

On the Reconstruction of the Ida-Virumaa Region in Post-War Literature and Film

Elle-Mari Talivee

Keywords: literary urban studies, history, Narva, Sillamäe, socialist realism, memory studies

The article observes literary depictions of two towns in North-East Estonia, Narva and Sillamäe, both of which were reconstructed as industrial towns after World War II, in fiction, life writing and a film script, as well as in a feature film made on the basis of the latter. The texts are simultaneously engaged in the making of landscape and the creation of local memory after the region's dramatic change caused by the war.

Ida-Virumaa became an industrial region in the second half of the nineteenth century; the Kreenholm textile factory was one of the world's largest by the end of the century. In 1916, industrial mining for oil shale was started in North-East Estonia. Oil shale was a strategic resource in World War II as well. In 1944, with the second occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union, uranium mining was started as a secret object of interest for the military industry.

The historical town of Narva was almost completely destroyed in World War II. Few buildings were restored, while the city was filled with blocks of flats typical of the Soviet period and the historical street network was transformed significantly. Still, Narva did not become a utopian Stalinist city – in Estonia, the only example of the latter is Sillamäe, a closed city built according to an all-Union standardised project, that attempted to embody an image of Communist happiness.

Postwar literary depictions of Narva have often proceeded from the baroque city centre that has become a separate symbolic site of memory. In the more recent past, different genres have started to complement one another, different periods have been compared and, as a result, representations of various spaces have received a more analytic artistic treatment that connects the pre-war period with the post-war one.

The first set of texts discussed here consists of POW memoirs of the immediate post-war reconstruction works, set down some decades later. After that, contemporary reflections of the reconstruction in Soviet Estonia in the 1950s–1960s are considered. Finally, attention is paid to texts that comment on the reconstruction era from a larger temporal distance: a backward look at Soviet-time Sillamäe from 2011 (expanded edition 2014) by Andrei Hvostov, a journalist with a degree in history, who spent his childhood in the town. Hvostov's memoirs and his short stories on similar topics that were published earlier serve as attempts at parallel interpretations of several possible local memories. A work that in a way unites all three periods is Vladimir Beekman's novel *The Narva Waterfall* (1986). Its protagonist Siina Aunvärk was born and grew up in Narva, left the war-ravaged city and criticises harshly the changes that have taken place in the city.

The examples of memoirs, retrospective autobiographical texts and sources reflecting their contemporary period also reveal how industrial cities of the Soviet era have been depicted in different periods. An analysis of the texts discloses the transformation of the prewar landscape into an industrial one, the contradictory nature of its descriptions, as well as the dependence of the latter on the time of writing. Examples are given of the possibilities of representing large-scale industrial constructions that significantly also involve not just the creation of new values but also the way of doing this – reflecting the work of the *udarniki* of the Young Communist League. According to Katerina Clark's typology of Stalinist novels, one of the texts observed, the film script concerning the shock workers' building of the Baltic Thermal Power Plant to which members of the Young Communist League contributed, can be categorised as the most widespread and ritualised type of Soviet fiction, the so-called production novel.

The selection of texts discussed in the article is by no means exhaustive and the Ida-Virumaa region may offer fruitful material for future studies using the categories of space and memory, both as regards ways of describing a real region in literature as well as analysing the stories clustered around a site of memory. The notion of a literary city emerging in the texts is broad, as areas and objects with different functions form part of it. The texts examined display an interesting conflict in spatial memory: a deliberate loss of memory induced during a certain period and the creating of something new as if into a void can be emphasised as rhetorical devices can be used to bring forth a new spatial representation, a site of memory in its own right.

Elle-Mari Talivee – PhD, Senior Researcher and Head of the Museum Department at the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences. She also works as a project manager at the Estonian Literature Centre. Her doctoral thesis sought answers to why, how, and by whom the urban environment was depicted in Estonian prose during 1877–1903. The city in literature is still one of her main research interests, and she is also deeply interested in environmental history.

E-mail: [ellemari\[at\]utkk.ee](mailto:ellemari[at]utkk.ee)