The Grotesque and Estonian Literature

Anneli Mihkelev
Comparative Literature, Estonian Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University
Narva mnt 25, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia
Email: anneli.mihkelev@tlu.ee

Abstract The roots of the grotesque exist in a very old tradition of culture and folklore. Thinking of Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg*, it is possible to find several motifs and elements which may work as the grotesque, or which may inspire literature and art. The grotesque has existed in Estonian literature in different periods, and the grotesque may convey social and political meaning (e.g. F. Tuglas' and A. Gailit's works). The grotesque indicates the deformations of the real world, and the grotesque also creates a new world which has a deformed structure. The grotesque and absurdity in literature became tools of rebellion against the Soviet regime (e.g. A. Valton's, V. Vahing's works) . The grotesque in Soviet literature also included political and social criticism, although sometimes it was disguised: the grotesque as an ambivalent and polysemic phenomenon made it possible to play with several meanings, including meanings which may have been forbidden. Grotesque motifs and images give Estonian poetry a more playful character, and represent the grotesque as a phenomenon of play (I. Laaban's and A. Ehin's surrealist poetry). The most important thing that grotesque images tell us in contemporary times is that something is wrong, that people do not feel comfortable in a situation, and that is a grotesque situation which combines tragedy and laughter.
Key words grotesque; myth; surrealism; absurd; Estonian literature

The grotesque is an old and complicated phenomenon or category which unites things which are seemingly impossible to unite: the comic and horrible, real and fantastic etc. The grotesque as a phenomenon is older than the literary term "grotesque", and the meaning of the term has changed over the centuries.[1] The Estonian researcher Harald Peep believed that the grotesque connects both fantasy and reality and that is the reason why the grotesque exists in romanticism, realism and other literary styles.[2]

The grotesque can exist anywhere. Jüri Talvet has pointed out the cues which characterize the complex and vital phenomenon of the grotesque: laughter, irony, satire, the body, lowering, ugliness, ambiguity, relativity, alienation, contrast, paradox,

contraposition, deformation, exaggeration, aberration, the fantastic, the unnatural, the bizarre etc.[3] He designated the grotesque as "the polyglot grotesque", because "The language of the grotesque is in perpetual modification. Whatever its codes in different epochs, it has always been a powerful means of art and literature in revealing the 'other' side of reality, both in time and space" (Talvet 62).

The works of Mikhail Bakhtin indicate that the roots of the grotesque exist in a very old tradition of culture and folklore. Thinking of national epics, it is really possible to find several motifs and elements which may also work as the grotesque, or which may inspire literature and art, e.g. the monster Grendel in the long Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. Beowulf represents the great hero; he is Beowulf the Great, who fights against evil and becomes the new king. Grendel "began to encompass evil, an enemy from hell" (Alexander 11-12). It is also significant that *Beowulf* contains several events which are historical, as well as some that are fantasy. The story of Beowulf circulated and developed orally for a long time before it was set down in its present arrangement and ultimate literary form[4]

So oral myths and literary myths are mixed in national epics which are written texts and which we can read at present. Concerning the Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg*, the folk tales about Kalevipoeg were collected in the early 19th century and then formed the basis of the Estonian epic by Freidrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (*c.f.* Latvian epic *Lāčplēsis*). If we speak of Estonian and Latvian epics, we are actually speaking of literary works which expressed the authors', Kreutzwald's and Pumpurs', intentions and their time: "a literary work of art, which combines a multitude of folklore elements" (Valk 408), as well as the signs of the time when they were written: "Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald composed the epic *Kalevipoeg* in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the romanticism of Herderian ideas were blended by the leading thinkers of Estonia into the ideology of the National Awakening" (Valk 407). According to Ülo Valk, "Kreutzwald modified folklore sources to compose a work comparable with other European epics, such as Homeric poems and the *Niebelungenlied*" (Valk 408), and similar to an epic about a great hero, as in *Beowulf*.

Speaking of great heroes, it is possible to find several specific characteristics which are common to all of them, or at least most of them. Usually all these heroes are extremely strong and they have extraordinary destinies. Although they have very big and strong bodies, they are not grotesque bodies. Even the Latvian hero Lāčplēsis, who has the ears of a bear, because his mother was a female bear, is not a grotesque man; on the contrary, he is a very handsome man. The grotesque appears in situations in which the heroes fight with enemies or against evil. Usually the evil characters are represented as grotesque and horrible monsters, e.g. Grendel and the dragon in

Beowulf, the witches in *Lāčplēsis*, and the warlocks in *Kalevipoeg*.

