

The Breath of Ice. On the Other Side of Juhan Smuul

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In 1944, a large proportion of Estonian writers had gone into political exile in the West. Those who remained in their Estonian homeland after it had been subjected to Soviet occupation were forced to either fall silent or write works that suited Soviet censorship. Nevertheless, new talents emerged in Estonia, of whom the most brilliant was Juhan Smuul (1922–1971), a writer of little education but with natural talent who came from the coastal dwellers of Muhu Island. Smuul was mobilised into a Soviet labour battalion. His war years in the Urals and Siberia were harsh and he suffered through life-threatening malaria and tuberculosis. Yet he ascended rapidly in his administrative career after the war. Smuul joined the Communist Party and served as the chairman of the Estonian SSR Writers' Union starting from 1953 until his death. His Lenin Prize-winning diary on his trip to Antarctica entitled *Jäine raamat* (1959, published in English in 1962 under the title *Antarctica Ahoy! The Ice Book*) brought him international fame and has been translated into at least 25 languages.

In the initial stage of his oeuvre in 1943–1953, Smuul stood out as an innovator of the narrative poem, a literary form which was considered to continue Pushkin's traditions and was therefore given a preferred position in Soviet literature. One of these long poems, *Poem Stalinile* (Poem to Stalin, 1949) was dedicated to the Soviet dictator in sincere belief and devotion, and made Smuul the most outstanding Stalinist poet in Estonian literature. After Stalin's personality cult was denounced in 1956, Smuul was the first and one of the few who publicly regretted going along with the cult of the leader, considering it to be human error. Human life as an error/mistake is in fact one of the concealed motifs of Smuul's oeuvre. As the old saying goes: man errs so long as he lives.

This essay considers two antithetical urges in Smuul's oeuvre that are related to one another: (1) the self-assertion of a strong personality and (2) the perception of general human erroneousness, the consciousness of sin, the feelings of guilt and regret that arise from that. Smuul grew up in a strictly Lutheran family and brought an intensified awareness of sin and guilt along into his independent adult life. As we know, the treatment of original sin was one of the key questions in Luther's struggle against the Pope's church. According to Luther, Roman Catholicism paid attention to only the sins committed in a person's lifetime, or actual sins like lying, stealing, fornication, and killing, while offering forgiveness for them. But it sidestepped the grievous inherited guilt arising from mankind's original sin, claiming that the fall of man in the Garden of Eden did not ruin his inner nature. Luther's viewpoint was that even the seemingly purest person is thoroughly corrupted due to original sin, for

which reason man does not have free will to do good and evil, the capacity to love God and one's fellow man through one's own strength, to redeem one's sins through good works. Man does not achieve anything 'through one's own strength' – the basis for everything is an unshakable belief in God, according to whose discretion everything else comes to pass. Man without faith errs all the time because he does not even know when he errs. The feeling of guilt and everlasting regret mark his connection to the original sin.

The essay shows that the perception of original sin, guilt and man's total erroneousness was already in Smuul's oeuvre before his 'Stalinist mistake', which appeared to be but one *faux pas* among others. In following his inspiration in *Poem Stalinile*, Smuul was already not sure if that poem might mean yet another error. It was easier for him to later regret it than it was for many others. At the same time, he arrived back at the first commandment in Luther's little catechism, that man must not fashion any (human) god for himself beside the true God.

This contrasts with the theme of the strong personality and self-assertion. As a boy growing up on the coast, Smuul's human ideal was the captain of a big sailing ship, whose power aboard the vessel was just as limitless as was God's power on earth. The captain was a higher being with demonic power who resembled Nietzsche's superman. He thundered at the ship's crew like Jehovah in a storm, yet brought it out of the jaws of death. As a strong personality, the captain regrets nothing. But in his general view, Smuul sees man precisely as a being in which regret dies last. This is the source of the captain's ambivalence: on the one hand, he is an object of admiration filled with divine power, yet on the other hand, he is a false god beside the true God who is in contact with the devil. We can understand how Smuul got bogged down in the personality cult on the background of the image of the captain etched in his mind from childhood: Stalin was also one of those demonic captains, the 'helmsman of humankind', as Smuul himself poetised.

Smuul's images of nature are also analysed in the essay. The blizzard (snowstorm) denotes both the reckless captain element as well as the remorse of the erroneous human who idolises him. Ice fields and icebergs started enchanting Smuul in his youth in keeping with the example of Norway's national hero Fridtjof Nansen. They denote a harsh masculine environment in nature, a state of natural fulfilment without any 'feminine' superfluity and misleading details. At the same time, they become symbols of death embodied in a seascape, peace of mind, where there is no longer any regret – the white sum of lived human experiences.