Reversals of the postmodern and the late Soviet simulacrum in the Baltic Countries — with exemplifications from Estonian literature

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Our article aims at imagining a point of convergence between three terms — Postmodernism, nationalism, and socialism — which are ordinarily understood to have a sort of allergic relation to one another. Consequently, our argument may seem at first surprising or paradoxical. Postmodernism, after all, tends to be conceived specifically through the prism of late capitalism. This has been almost axiomatic for certain theorists of the postmodern at least since Fredric Jameson proposed that “the emergence of Postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism,” and that “its formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of that particular social system” (“Consumer Society” 125). Socialist systems, therefore, have been generally thought to fit uneasily under the label of postmodernity. We will argue, however, that some of the key concepts of postmodernity could also describe the totalitarian state with economic difficulties and a homogenized social order, not just late capitalism.
Nationalism would seem to be a modern project, something essentially unifying and teleological, and on that account quite remote from postmodern thinking. Socialism, in turn, not only strives to overcome national thinking, but also explicitly expresses its disdain towards the postmodern. Yet, in our view, conditions in the period of late socialism in the Baltic states — and very likely in socialist countries more generally — provoked a complex interconnection between the three ideologies. More specifically, we will trace out the triangulation of late socialism, Postmodernism, and nationalism, as this knotted trinity gives rise to problems in literary works of art in Estonia. We will take a special interest in the transformations inside this trinity (and in its relationship to literary works) following the collapse of the Soviet empire. Because the cultural situation under the Soviet regime was so strongly tied to the ruling ideological program, it seems reasonable to start a cultural investigation of that period from the particularities of the socio-political atmosphere.

1. Postmodernity: Social condition, critical discourse

Among the most important features of the late socialist condition (at least in the USSR), and chief among the socio-political particularities that structure the present essay, was a radical discursive split: literature and society were divorced from the critical metalanguage that was supposed to describe them. As Mart Velsker suggests, “Party control created a situation where the critical metalanguage became even more thoroughly enmeshed in the Stalinist networks than literature itself did” (127). Strikingly, Hando Runnel’s poetry collection, Punaste õhtute purpur (The Purple of Red Nights; 1982), was, for instance, allowed publication — only to be placed subsequently under a critical ban. While the collection was published and sold, no reviews were permitted, so Runnel’s published work had to contend with an absolute critical silence. One crucial consequence of this split between critical discourse and literature was the political impossibility of talking about Modernism or Postmodernism in literature, since in the metalanguage all literature was officially labeled “socialist realism.” Thus, whereas in Western societies Postmodernism was produced first of all as a critical discourse — as Brian McHale writes, “postmodernism exists discursively, in the discourses we produce about it and using it” (Constructing 1) — in East European countries it could be introduced as a discourse only after the loosening of the political control in the 1980s, and then it was extended back in time to cover the conditions of the 1970s and 1960s. Consequently, one could retroactively identify postmodern features as implicit literary strategies or as a “cultural logic,” even though Postmodernism was necessarily absent as a self-conscious discursive category at the time. One might even say that a postmodern condition that “anticipates retrospectively” the postmodern critical discourse is one of the particularities of the late socialist system.

An investigation of the different ways in which the cultures in Central and Eastern Europe have characterized their situations bears out this theory of “retrospective anticipation”: countries with more or less similar backgrounds perceive their Postmodernism in very different ways, yet all clearly separate postmodernist literature from postmodern discourse. One prestigious collection of articles, Bertens’s and Fokkema’s International Postmodernism (1997) gives the following picture: Postmodernism is supposed to have started in Czech literature already in the
1940s, in Russian literature in the late 1950s, in Slovak literature in the early 1960s, in Poland in the late 1960s, in Slovenian and Romanian literatures in the early 1970s (to be rediscovered in the early 1980s), in Hungary in the late 1970s, and — most strikingly — in Latvian literature there has never been any postmodern literature, despite some attempts to “imitate” it in early 1990s. The picture, therefore, appears greatly varied, with the common denominator being that discussions about Postmodernism had a late beginning — most typically in the 1980s.

Hans Bertens has identified three phases in the development of Postmodernism:

1. Postmodernism as a complex of anti-modernist artistic strategies: “they all seek to transcend what they see as the self-imposed limitations of Modernism, which in its search for autonomy and purity or for timeless, representational truth has subjected experience to unacceptable intellectualizations and reductions” (Bertens 5);
2. Postmodernism as a Weltanschauung, a set of intellectual propositions: “It’s not the world that is postmodern, here, it is the perspective from which that world is seen that is postmodern” (9);
3. postmodernity as a state of affairs, specific to the Western world, or a new cultural logic: “it is the world as such that has become postmodern, that is, entered a new historical era, that of postmodernity” (10).

