural creation. The remote background to such thinking could be seen in the famous phrase of René Descartes: *Cogito ergo sum*. Reality beyond thinking has no value. The intellectual faculty is declared the supreme criterion, and the physical and biological worlds must obey it. Man, provided with the faculty of reason, is the very peak of God’s creation.

Descartes, the child of the Renaissance’s waning, could still only imagine it so, but his compatriots, the 17th-century “postmoderns” Bernard de Fontenelle and Charles Perrault, went much further. They declared their own age – naturally, meaning by it their “own” contemporary French literature – the very peak of literary creation, superior to that of the ancients.

(Post)modern “Progress” in Culture?

Appreciation of literature and the arts is more often than not a matter of taste, and tastes, as we all know, differ from one person to another, from one historical epoch and cultural space to another. However, what is much more significant, especially as related to the postmoderns of the second half of the 20th century, is the emergence with the 17th-century “postmoderns” of the idea of “progress”. New literature is considered superior to older literature, a belief in a progressive literary development appears. From such a position, old authors are always overcome by the young. The new, the modern, is made to be synonymous with the good.

Not only God as the initial creator is denied, but also great authors of the past are thought to exist only thanks to the genius of the contemporary critical mind which decides their fate by the critical rewriting or reinterpreting of their work. According to this view, writers do not know much about their own creation. The critics are the main authors, without whom writers would not exist.

In other words, meta-textual and post-textual creation – thus, intellectual creation – is considered superior to original artistic creation which, being mixed with the sensual and the “low” (non-cultural), comes to be

considered an inferior activity. As a result, a large sector of postmodern criticism appreciates, above all, intellectually orientated creation, whose object and point of departure is culture. In parallel with the high degree of sophistication in the use of the language in postmodern critical discourses themselves, irony and mind games, narrative techniques and strategies attract scholars and critics in the first place. They are reluctant to explain the content of literary works beyond the strictly cultural and the formal. Or, if they do, they easily fall into the trap of sociological simplifications.

The meta-textual language becomes ever more abstract. Theories depart from theories, in the belief that in this way cultural progress can be achieved.

To use Lotman's semiotic vocabulary, "syntagmatics" has been turned into the main sign of cultural scholarship. Following the creed borrowed from exact and natural sciences, namely, that theory illuminates the path for practice, probably an analogous "progress" is expected to take place in culture.

In terms of Lotman's semiosphere, postmodern-centric cultural thinking is attempting to move culture into the "noo-sphere" dominated by man's intellectual activity. There, its modification would be subjected to logic, causality and regularity. Texts are considered as segments in the anonymous chain of intertextualities, gradually developing towards greater perfection, like science, under the guidance of theory.

For my part, I confess that, as regards cultural creation, I still believe much more in "paradigmatics" than in "syntagmatics". I fully admit that (linguistic, stylistic and so on) tradition and the general cultural background are just as strongly conditioning any creation in literature and arts. However, with Lotman, I tend to believe that the anonymous chain can be interrupted by a creative author in an act that is not merely cultural but also existential. Only then does the creative act become an act of semiosis, creating genuinely new values and making culture richer and more varied in its content. It is very far from the idea of progress.

Artistic Creation as a Semiospheric and Symbiotic Act

In other words, and moving closer to Lotman's conclusion: the Author creates on the open border between culture and life, on the one hand, and life and death, on the other. He/she brings in all creative faculties at the same time: memory, intellect, senses, conscience and sub-conscience. There are a number of borders and edges open to dialogue as well as "explosions" in any significant artistic creation and work. However, history also proves

that in certain historical conditions culture “sleeps”, being replaced by mediocre creation in which the copying (re-writing) technique, congenial with some of the main postmodern theoretical postulates, prevails.

It is a topical truth that the meaning of an artistic work or text is open, it emerges and becomes modified gradually in time and space, in a dialogue between the author and his/her readers. It is a symbiotic process, in which, as historical experience demonstrates, symbiotic creators – either authors of original works or critics-interpreters (as authors) – have the greatest possibilities to establish and influence the canon-formation.

Why speak of symbiotic creators? Because more often than not, especially in the case of postmodern criticism, there is a tendency to undervalue the capacity of the authors of literary works for philosophic and metaphysical thinking. Incidentally, in his article “O semiosfere” Lotman directly connects the notion of the “border” with a semiotic individuality and proceeds to claim that “the semiosphere is a ‘semiotic personality’” whose submission to any more concrete formal definition is highly complicated (13).

The greatest writers of the past, without exception, have been such “semiospheric” or “semiotic-symbiotic” authors in the sense that they have worked on a number of borders, were perpetually attracted by what lies beyond the border of the known. They worked like philosophers interpreting life, but theirs was the superior art, as they did not limit themselves to the abstract formulation of ideas and concepts – thus decomposing the integrity of a human being – but revealed their philosophy in sensual images, which could be received even by a large public.