But the best motifs for creating or inspiring grotesque elements in literature and art are motifs of reproduction and fertility (how Kalevipoeg's mother Linda was born from the egg of a black grouse, several visits to Hell etc.). However, these motifs are not usually represented as the grotesque in Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg*; originally these motifs expressed the positive meaning of rebirth and nature in folklore, but the meaning of fertility has been changed to the negative in modern history.[5] These motifs and symbols have changed in literature, but they appear in literary texts in different ways and in different contexts again and again, e.g. in Enn Vetemaa's travesties *Kalevipoja mälestused* (*The Memoirs of Kalevpioeg*, 1971) and *Eesti näkiliste välimääraja* (*A Guide to the Estonian Water Sprites,*1980), or in the postmodernist poetry of Contra (b. 1974).

The grotesque may appear in different ways, and it may have different cultural aims in different periods. The grotesque may be a style in the literary work or the grotesque may appear as a stylistic element or character or situation in a text. The grotesque indicates the deformations of the real world, and the grotesque also creates a new world which has a deformed structure.

This article analyses the grotesque in Estonian literature in different periods: why and how the grotesque has existed in Estonian literature, and what the message of a grotesque literary work is.

The Grotesque at the Beginning of the 20th Century

Friedebert Tuglas (1886 – 1971) was an Estonian prose writer, literary critic, editor, and one of the leaders of the "Young Estonia" movement at the beginning of the 20th century. He searched for new aesthetic ideals and, although he started out writing realistic short stories, his following collections displayed neoromantic and impressionist styles. In his mature period between the two World Wars, the stories of Tuglas are "marked by intensely symbolic diction, the mixing of reality and the fantastic, a search for a mathematically balanced composition, and the interfacing of literature with myth" (Undusk 8). Tuglas's short story "Maailma lõpus" ("At the End of the World", 1915) is one of the best examples from that period. Tuglas himself said that the idea of that story had been inspired by Kreutzwald's epic *Kalevipoeg* (1857–1861), in which the hero travels to a Nordic country across the sea.[6] Vilmos Voigt has noted similarities with several European literary works, e.g. the *Odyssey*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) etc.[7] All of these works contain extraordinary sea journeys and meetings with fantastic beings, such as female giants or monsters who have deformed bodies, and who live on faraway islands. In my opinion there are not only similarities with the

literary works mentioned above, but Tuglas's story also interprets these older literary works.

Tuglas's story is about a young seaman who is on his first journey at sea. The trip begins with adventures when the ship encounters a realm of emptiness and after that the seamen find an island with rich vegetation. Unfortunately, other seamen inadvertently leave the young sailor on the island because he is sleeping deeply at the top of a big tree. When he is alone on the island, he meets a female giant: "I sprang aside but the giant woman made the same move and stretched out her hands for me. I dodged to the other side, but with a few steps she overtook me. [- - -] She tried to catch me, her arms spread, as if I were a lamb. I did not know how to use my sword nor did I dare use it. She suddenly seized me by the shoulders and lifted me up to her face just as if I were a little child. She held me there for some moments while I flailed about with my arms and legs. It was only then that I saw she was laughing, laughing wildly. And I also saw that she was young and pretty" (Tuglas 26; trans. O. Mutt).

It is a curious island where curious people or beings which look like humans live among rich nature: "But one thing astonished me most of all: they did not speak. [- - -] They only seemed to look at each other in order to comprehend. And strangely enough they also understood my thoughts whenever they saw my eyes. [- - -] They were simply wise — wise in a special sense unknown to us. They seemed to merge with nature and their consciousness seemed to be that of nature itself. And that is why I believe they understood animals and trees as well as they understood me" (Tuglas 37).

The protagonist of the story feels fear and at first he shies away from the giants, and he does not understand the situation: "I lay between two soft cushions and considered my situation without, however, being able to understand it. Everything was as it is in real human life; nevertheless, everything was preternatural, entirely improbable. But the whole voyage had confused the real and the preternatural. I could no longer marvel properly at anything" (Tuglas 32).

Tuglas presents odd moments and situations in this story, and he also combines fantasy, beauty and ugliness. It is very significant how beauty and the love story with the giant maiden change during the story and ugliness becomes the dominant factor. The language of Tuglas's story expresses passion, and this motif is very similar to the old grotesque pictures and sculptures: "Our love became awesome like the midnight sun: it was around us and yet dazzlingly bright. [- - -] Lush grass was like her hair, I was enmeshed in wisps of mist as in her plaits, I trembled on quaggy bogs as on her breast. [- - -] It was terrible. A woman's passion is terrible" (Tuglas 49 – 51).

The next pages present a different picture of that woman and of passionate love: "But how different she now looked! Her face was ashen, there was a deep frown on

her brow and her eyes were cold. [- - -] Her hair streamed in all directions like flaming vines. And the claws of an unknown beast like the talons of a ghastly monster were fixed to the toes of her sandals" (Tuglas 54 – 55).