Bertens follows the development of Postmodernism from its first stage in the late 1950s through the third stage in the 1980s. Initially, he says, Postmodernism was discussed as an artistic strategy, later as a way of seeing the world, then finally it developed into a new condition of Western capitalist society. This last phase, in particular, has been understood as something specific to late capitalism. One would expect, therefore, that it would be the phase least translatable to the Soviet system. Paradoxically, however, the evidence suggests that in late socialism this structure was maintained, only exactly in reverse. Postmodernism in the literature of late socialist cultures appears to have emerged in reaction to a “postmodern” society already in place. To develop this argument, we will begin by examining the prehistory of Postmodernism in Modernism.

2. A brief, harmonious interlude: Estonian Marxist modernism in the 1960s

We might usefully start with a consideration of the 1960s. Whereas the 1960s in the West are often considered as marking the beginnings of Postmodernism, this period in Estonian literature is generally conceived in terms of Modernism, albeit one with a distinctive local flavor. In contrast to turn-of-the-century Modernism, Estonian Modernism in the 1960s was not an elitist project. Not only were distinctions between high and popular literature absent in the Soviet situation, but the very small number of books published could not support such a market segmentation.

The aestheticism of Estonian Modernism also had its contextual peculiarities. Colin Falck considers Modernism in terms of aesthetic categories: “Modernism’s central function, and the real achievement of its technical explorations, was to remind us once again of the aesthetic nature of fictions” (149). In the context of the socialist system, the function of modernist
literature expanded from the aesthetic nature of fictions to the aesthetic nature of human existence in the world. After the existential concerns of the preceding years of terrorist Socialism, Estonian Modernism in the 1960s was thought to bring people back into an existence that was both sensually human and socially contextualized. Rather than being regarded as an elitist project, therefore, Estonian modernist literature was considered a nationally important undertaking and fulfilled an important social task. “Poetry chapbooks turned out to be a kind of national celebration,” writes Kersti Unt in retrospect (“Muutuv kaanon” 1232); through such bundles of small verse collections, the poet regained, as was often claimed afterwards, the romantic position as the “conscience of a nation.” This was really a quite remarkable development — a romantic Modernism, in its strivings somewhat similar to the ideas of the National Awakening. The National Awakening in the nineteenth century had been a social movement that emphasized the importance of renewed social structures. The “mini-National Awakening” in the 1960s placed subjective freedom above the powers of the system, but by requiring freedom for everybody and presenting the question of the subject as a social issue, it gained once more national importance and acknowledgement.

Indeed, the 1960s remained a remarkably utopian zone in Estonian cultural life. The experimental modernist novel focused on the most topical problems of the Lebenswelt; the theme of morality was foregrounded, and formal experimentation did not imply an abandonment of ethical values. The narrative plot typically opposed an arrogant member of the Communist Party, who had abandoned ethical principles in the name of career ambitions, to an honest artist/writer/scientist of clear conscience, who had composed ethically and aesthetically valuable works. This was the case, for example, in Enn Vetemaa’s Pillimees (trans. as A Musician; 1965) and Monument (1967). This Modernism aimed at cleansing the subject from the grime of the system and collaboration with it, reaffirming the rights of human life.

Although Modernism became the voice of a relative national freedom, the movement was nevertheless strongly tied to the Soviet reality. This reality was at the time thoroughly modern in its ideology insofar as it was widely and optimistically believed that the party and the socialist system could be renewed from inside. To a great extent, Estonian Modernism in the 1960s was part of the Marxist project of modernity. A sociological investigation conducted by Erle Rikman leads to the same conclusion — namely, that the dominant model of discussing the 1960s in the larger contemporary discourse coincided remarkably with the model used by party members (136). One suspects, however, that a Marxist Modernism could develop so fervently only because it accorded (or seemed to accord) with another grand narrative of modernity — the national narrative.