I have published an article (2003) about Cervantes’s theory of the novel, meaning by it not so much what Cervantes borrowed from Aristotle or other philosophers, nor his explicitly manifested ideas about literary creation and the art of the novel, but the theory or philosophy in images, turned into practice, as it emerges from his *Novelas ejemplares* and *Don Quixote* itself.

Calderón, Camões, Kreutzwald, Liiv, Pessoa

One of the supreme manifestations of the author in Western literary history can be found in Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s play, in fact, his *auto sacramental*, *El gran teatro del mundo* (The Great Theatre of the World). Calderón, like nobody before or after him, manages to assemble on the theatrical stage the whole of life, God’s creation represented by allegorical characters. God himself is in the action – called *el Autor*, the possessor of all human knowledge. However, it is Calderón the author of the play who

makes the conceptual scheme come to life, revive, and emerge through lyrical and sensual images. Calderón the author resuscitates God the author, turning creation into a semiospheric act, not just a mere intellectual abstract. The play is a vivid dialogue between the original creator (God) and the interpreter of his creation, Calderón, who becomes an author in the widest sense of the term.

The Portuguese Luís Vaz de Camões, in the late Renaissance did not invent any new aesthetic patterns in his famous epic *Os Lusíadas*. However, as an author belonging to the European smaller periphery, Portugal, Camões had a keen border sensibility. This could be one of the explanations for why Camões was the only Renaissance author who managed to write a complete national-patriotic epic, something that was attempted also by the French Pierre de Ronsard, but left unfinished. The great European nations, by that time, had already created their epics. They could expand their territories, thus providing their “body” with new energy and vital force.

Portugal, meanwhile, had for centuries been and was still at that time strongly menaced by its mighty neighbour, Spain. Camões’s main achievement was that in his epic he managed to demonstrate that also smaller, peripheral nations have their individual identity and are capable of great spiritual deeds. Camões constantly emphasises in his *Os Lusíadas* the voyage to India of the Portuguese as a spiritual act, while condemning expansion as guided by earthly greed. His epic became a great spiritual support for his nation and at the same time was also one of the paradigmatic works that inspired Romantic philosophers, like Johann Gottfried Herder, two centuries later, to claim spiritual equality of all peoples and nations, whether they belonged to centres or peripheries, whether they were physically big or small.

Some of the most outstanding authors of the Estonian budding nation in the second half of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century worked in the same paradigm. They came from even a much remoter periphery than the one to which Portugal belonged. It was the deepest periphery also in the socio-psychological meaning, as the Estonians, mainly a peasant people, were until the start of the 19th century in the humiliating state of serfdom under the Baltic-German landlords, within the Russian Tsarist empire.

The two authors whose work has been of a particular significance for Estonia, are Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803–1882) and Juhan Liiv (1864–1913). Both were poets, semiospheric as well as paradigmatic authors par excellence. Kreutzwald’s parents had been serfs, but after studying at Tartu University he managed to become a medical doctor. In the re-

mote Southern Estonian border town, practicing as a doctor, Kreutzwald wrote the epic *Kalevipoeg* (literally: The Son of Kalev, 1861).

Juhan Liiv's parents were not serfs, but he too came from a humble peasant family, and mainly because of poverty never studied at the university, though he also lived for several periods in Tartu. In 1893 he suffered a spiritual crisis and fell mentally ill. However, it remains a fact that the best part of his poetry was created during the years of his illness, on the unstable border of madness and sanity.

Kreutzwald provided his epic *Kalevipoeg* with a scientific framework. It was first published, with a parallel German translation, in the proceedings of the Learned Estonian Society (Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft / Õpetatud Eesti Selts). The author claimed that the epic was based on genuine folklore. In fact, it was, at least in part, a mystification on which Kreutzwald was forced to rely, because otherwise the work would probably never have been published. Estonian literature did not exist as yet, and the tsarist censorship would have remorselessly crushed a patriotic literary work in the bud. In those conditions, support from outside Estonia was an essential factor in the epic's coming into existence and its subsequent recognition, despite criticism from Estonians themselves. The St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences gave Kreutzwald an important award even before the publication in the Proceedings was finished, while in a speech in Helsinki in 1859 a Finnish folklorist, S. Elmgren, claimed that Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg* was equal to Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala*. As a matter of fact, in the book form *Kalevipoeg* appeared first in Kuopio, Finland (1862), and only after that did publications in Estonia itself follow.

In parallel with the Portuguese epic of Camões, Kreutzwald's peripheral epic claimed the individual identity of the Estonian nation and its yearning for liberty. The work, spiritually, constructs the Estonian nation and its culture through a powerful series of symbols and lyrical imagery. Again, it is not a mere mental construct – in contrast to what some post-modern theoreticians have claimed as the basis of nations' ontology – but its roots lie deep in the peripheral consciousness of existence, in which sensibility, feelings, ideas and philosophy enter into a symbiotic, interactive relationship. Only such works can influence and inspire a collective public, a wider community, like a nation.