All the nature and plants are very important, because they express the feeling of fear, and Tuglas presents a really grotesque picture in his story: "But it was ghastly vegetation. [- - -] Disgusting plants appeared. [- - -] Flowers, with giant blooms the colour of human skin, grew in large patches, they snapped underfoot and the content that oozed out was bloody like raw meat and stank of carrion. [- - -] But the maiden hurried on, crushing the plants with the claws and making them bleed like live creatures" (Tuglas 56).

Finally the young sailor kills the giant maiden, and escapes from the island, but he is not a happy man among other people, because he constantly dreams of the nameless island.

In this story, Tuglas uses fantasy in the same way as Edgar Allan Poe, Gustave Flaubert and Jonathan Swift, and he uses several images which represent the grotesque; he combines nature and fantasy in this story, as well as ugliness and beauty etc.

Vilmos Voigt has stated that "Tuglas combined two traditions in "At the End of the World": oral stories of extraordinary sea voyages and a literary pattern of the 'island of love and happiness'. He could have followed both patterns in various ways: using Romantic, Realistic, fantastic, philosophical, or even adventurous discourses. But his method was different: an allegorico-symbolic undertone is perceived throughout the story. [- - -] But Tuglas does not want to write a new myth; he is using the discourse of the myth for his literary purpose" (Voigt 77 – 78).

Consequently, "At the End of the World" is an example of how positive laughter is combined with social criticism and romantic ideas of a better world.

August Gailit (1891 – 1960) was another writer who used grotesque motifs in his short stories at the beginning of the 20th century. Gailit was an exceptional figure in Estonian literature. He belonged to the literary group "Siuru", together with Friedebert Tuglas and others. Jaanus Vaiksoo has written that "Gailit's work of that period suffered the impact of the grim era, *i.e*. the First World War and the years that followed. Or, sticking to the writer's main axis of beauty versus ugliness; ugliness transformed into the aesthetic clearly prevailed" (Vaiksoo 5). One of the main figures in Gailit's works after World War I was the Devil "who lures people to the path of sin and turns a convent into the vilest of brothels. [- - -] In his novel Purple Death, the mysterious disease destroys only men. The women remain alone and lose their meaning in life. The few surviving men perish amidst frenzied hordes of women who wage bloody battles to get them. The dreadful disease destroys whole nations. The

world is doomed" (Vaiksoo 5). World War I inspired Gailit with its horrors, and he presented extremely grotesque situations in his stories.

In 1944 the Soviet Army occupied Estonia, and Gailit and his family escaped to Sweden. There he continued with his pessimistic philosophy of life due to the occupation of Estonia and exile. But the writer's style remained much the same: "It is still playful, grotesque, instantly recognisable. His work is still based on opposition: beautiful/ugly, good/evil, warm/cold, nature/civilisation and God/Devil. Gailit's works thus resemble fairy tales" (Vaiksoo 9). So Gailit's stories balance on the border between grotesque and fairy tales.

The Grotesque in the Soviet Time

The political and literary situations after World War II were both complicated and paradoxical in Estonia. It was a time when the Soviet period was adapted to and a new culture under the new ideology was formed.

After the 1960s, and especially after 1968, Estonian society and literature both underwent profound changes. Although the 1960s generation of writers continued their literary work, they approached it differently than even a few years earlier. It was also a time when the grotesque became one of the favourite techniques, because "At the end of the 1960s Estonian literature begun to use a system of images which did not pretend to recreate reality in the forms of reality itself" (Tootmaa 313). The grotesque "…allowing life and man to be as if "found anew", getting closer to the substance of things and occurrences, and at the same time rejecting and mocking the enemies of the ideal and warning against dangers to the individual produces by the development of mass-oriented society" (Tootmaa 313). The grotesque and absurdity in literature became tools of rebellion against the Soviet regime.

Arvo Valton (b.1935) was one of the writers of the 1960s generation. He was a young man who systematically undermined the Soviet regime in his works.[8] According to Harald Peep, Arvo Valton used grotesque as a style in his short stories.[9] And Janika Kronberg has pointed out that in the 1960s Valton "first made his mark as a writer of short stories with grotesque and strangeness as leitmotifs. Valton criticises absurd aspects of the technological revolution and its deleterious effects on beauty and art. The author is a master at suggesting a link between the bureaucracy of totalitarian regimes and examines the borders of existential concerns" (Kronberg 16). This indicates that the grotesque in Soviet literature also included political and social criticism, although sometimes it was disguised: the grotesque as an ambivalent and polysemic phenomenon made it possible to play with several meanings, including meanings which may have been forbidden. For example, one of Valton's best short stories is "Kaheksa jaapanlannat" ("Eight Japanese Women", 1968), in which delicate

dancers visit a very big and non-human, mechanical and terrible chemistry factory. The delicate dancers and the factory form an obvious contrast between the human and nonhuman, the mechanical and natural, and that opposition also carries criticism of the Soviet system and the propaganda of progress.