In the late 1960s, the mood in the socialist government shifted, and the modernist push towards progress was abruptly crushed. At the same time, however, the machinery of Soviet ideology continued unabated to promote the myth of uninterrupted progress. Thus the construction of a grandiose system of simulacra, interrupted at the end of the 1950s by the loosening of Soviet ideological strictures on cultural life, resumed and attained perfection by the 1980s. We will later show that the whole period of simulacrum-construction fits well into the category of postmodernity. Our task now is to explore the modes of Soviet postmodernity.
3. The postmodern features of the late socialist simulacrum

Jameson has approached Postmodernism through its two distinctive features, space and time: “the transformation of reality into images” and “the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents” (“Consumer Society” 125). Later, in “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Jameson linked the two through a relationship of inference: he lists among the “constitutive features” of the postmodern “a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary ‘theory’ and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum; [and] a consequent weakening of a historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality” (Postmodernism 6; our italics). Jameson adds the waning of affect and the importance of new technologies as marks of a postmodern culture. Apart from the new technologies, all of Jameson’s keywords are appropriate to characterize the state of late socialism. Depthlessness, timelessness, and the waning of affect seem to form a friendly cluster in late socialism just as they do in late capitalism; the new technologies are added by Jameson as a “shorthand” for something outside (a topic to which we will return).

Simulacrum, “the identical copy for which no original has ever existed” (Postmodernism 18), is suggestive of the Jamesonian spatial dimension of the postmodern. We find, however, that the simulacrum was constitutive of the socialist totalitarian regime to a far greater extent than it was of late capitalism (including cyberspace). The multiple simulations of late capitalism, which are accompanied by a belief in a plurality of voices and possibilities, appear to have an innocence utterly unparalleled in the monolithic simulacrum of Soviet reality, which were directly and self-consciously promoted through the state apparatus and disciplinarian institutions. Nor was the socialist simulacrum unduly troubled about its truth-values, its correspondence to reality. The totalizing nature of the simulacrum, the fact that there was no exterior point of articulation to it, meant that the simulacrum could manufacture itself — not just in cultural or interpretive but also in economic terms, such as numbers and statistics. Such a thoroughly empowered simulacrum was able to counteract and master the facts of reality for decades — if only by neglecting them. The whole sphere of language turned into one grandiose performative speech act, directed towards the affirmation of the Soviet simulacrum. The speeches of Leonid Brezhnev, for example, published in newspapers all over the Soviet empire, were punctuated by the repetitious comment within brackets, “[constant applause].” If we consider the physical likelihood of maintaining steady applause through a two-hour speech (!), we understand that the printed speeches and their way of presenting the simulacrum were not to be interpreted as denoting any kind of reality; rather, the performativity of the speech acts supported the simulacrum quite apart from the real world. “[Constant applause]” was presented as a sign of a reality, a speech event being really heard, but it actually maintained only a simulacrum. Constant applause can also be thought of in terms of Jameson’s end of history: if applause is permanent, it cannot be connected to anything specific — either to the excitement and pleasure of an audience, or to any kind of change and development. Rather, the constant applause presents itself as an affectless accompaniment to a constant, unchangeable state of affairs.

We begin to get a sense of what Jameson meant by the temporal peculiarity of postmodernity: namely its social timelessness, its denial of origin. He foregrounds one major theme of postmodern temporality within the deeper logic of multinational capitalism: “the disappearance
of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind that earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve” (Postmodernism 125). The effacement of pre-colonial (pre-Soviet) historiographies constituted one of the most arduous efforts of the Soviet system. The system did not fully succeed in supplanting the “old” history — the story that Estonians told of themselves prior to the Soviet occupation — and yet the Soviet order was experienced on the most part as a boundless, everlasting presence with no way out. The times preceding the Soviet order attained for most Estonians the features of a mythical period of general happiness, something never again to be attained. We can find another example of this in Pavlik Morozov, the pioneer who informed the KGB against his father. In replacing the diachronic family relationships with the synchronic heroism of the Soviet order, he became a public hero, a symbol of the Soviet refusal of origins. Thousands of Young Pioneer organizations were named after this figure of a Soviet present without filiation.

Among the most visible signs of the forced disregard of origins during the Soviet era was the new panel housing, large tracts of town consisting only of ugly apartment houses. Though as an architectural project these functionalist buildings had been associated with the alienation of modernity, by the 1970s their literary qualities had shifted to suggest merely the flatness and uprootedness of postmodernity. In Mati Unt’s Sügisball (Autumn Ball; 1979), for example, the character Eero sees his high-rise suburb in flat terms, as devoid of any kind of elevation.”

Lacking either cellars or attics, these homes lack any psychological verticality: a free spirit can find no place in the small attic chambers, and chthonic creatures such as rats cannot live in the cellars and root the dwelling to earth (Sügisball 13–14).