As a result, *Kalevipoeg* has become a fundamental text for the Estonian nation and its culture. It created at the same time a complicated myth, influenced by the subtlest layers of Romantic philosophy (Herder, Goethe). Although *Kalevipoeg* in later Estonian culture has often been an object of irony and parody, its mythical significance has ever expanded. Although in the English translation of *Kalevipoeg* (by Jüri Kurman, USA, 1982)

Kreutzwald is still being qualified, in the footsteps of the older folkloric point of view, as a mere “compiler” of the epic, Kreutzwald’s figure as one of the great European authors of the closing era of Romanticism becomes ever more apparent, as new approaches appear (see Laak 2008).

Another Portuguese (= peripheral) poet, Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935), somewhat younger than the Estonian Juhan Liiv, claimed in some of his work that he was the only truly nature poet, in the sense that by depriving nature of any ideas and feelings, attributed to it by the Romantic mainstream, Pessoa really achieved a great poetic-philosophic originality. It became accentuated, as he intentionally fragmented himself by distributing his authorship, as a poet, among a number of authors, his heteronyms (Alvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, Alberto Caeiro, among the best known).

Thus, in one of his poems (XXVIII) Alberto Caeiro writes:

Por mim, escrevo a prosa dos meus versos
E fico contente,
Porque sei que compreendo a Natureza por fora;
E não a compreendo por dentro
Porque a Natureza não tem dentro;
Senão não era a Natureza.

(XXVIII)

(As for me, I write the prose of my verses/ And I am satisfied, / Since I understand Nature from outside; / And I don’t understand it from inside / Because Nature doesn’t have inside; / Or else it would not be Nature.)

The philosophy of Alberto Caeiro, the teacher of Alvaro de Campos, produces an impression of extreme rationalism, in which feelings have no place at all. Some of Alvaro de Campos’s poems (such as his famous *Ode marítima*), in contrast, reflect the sexual and physical impulses of nature, which are deprived of any sentiments and reason, as they are projected into human action. However, the final portion of *Ode marítima*, as well as another famous poem by Alvaro de Campos, *Tabacaria*, show that the decisions of “pure reason”, as well as those of nature, are reduced to a mere sexual mechanism – thus analogous with man’s technical striving. In this there resides a shade of irony. Pessoa the poet in his creative integrity was still very much acting on the anguish-ridden edge of existence. The movement towards the “safe” centric ground of reason or the imagined “inside” of nature is hardly more than a parody of man’s rational aspirations.

The same state of a permanent disquiet – and here one can recall Pessoa’s book of reflections, *Livro do desassossego* – is inherent in the poetry of the Estonian Juhan Liiv. The younger generation of Estonian symbol-

ists tried to make him a forerunner of their own aspirations, but Liiv was much subtler. He did not accept the symbolists' call for strict rhymes – i.e. their formal rationality. Though departing more often than not from visions of nature, Liiv's images could seldom be reduced to mere surface impressions or mere hinting at some feelings. Liiv's poetry contains a strong intellectual intensity, but his great advantage with most "intellectual poets" is that his ideas never appeared in their nudeness. They emerged from his images which, being sensual and lyrical at the same time, and dragged to the edge of existence, have a magic that a "noo-spheric" poet – regardless of his/ her artistic abilities – would never achieve. For that reason in several of my recent essays about Liiv (cf. 2007) I have seen Liiv as one of the greatest European existential-lyrical poets and have sought analogies between him and the Basque existential thinker and writer Miguel de Unamuno, at the other edge of Europe. Their year of birth, symbolically, coincides.

Finally, does what has been stated above mean that I undervalue the role of interpreters / rewriters as authors? Not at all. As Juhan Liiv himself never managed to publish a book in his life-time, he as an Author was coined by other, younger authors, the short story and essay writer Friedebert Tuglas (1886–1971), in the first place. Thanks to Tuglas's early monographs on Liiv and a substantial selection of Liiv's work published by him, Liiv could enter the permanent canon of Estonian literature and become consecrated by posterity.

We all know very well that the ground for the great canon of Western literature, if not of world literature, was prepared above all by Romantic writers and philosophers (Herder, Goethe, the brothers Schlegel and others). Several of them were Authors in the deepest sense of the word. Their semiospheric openness to the "other" was the most important factor in the establishment of such a fertile symbiotic dialogue between the author and the interpreter that in the final result both appeared as Authors.

NOTES

¹ Here and in the following, the translation is mine.

² The semiotic series edited by Lotman had on its cover the word "Semiotics" in Greek letters, but its official Russian title, "Trudy po znakovym sistemam" cautiously avoided the term.

³ The short treatise was translated and published the same year in Italy: *La cultura come mente collettiva e i problemi dell'intelligenza artificiale*. Urbino: Università di Urbino, Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e di Linguistica, Ser. A, 1977, N. 66.

⁴ I use in my references the reprint of the article in Lotman 1992.

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