It is significant that most of the works of Arvo Valton were written without any noticeable plot, but in his short story "Rohelise seljakotiga mees" ("The Man With the Green Rucksack", 1968), the gradual forming of the grotesque appears. The plot of the short story is the following: "Suddenly a man appears from nowhere and begins to read a book out loud in a railway station. As this activity is not directly dangerous to society, the man cannot be prohibited from doing so. However, his action receives the attention of the corresponding authorities of a totalitarian state; committees are formed to deal with the phenomenon, to struggle against spontaneous reading of books in railway stations; reading out loud is intended to be continued on an organized basis with trained readers, etc. But the man disappears as unexpectedly as he came. With him disappears the phenomenon to be struggled against; the trained readers have to find other jobs, the rostra built especially for reading books out loud will stand useless, etc.; the dumb machinery grounds to a halt, because everything is peaceful again. Thus, by hyperbolizing the mechanical reaction of officials to an unknown phenomenon, a grotesque plot is achieved" (Tootmaa 320).

Valton's short story "Salmonella" (1968) has an analogous structure. Hasso Krull has stated that these Valton works are similar to the works of Franz Kafka, because although Valton represents reality in his works, that reality still looks unreal.[10]

Valton has used dreams as a model of reality in his works: "The structure of the dream landscapes is complex: dream-like situations are blended with real ones, the plot is intertwoven with long deliberations, there is a pictorial flow of consciousness, action and humour" (Tootmaa 318). Even the mystic and ghostly elements in his works stress grotesque style and metaphor. "In fact, his stories about reality are very similar to his dream stories" (324), e.g. "Kummituste maja" ("The House of Ghosts") and "The Dolls" from the collection *Mustamäe armastus* (*The Love of Mustamäe,* 1978).

The excerpt from the collection of miniatures *Mina, mina, mina* (*Me, me, me,*1988) demonstrates the style of Valton, how he uses the grotesque, and language to make grotesque images. It is an astonishing text in which the real world and non-real worlds are mixed:

I drew an animal once.
I didn't know what animal it was.
None of the friends I showed the drawing to knew it either.

That animal made us all anxious.

One day it took pity on me and began to live.

I put a collar round its neck and we went for a walk out the back.

People said, ‘Oh!’ when they saw it and several of them said, ‘Ah!’ So apparently, they didn’t know what animal it was either.

I took my animal to see the scientist. He put his glasses on and studied his book. He said nothing and just shook his head.

I offered my enigma to the zoo. They wouldn’t take it because they didn’t know what notice to put on the door of its cage.

I came home knowing that I’m a dreadful artist.
[…]

I carry my love as if it were a small porcupine in my hand.

Suddenly it begins to talk in a human voice and says, ‘No!’
‘Why?’ I ask.

But try as it might, it is no longer able to produce human speech to explain what it means.

Maybe it doesn’t even know itself. Although I don’t detect any astonishment in the porcupine, it appears altogether proud of its lack of knowledge. Or maybe it is proud that it made such a heroic effort and said ‘no’.

What can you do with it? It’s lovely, true enough, this prickly existence. Really special straight away.

But when you think about it in depth and absolute honesty, would I want it to dandle in my hand for life? It’s needling me already.

For the present my hands are hardened but what about in years to come?

> Perhaps I'll be less thick-skinned and want to let the needler go? But in the end it is mine to pledge!
>
> There's no escaping it. It's true, love is always complicated.
> (Valton 82, trans. S. Wilson and A. Alari)

There are similar tendencies in the works of another Estonian prose writer, Vaino Vahing (1940 – 2008). Vahing was a psychiatrist and a writer, and he used dreams in his works mostly as a source. He transformed the stuff of dreams into the actual, and thus Vahing's dream-like stories can be "reduced to reality as the background that gives birth to dreams" (Tootmaa 318), e.g. in the collection *Näitleja* (*An Actor,* 1976). Consequently, "Vahing discovered disorder and lack of motivation in this world most people think of as ordered and motivated; he showed that reality itself is contradictory and grotesque" (315). Comparing Valton and Vahing, Rein Tootmaa concludes, that "One sees moments of grotesque in life, the other thinks life itself so grotesque. Depending on the differences in perceiving reality, the grotesque of exaggeration prevails in Valton and that of reality in Vahing" (319).