Jameson describes the obliteration of the past in late capitalist society through its news media, which induce and reflect a state of exhaustion: “The informational function of the media would thus be to help us forget, to serve as the very agents and mechanisms for our historical amnesia” (Postmodernism 125). But if in the Brezhnev era, “the ‘same’ newspaper was published every day, with the ‘same’ message in it” (Kruhl 172), something similar may have also been at work in the late socialist countries. Whereas in late capitalism, the news sweeps past quickly in an endless stream, leaving scarcely a trace in people’s consciousness, in late socialism the “news” repeats the same moral tirelessly every day, and greets it, so to speak, with “[constant applause].” In Western postmodern journalism, the event becomes an image, a vision of crisis or catastrophe that cannot support a positive resolution. Later developments are not reported. They are, in fact, no longer “newsworthy.” The movement of story gives way, one might say, to the flat presence of an image. In late socialism every event of news serves only as a repetition, yet another example of the same: the state of unchanging improvement in the progress of socialism. At the level of rhetoric, a certain change is announced (“improvement”), but the unvarying story of that change defeats any sense of movement (“still improving”). Each case brings about an effacement of the event.

Naturally, descriptions of the specific features of society in late socialism and late capitalism reveal huge gaps between them. The Soviet empire lagged far behind the technological developments of late capitalism. However, one should not overestimate the importance of this fact. Jameson argues that technology is not the “ultimately determining instance.” Rather,
“our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are
themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system
of a present-day multinational capitalism.” And he concludes: “The technology of contemporary
society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered
global network of the third stage of capital itself” (Postmodernism 37–38; our italics). Thus the
new technologies function in late capitalist postmodernity as a shorthand for a network of power
and control. To speculate here on how late socialist culture grasped its networks of power
through some alternate representational shorthand would lead us beyond the scope of the present
analysis, but it stands to reason that Baltic late-socialist cultures should have produced their own
synecdochal shorthand for the machineries of power and control responsible for the Soviet
simulacrum, for example in the folkloric fascination with the flow of consumer goods and food.

Similarly, the commodification characteristic of late capitalism, where aesthetic production
“has become integrated into commodity production generally” (Postmodernism 4), was not a
feature of the socialist countries. But this difference might mask a deep similarity of structure.
David Ashley, writing in the tradition of Jameson and David Harvey, labels late capitalism as
a spectacle-commodity economy: “Whereas market societies sold articles that promised
instrumental efficacy (e.g., candles, bread, machine tools), contemporary capitalism offers far
more abstracted and intangible commodities (e.g., image, diversion, identity, fashion). This is
such a major shift that it transforms not just business but life as a whole” (11). Similarities with
the socialist system come into focus when one shifts attention from the late capitalist commod-
ification of simulacra to a late socialist simulacrum of commodity.

Indeed, a spectacle-commodity economy of a similar kind was characteristic of late socialist
society, even if it was not the product of “the global transformations in the overall process
of capitalist accumulation” (Ashley 15). Images, identities, ideologies were the basic commodities
in a society where the lack of instrumental efficacy was overwhelming. Instrumental articles
were replaced with spectacle-articles in order to fill the void. As in late capitalism, an economy
of intangibles supplanted an economy of tangible commodities. We could even argue that the
Soviet system replaced economy with a spectacle of economy, insofar as it tried to administer
the economy by the power of ideology. The outcome was a simulation of economy, wherein
everybody had a job but no real duties. According to a well-known joke, “We pretend to work,
and they pretend to pay us!” People went to work to exchange information about where they
could acquire the missing everyday instrumental commodities. Again, the Soviet simulacrum
appears to be a more substantial version of postmodernity’s project of effacing reality.

4. Nation and the problem of a postmodern resistance

The preceding sections have argued that late socialism supported a certain variant of post-
modernity. One could suppose, therefore, that late socialism would be a fruitful soil for a
postmodern literature. However, it is important to note here a most significant historical feature
of late socialism in the Baltic states: the period of late socialism was also a period of occupation.
The Soviet order had been enforced violently and without national consent; the socialist system sought to systematically obliterate and Russify the cultural life of the occupied nationalities. Such a system ought to have generated a national resistance. During the early- and mid-1960s, the national and Marxist projects of modernity seemed, indeed, compatible in their aims, yet the end of the 1960s announced an irrevocable divorce between them. If postmodernity can be said to have inhabited socialist ideology, one would also expect that the national discourse would react against Postmodernism as its enemy. One is reminded again of the “allergic relationship” between nation and Postmodernism mentioned earlier in this essay. Can a literature of national resistance be postmodern? Is not the nature of nation — to say nothing of political resistance — antithetical to a postmodern mentality? The project of nationhood is chiefly grounded in modern thought. Nationhood is most often a narrative of progress that aims toward an ideal, perfect future and expresses itself through a national mode of speech. It would seem that the postmodern could not ground itself in a national narrative, especially one belonging to an oppressed (and therefore pressing and agitated) nationality.

