

Aesthete Visnapuu and his “Creative Nationalism”

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This article belongs to the same series as the two previous articles (Pilv 2004; 2005), which examined the relationship between the aestheticist artistic stance of Johannes Barbarus and Johannes Semper and their ideologization. Here, a similar development is examined using the example of Henrik Visnapuu’s manifesto texts, specifically the intertwining of futurism and nationalism in his ideas. I try to observe how the aesthetic and poetic way of thinking is important in the foundation of 20th-century utopian-totalitarian ideologies as forms of expression of modernism, and I outline this precisely through the arc of creative work and choices of individuals, not as a general speculation.

I distinguish between aestheticism and avant-gardism, which have much in common (criticism of modern capitalism, poetic innovation, etc.), but which differ in their orientation: aestheticism (and decadence as a part of it) is rather individualistic and directed towards the past or timelessness, while the avant-garde (and futurism as its core) is directed towards the future and has an egalitarian way of thinking. There is a distinction between principles; in the work of individual artists, they appear side by side. I rely on Andrew Hewitt’s treatment of “Fascist Modernism”, which, in analysing the relationship between Marinetti and Italian fascism, shows that the clear opposition of aesthetics and politics is precisely an invention of aestheticism, which later led to the specific interweaving of these spheres, developing into the avant-garde. In Hewitt’s view, the avant-garde brings to an end the mutual tension between the earlier decadent aestheticism and politics, so that art itself becomes the avant-garde of social and historical self-realization.

Visnapuu achieved wider recognition in 1913–14, when he published futuristic manifestos in the publications of the Moment group. It is possible that he received the initial impetus for this from Semper’s introduction to Italian futurism, although in terms of form he was more based on the Russian cubo-futurists, and he also had close contact with the ego-futurist Igor Severjanin. Visnapuu also briefly collaborated with Barbarus (who was later the main representative of cubo-futurism in Estonian poetry), but their paths diverged when Tarapita’s group took an unequivocally leftist line.

The “Order of Momentists” (1914) is notable for manifesting an aesthetically centred attitude to life and for seeing a viable national culture as the goal, which is born through decadent fermentation and putrefaction. In his texts from the end of the decade, Visnapuu demands an artistic revolution from the young generation, the goal of which is “a great and beautiful synthesis of national culture”. The central concept in Visnapuu’s ideology is “cruel, brutal, shameless, beautiful and happy life”. Life is opposed to the “dragon” – the mob and the bourgeoisie, who fetter free creativity. The glorification of life, together with the fermenting creative crisis, also fills the manifesto “The New Moment” (1920).

The speech “The War of Liberation and Creation” (1919) is interesting; the avant-garde search for new forms, nationalism, racial ideology and left-wing revolutionism are combined; national independence is necessary for the freedom of the people, while revolution is for the freedom of the individual. Visnapuu distances himself from both the Bolsheviks’ attempts at ideological control and the economic pressure of the bourgeoisie on art, and here one can sense the search for a third way that was

active in Europe at the time: how to keep criticism of the bourgeoisie separate from the left-wing position of class struggle.

In the early 1920s, Visnapuu engaged in a polemic with left-wing literati, highlighting the importance of the original racial/ethnic unconscious in the creation of national culture and rejecting the epigonism of European culture by Noor-Eesti (Young Estonia), accusing them of interrupting the natural development of culture.

Visnapuu's ideological and utopian searches revived in the early 1930s, when he began to contribute to the mouthpiece of the right-wing populist-authoritarian Vaps movement, writing about the need for the spiritual rebirth of the nation. The most central text of that time, however, is "Creative Nationalism", published in the collected works of the student corporation Sakala. In it, Visnapuu finds that nationalism has been discredited by business interests and must be creatively rethought. True creation is national, true nationalism is racial. He distinguishes between, on the one hand, programmatic nationalism, which adopts ready-made forms from the outside and is often exploited in private economic and political interests, and, on the other, creative nationalism. Creative nationalism is not tied to any political system and is above class (Visnapuu also gives examples of this from the Soviet Union), but most importantly, it consists in recognizing that the nation is not yet ready; it is still fermenting, and the national character has yet to be created; the national form has to be invented. This conception of nationalism is futurist and aesthetic. It is noteworthy that Visnapuu uses the formula "universal in content, national in form"—this is reminiscent of the main slogan of the Soviet cultural policy at the same time, which is also of avant-garde origin.

The freedom fighters (the Vaps movement) were banned, but Visnapuu became an ideologist of Konstantin Päts's authoritarian regime in 1935. Thus, Visnapuu's development can be interpreted in the spirit of Hewitt: in a sense, the inherent fate of utopian aestheticism and avant-garde is always to fail—to realize and then to disintegrate, to be realized as disintegration.

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