There were also other writers who used more or less grotesque motifs and stylistic elements of the grotesque in their works in the Soviet time, e.g. Enn Vetemaa (b. 1936), Mati Unt (1944 – 2005), Paul-Eerik Rummo (b. 1942) and Juhan Smuul (1922 – 1971). The grotesque as a literary element served comic, tragic, social, political and aesthetic purposes in the Soviet time. The social meaning of the grotesque connected it with the romantic literary tradition, and also with such authors as Swift, Hoffmann, Gogol and Poe.

The Grotesque and Surrealism

It is only one small step from grotesque motifs and stylistic elements to surrealism, which is connected more with language, and with playing with language. According to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901 – 1981), language expresses the structures of the unconscious. Francis de Goya's (1746 – 1828) *capricho "El sueño de la razón produce monstrous"* (*The reason's dream producing monsters*) is a very good illustration of Lacan's and surrealist ideas, because Goya's work stresses ""the obscure side of reality", where the human conscience is deeply intertwined with the sexual and the telluric" (Talvet 60 – 61). Grotesque motifs and images also exist in Estonian literature, and they give Estonian poetry a more playful character, and represent the grotesque as a phenomenon of play.

The avant-garde movement surrealism came to Estonian literature in the 1930 - 1940s. The first surrealist poetry book was Ilmar Laaban's (1921 – 2000) *Ankruketi*

lõpp on laulu algus (*The End of the Anchor Chain is the Beginning of Songs,* 1946), published in Sweden. Laaban was influenced by French poets and he also translated French literature into Swedish.

Laaban was the first innovative Estonian poet in exile. The influence of his poetry was also very strong in the homeland because its surrealist liberty brought metaphor and freedom to poetic language. To celebrate the 20th anniversary of the first manifesto of surrealism, Laaban published the article "The perspectives of Surrealism" in 1944. He wrote that surrealism was a new world-view, not only aesthetic, but also ethical and moral.[11] Laaban's texts are sometimes ironic, and that aspect is revealed in sound and intonation when these texts are read. Irony and surrealism are actually problematic phenomena: the question arises as to whether it is possible to write automatically if the text must be ironic. Laaban's surrealistic liberty gave freedom to poetic language and metaphor. His surrealism was more a liberation of language than a liberation of the mind from logic.

For example, the poem "Vaikus ja vägivald" ("Silence and Violence") from the collection mentioned above, begins with a grotesque picture of a landscape and sky with "clouds tightening into meat and skinning over with fur":

Silence and Violence
Long ago on a windy hunt
a horrible happiness abruptly bloomed in me
and the landscape congealed only its pungent
blood rustling through my veins the gun smoked
incessantly the hound did not bark
as it gazed at the clouds tightening
into meat and skinning over with fur
streaming tangled by despair

Because on the horizon a stout tower appeared
which swayed slowly between emptiness
and the overflowing clamor of hideous joy
like a gigantic latrine
the sweaty sun mottled Earth and Welkin
until suddenly it was eclipsed by cold
ravens of freedom who carried my eyes
and fresh images like flags in their bills

At twilight which was only flashes

as the sea is but the triumph of the drowned
my hunting jacket was freed of its heavy
web of lust I simply ran forward
along the mute moor coming across
animals with shining coals for hearts
I shot them so many that the road home
was finally choked with grass

Long ago I seized the empty beaker
and faced its inflexible challenge
and ever since this endless draught rinses -
my gun-barrel mouth which sparkles
in the starry sky and when it sees
some too-warm nebula defiling cosmic night
it proclaims ponderously and clearly
I DENY DEATH BUT AFFIRM ICE
(Laaban 8; Trans. R. Adang and A. Ehin)

The first part of the poem expresses fear and despair, which are connected with that strange landscape. The last strophe sounds more positive and self-confident, and there are no further grotesque images; only the effect of astonishment remains.

In 1945 the poem "Elada vabana või surra" ("To Live Free or Die") was published and it is very similar to Paul Éluard's (1895 – 1952) poem *Liberté*. Laaban remained close to French surrealism till 1944; after that his style became more distanced from French surrealism. French surrealism was connected with political movements and the Communist Party. Laaban's surrealism was against the Communist Party after 1944, because he had escaped from his homeland when the Soviet occupation began. But the idea of freedom was still one of Laaban's main ideas and most probably this was due to the influence of French surrealism.