Different answers present themselves to this complicated question. Without doubt, there were writers in East-Central Europe who avoided Postmodernism, turning instead to the national past and writing modernist or realist novels about important national figures. The officially honored Estonian authors today are still those who focused on the thematics of national identity. Chief among them is surely Jaan Kross, who since independence has been yearly nominated for the Nobel Prize. His novels and short stories raise problems of national identity from a modernist perspective: he exploits modernist textual strategies and poses epistemological questions from a national perspective. Kross’ best known historical novels, Keisri hull (The Czar’s Madman; 1978) and Professor Martensi ärasõit (Professor Martens’ Departure; 1984), are cases in point. The first of these revolves around Timotheus von Bock, an idealistic Baltic nobleman who comes to defy the Czar he serves; the second focuses on the Estonian-born diplomat Friedrich Martens and his reflections on his national identity while in the service of a later Russian Czar. In addition to Kross, there were underground modernist movements with Samizdat publications, but their productivity was slight and their role in the cultural life of the Baltic states insignificant. Most writers in the Baltics wrote from within the system and, somewhat surprisingly, were relatively unharmed by the Soviet regime.

Still, national attitudes towards the Soviet occupation were quite complex, and we should refrain from labeling any and all as ipso facto modern and anti-postmodern. The resentment of a system need not manifest itself as a modern Résistance, with a capital R and a French roll of the tongue. Resistance may refer to more than secret codes and readings in-between the lines, the spreading of secret messages or battling in the streets; more also than just sneaking into a poem the national colors acrostically (as Andrus Rõuk did in a 1981 issue of the Looming magazine). Possibilities for a different mode of resistance emerged from the official claim of Soviet socialism that only its One True Project of Modernity could bring supreme happiness to the entire world. As with any other modern projects, it presupposed an open and pliant future and the possibility of forming the world according to its ideals. It described itself in terms of permanent advancement and the growth of well-being. It also claimed to tell the real story of the real world. What, could, therefore, be a more effective form of resistance for the voice of a nation than to move the occupying socialist discourse into the light of postmodernity, as if to say
“I am the true modern and you are the fake”? What could be more offensive to an alleged modernist project than to be challenged through a postmodern critique but also have its own postmodern features exposed? Thus disclosing the modern myth of socialism as postmodern was also an oppositional move against the regime.

5. Temporality, nation, and the development of a postmodern Estonian literature

Amid these strange circumstances — nationalist narratives of modernity, restricted critical discourse, a Soviet world order that was clearly postmodern but alleged itself to be modern — we must wonder how literary culture could develop an approach beyond the one pursued by modern nationalists like Jaan Kross. If Bertens conceives of Postmodernism in late capitalist societies as developing from a complex of artistic strategies to a Weltanschauung and finally, in its third stage, to the “cultural logic” of a new historical era, then in late socialist society we see that same development only in reverse direction. In the late 1960s, writers began depicting the Soviet system as a specific state of affairs, with features that correlated with postmodernity as a social condition of simulacrum, but at the same time these writers tended to distance themselves in a modern fashion from the postmodern world they saw around them. In the late 1970s, a postmodern Weltanschauung started to emerge, and the writers’ positions came to correspond closer to the postmodern world. Only in the late 1980s did postmodern technical and artistic strategies come to prevail in literature. But this aspect requires a closer look.

At the end of the 1960s, the pointedly subjective, emotionally charged, ethically sensitive approach of the literature published earlier in the decade gave way to a more dispassionate observation of the discursive mechanisms of power. The optimistic belief in progress came into question when the dominant 1960s myth of a new and better future was replaced by a sense of static, unchanging present. Time stopped. Sõnumitooja (The Messenger; 1972), a short story by Arvo Valton, can be taken as a typical example of the new writing. Here, the protagonist heralds his message — the (more or less empty) content of which is that he is a messenger. Another narrative by Valton, Mustamäe armastus (Love in Mustamäe; 1978), describes a comfortable and satisfying suburban love affair between a man and a woman who contact each other by looking out of their windows. Here, love finds its fulfillment not in the immediacy of the body, but rather on the surface of an image. Conception is staged not inside the female body, but rather mediated across the void between the distant window frames. It is hard to find a better illustration of a postmodern depthlessness, the triumph of a surface-bound, denatured relation to the issue of origin.