The poem "To Live Free or Die" is very optimistic, exalted and full of the pathos of freedom. There are not very many grotesque images and motifs in this poem, and those which may be grotesque are represented as an evil which has lost its frightening aspect: the message of Laaban's poem is that the evil is defeated and there is no need to fear it. For example, the verses in the fourth strophe represent a grotesque picture of decayed eyes, but the next verse connects it with hope:

To know that the decayed eyes of traitors
become the spawn of the fish of hope

And the last strophe is about a murderer's grave, but it is possible to live there as grass, holding a rock and joy:

To live as grass on the murderer's grave
to live a rock in one hand and joy in the other

Laaban's poetry expresses freedom on every level, and when he uses grotesque, ugly or terrible images, they have a comic and positive function in his poetry. Laaban's surrealism works like the grotesque did in the medieval carnival, according to Bakhtin.

To Live Free or Die
To weigh the sun on the scales of leaves
to proclaim truth to each gust of wind
to bear on the brow the reflection of wells
to live free or die

To kiss stones kiss the keys of azure sky
kiss animals amid thunder and oblivion
to sing in the desert in a snowy voice
to live free or die

To gather up all lost words
to sway in the orgasm of flowers
which shatter the opaque sky
to live free or die

To listen to the fountain of fair blood
declaiming in the garden of terrifying grass
to know vengeance and the value of stars
to live free or die

To know that the decayed eyes of traitors
become the spawn of the fish of hope
without dreams of ferns and iron
to live free or die

To bemoan the petrified bees
to find the crack where the moon will be reborn
to smile in the face of the swirling storm
to live free or die

To see the black cloud blossoming
above the barren landscape's gaudiness
to embrace the translucent sculpture of madness
to live free or die

To recall the shame to recall the sea
to understand a child's earthy question
to remain faithful to a melted ice floe
to live free or die

To watch the dawn growing in the valley like a tree
to watch it from the ridge of the sierra of abomination
to unite hail and a butterfly in a human face
to live free or die

To live as flying fish live
to live in wintry fires and in the night of benevolence
to live endlessly vanishing
to live free or die

To live as grass on the murderer's grave
to live a rock in one hand and joy in the other
to live to discover the heart of waves
to live free or die
(Laaban 8-9; Trans. R. Adang and A. Ehin)

Andres Ehin (1940 – 2011) was one of the few surrealist poets in Estonia.
According to Janika Kronberg "Ehin naturally synthesises undogmaticalness and the profusion of free associations, unexpected connections and imagination, freed from consciousness and opposed to common logic" (Kronberg 36). Ehin was a poet who enjoyed word play, unexpected associations and absurd images. His poetry was humorous and individual. There are not many grotesque images in his poetry, but if some fragment works as the grotesque it usually has a positive meaning. It is the

surrealist carnival with polysemic word play, laughter and ambivalence, e.g. the poem "Olla koerkorter" ("Dog Apartment", 2001), which plays with two worlds: the world of human beings and the world of animals, and it unites things which seem to be impossible to unite. The result is astonish and fun as a real carnival.

Dog Apartment
Imagine an apartment made of dog
three rooms of bark, a bathroom of snout
the cold tap dribbles, the hot tap slobbers
an apartment made of dog with floors
which howl at ceiling lamps at night as if they were moons

imagine an apartment made of dog
which detests the very scent of cat
an apartment made of dog
whose sofa hairs bristle
at the sprayings of even distant moggies.
(Ehin 2005) (Trans. P. Cotter)

The Grotesque in Recent Estonian Culture

Andrus Kivirähk (b. 1970) is one of the most popular prose writers today. His novel *Rehepapp* (*Old Barny,* 2000) is about Estonians and Estonian identity; it is a self-ironic novel, but at the same time it works as a positive grotesque carnival. Kivirähk uses "elements of folklore and mythology in his work, deforming them into the absurd and grotesque" (Kronberg 37). Kivirähk combines different elements of national mythology, and treats them playfully and freely.[12] There is also postmodernist play, but at the same time it is positive and includes relieving laughter, which expresses the positive aspect of the grotesque. It is also significant that Kivirähk writes about some none-specified time when Estonians were controlled by foreign landlords; this historical past is simpler to understand and interpret now, and at the same time people recognize themselves in some ways. Actually, Kivirähk speaks through national mythology and history about contemporary people.

Ervin Õunapuu (b. 1956) is a prose writer and an artist well-known for his theatre scenery and surrealist water-colours. He published his first novel, *Olivia meistriklass* (*Olivia's Master Class*) in 1996, and that novel put the author at the center of the Estonian literary life. The titles of his other works are also very significant and sometimes grotesque: *Teie mälestuseks, kes iganes te olete ja kus asute* (*In Your*

Memory, Whoever You Are and Wherever You Are, 1999), and *Surmaminejad lasevad tervitada* (*Suicides Send Their Greetings,* 2000).

Õunapuu uses strong grotesque images in his short stories, and his stories contrast with traditional realism. He describes ugly events in life, but these stories are actually very poetic, full of contrasts and impressive images. He uses intertextual relations, and combines verbal and pictorial images in his stories and books, as well as historical motifs from Estonian and European history. Religious motifs are very important in his works. The key words characterising Õunapuu's work are archetype, myth, absurd and dislocation. [13]

The collection *Eesti gootika. Lauavestlused* (*Estonian Gothic. Table Talks,* 2010) is the last book from the series *Estonian Gothic*. The grotesque protagonist of the book is Martin Maria Kull, who is a radical Christian and the first administrator of the country which he has named The Land of Holy Mary (in Latin, *Terra Mariana)*. The protagonist's first name suggests Martin Luther, but the name Maria provides a connection to the European Catholic tradition. The last name Kull is Estonian, and it is significant that the protagonist has changed his original German noble name von Habicht to the Estonian name Kull ("hawk" in English). This is a reference to Estonian history in the 1930s, when many people took new, more Estonian names. Every sentence in Õunapuu's text contains references to history and to religion.

The title *Estonian Gothic. Table Talks* alludes to Martin Luther's speeches. Luther was a reformist and he protested against the claim that freedom from God's punishment for sin could be purchased with money, but Luther was also a man of contradictions (*e.g.* he became antisemitic in his later years). Martin Kull is not Luther, but there is something which connects him with Luther and other rebels. Õunapuu's book is written as Martin Kull's diary. The beginning of the diary is similar to the first chapter of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word (*Logos* in Latin – A.M.), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jh 1:1). Martin Kull begins with "In the beginning was the thought".[14]. And he continues: "I arrived today in the State which was named the Estonian Socialist Republic this morning, but now it is changed. I made it thanks to God" (Õunapuu 5). And then he describes how he has changed the name of that state to *Terra Mariana*. This shows that the only thing that has changed is the name of the State, nothing more. All other things are the same. Soviet Estonia has a new name, but still the old content.

At the same time, the name *Terra Mariana* refers to the old official name for Medieval Livonia, given by Bishop Albert in 1201, and to the 13th century, when the Teutonic Order conquered Latvia and Estonia. The first page of Martin Kull's diary refers to all of Estonian history. And the last sentence on this page is also very significant: it is the Gospel of Apostle Martin (5). He is a false prophet in the religious

sense, of course, but if we think about the literary and social contexts, the message conveyed by this false prophet is very important, and it is actually a secular message rather than a religious message.

The Table Talks contains more than a written text. There are very high-quality photos to illustrate the text. And every picture has its own meaning. Under the portrait of Martin Kull, it is written that he was born in Germany in a nunnery, and he is missing.

The illustrative photo under the first chapter is also very significant and grotesque. There are three things side by side in the picture which do not belong together: a crucifix, a Soviet passport, and an American dollar. The Soviet passport is in the middle, and it also refers to history: Christianity was not accepted in the Soviet time, but it is a well-known fact that many pastors also worked as KGB agents. Religion and politics were connected and mixed in the Soviet time as it was also in the Russian Empire. Perhaps that is one of the main reasons why Õunapuu is very critical of the Church.

The American dollar is also very significant. It is money which people admire, but it is the enemy's money in the Soviet context. It was forbidden for common people. All these things are very symbolic, and together they reflect ideology, power and politics. And all these symbols are also very strong in our cultural collective memory, as well as in our personal memories. Õunapuu deforms these meanings in his book to demonstrate that these symbols are negative if they are in a negative context, or if they represent a reality which is grotesque.

But on another page there is a picture of a crucifix and 10-cent Euro coin in a small change purse. Although 10 cents is not much money, and the cultural memory is not very long in this context, that picture points to the same combination as the crucifix and dollar, but now it is not the Soviet context, but the context of the European Union.

The last chapter of Õunapuu's book is titled "Missing". It refers to the first chapter, and to history, more precisely to Stalin's acts of repression, in which many people went missing. The last chapter presents the arrest of Martin Kull, and it presents a picture very similar to how the KGB arrested people in Stalin's time. The men who come to arrest Martin wear civilian clothes, but military boots. And Õunapuu's text is very ambivalent: although he plays with tragic history and with religious motifs (Judas and the Bible, which inspires the protagonist), there is still suspicion that Martin Kull is a criminal. He has not paid his taxes and he is deeply in debt, according to the officers. This seems to be the reason for his arrest.

Martin Kull's last words "I have waited for this moment for over fifty years" (78) are very significant, and ambivalent. The question of who Martin Kull is arises again.

Why has he been waiting for that moment, the moment of arrest, for more than 50 years? Or perhaps he has not been waiting for the moment of arrest, but for another moment, the moment when he can disappear.

We can also read Õunapuu's text as an optimistic text: Martin Kull, the false prophet, lawyer, radical *etc.* disappears, and hopefully he takes his hypocrisy, lies and Soviet burden with him. There is only a very strong light in this place where he stood before he disappears.

Mehis Heinsaar's (b. 1973) stories are not as tragic, and he uses many intertextual relations in his stories. Janika Kronberg has written that Heinsaar's stories are "light and airy, with the imaginary dimension introduced in realistic scenes, sometimes in an absurd or surrealist way" (Kronberg 58). The term "magical realism" characterizes Heinsaar's style very well. While Õunapuu's stories use very strong deformations and there are also strong social and critical messages, Heinsaar's typical character is a funny and kind-hearted man who does strange things, and all his life is full of mystical adventures which are melancholy and humorous, not malevolent and ironic. Heinsaar's typical character is a strange man who has physical deformations and/or mystical abilities. Such people are usually reclusive and other people shy away them, because they are very strange, e.g. Anselm in the story "Liblikmees" ("Butterfly Man", 2001), whose body gives off butterflies if he is excited: "It's always the same, every time I experience a strong emotion, these creatures start flying off my body. I was bullied at school for it, and my relatives, even my parents, saw me as some kind of freak, although I've always been of perfectly sound mind" (Heinsaar 27). Anselm meets other people who are similar to him; they are heroes in the circus, but freaks in real life: "he saw a man with a transparent body surrounded by gorgeous women with non-transparent bodies who seemed to form his harem; he saw an old wrinkled woman with a long white horn growing out of her forehead and whose sweet breath reminded Anselm of a long-forgotten world. Two children with wings for arms were floating near the ceiling and their flight resembled that of bats" (Heinsaar 28).

A deformed body also occurs at the end of Heinsaar's collection of short stories *Härra Pauli kroonikad* (*The Chronicles of Mr. Paul,* 2001), whose last story is titled "Veidi peale maailma lõppu" ("A Bit of Time After the End of the World"). Everyone else has left, but Mr Paul still remains; actually his shoe, mouth and left eye remain, and all these parts try to find each other and their surroundings, but there is nothing there.

Conclusion

The grotesque can appear in different ways in literature. It may be positive and comic word play, as it was in old cultural traditions and medieval carnivals. The grotesque

may also convey social and political meaning, as during the Romantic period and the Soviet time. But the most important thing that grotesque images tell us in contemporary times is that something is wrong, that people do not feel comfortable in a situation, and that is a grotesque situation which combines tragedy and laughter. Laughter is good, but not if you are a laughing stock.

Notes

1. Q.v. Wolfgang Kayser. The Grotesque in Art and Literature. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981; and Ülar Ploom. Grotesque Images in Dante's *Inferno*. – *Interlitteraria* 2, 1997: 84 – 85.

2. Harald Peep. *Tähtraamat*. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1978: 49.

3. Jüri. Talvet. "The Polyglot Grotesque", *Interlitteraria* 2, 1997: 51.

4. Michael Alexander. *Beowulf.* London: Penguin Books, 1988: 11-12.

5. Mihhail Bahtin. *Valitud töid (Slected Works)*. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1987: 199.

6. Friedebert Tuglas. *Teoste sünnilood*. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1966: 177 – 217.

7. Vilmos Voigt. "Tuglas' Early Mythopoetics", *At the End of the World. Text, Motif, Culture. Collegium litterarum 18,* ed. Rein Undusk. Tallinn: The Under and Tuglas Literature Centre, 2005: 68.

8. Ain Kaalep. "Tervitades uut generatsiooni", *Taasleitud aeg. Eesti ja some kirjanduse muutumine 1950. – 1960. aastatel. Kadonneen ajan arvoitus. Viron ja Suomen kirjallisuuden muuttuminen 1950- ja 1960-luvulla*. Tartu: Tartu Ülikool, 2000: 11 - 17.

9. Harald Peep. *Tähtraamat*. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1978: 57.

10. Hasso Krull. *Millimallikas. Kirjutised 1996 – 2000*. Tallinn: Vagabund, 2000: 81.

11. Q.v. Ilmar Laaban. "Sürrealismi perspektiive", *Eesti Looming* II. Helsinki, 1944: 82; Sirje Olesk. Tõdede vankuval müüril. Artikleid ajast ja luulest. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, 2002: 114.

12. Janika Kronberg. "Review of Andrus Kivirähk's The Barn-keeper", *Estonian Literary Magazine* 12 (Spring, Tallinn, 2001): 37 – 38.

13. Rutt Hinrikus. "Review of Ervin Õunapuu's *Eesti gootika* (Estonian Gothic)", *Estonian Literary Magazine* 10 (Spring, Tallinn, 2000): 42 – 43.

14. Here and in the following the translation of Õunapuu's text from Estonian is mine. A.M.

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