In Valton’s stories the critical distance between the implied author and the outlined reality is apparent. Consequently, the implied reader is positioned outside the unacceptable reality as if to say, “Yes, we live in a postmodern world, but it has not been of our free choice.” This attitude describes an enforced, not a narcissistic postmodernity. Those who accept it, like the characters in Valton’s stories, are implicitly “wrong.” Thus Valton’s texts stage the postmodern world through the eyes of disappointed Modernism, something they have in common with many celebrated postmodernist fictional works.
By the end of the 1970s a subtle yet significant shift took place: Postmodernism began to emerge as the only possible *Weltanschauung*. Mati Unt, the leading Estonian writer in the 1970s who was praised for having captured the most hidden archetypes of Estonian society, had depicted the postmodern condition in his short narratives as early as the end of the previous decade. For example, re-presenting the tale of Judith and Holofernes (“Juudit ja Olovernes”; 1969) as a show staged by the characters for the book of history, Unt turned the “seriousness” of history into pastiche. Though his longer stories in the late 1960s retained a modernist flavor, by the mid-1970s, Mati Unt had turned decisively to Postmodernism and thus moved the core of Estonian literature of that period towards the acceptance of the postmodern condition as a given. *Sügisball*, another “love story,” presents suburban Mustamäe as the only reality, yet not as the locus of modern pathos or suffering but rather as a place suffused with the pleasures of simulacrum. Unt takes interest in Mustamäe as a spatial phenomenon, focusing on its constituent parts, its construction and its (mis)functioning.

By the 1980s, the Soviet simulacrum had achieved a large degree of success in presenting itself as the never-ending totality of life. The writers’ positions were thus inexorably absorbed into the postmodern world. Moreover, the bold line drawn by the occupying ideology between past and present spread its influence in two directions: the present not only showed itself as an enormous simulacrum, but it also shed its reflections back into the pre-Soviet times. The nostalgic past acceded to a mythical perfection. As the past independence lost its sense of reality, the national project was deprived of its strength as a modern project. The ideas of a national modernity — independence, cultural freedom, and so forth — also acquired a mythical, “lost” character. The project of modernity is supposed to propel a movement from imperfection towards perfection: by the end of the 1970s-beginning of the 1980s, the national project had ceased to develop, achieving indeed its perfection, its completion — albeit retrospectively, in the past. Modernity was recuperated in the nation’s nostalgic memories as a perfect state of affairs, the very image of perfection. Through the looking-glass of the Soviet simulacrum, the preceding times were presented as closed, happy, and finished.

As a consequence of its very perfection, then, the national narrative lost its modernity. The essence of the modern, after all, is that it cannot finally achieve completion and closure — modernity exists only in *movement towards* the perfect future. The national, ossified in the form of the mythical, could no longer contest the Soviet simulacrum — nationality could no longer support an attitude of modern disdain towards postmodernity. Hence the literature of the 1980s witnessed the disappearance of the distance between modern and postmodern; the national narrative got likewise contaminated by postmodernity. The national narrative revealed itself as one among other narratives, perhaps of utmost importance, but not of privileged validity or power. Those writers who turned to postmodernist practices did not adopt anti-national positions nor did they avoid national thematics. Postmodern authors started to exploit the national mythology. They mixed the desire for national freedom with irony and constructed mythical spaces, while at the same time expressing an awareness of their mythical, constructed nature. In this way, a double discourse of national mythology was created: on one level, a nostalgic narrative carried by a longing for the perfect past, on another level, a questioning of the first, a conscious acknowledgement that this harmonious past is but a myth and has never existed as reality.
A good example of this kind of double discourse can be found in Mati Unt’s 1974 short story “Lehekülgi Eesti kultuuri ajaloost” (Pages from the History of Estonian Culture). Here, the author narrates the historical meeting of two important figures of the National Awakening. In July 1868, Lydia Koidula, the celebrated Estonian national poet, visits Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, compiler of the epic *Kalevipoeg* (1854–57). In Unt’s tale, Kalevipoeg, the mythic, national hero from Kreutzwald’s epic, steps into the room to rape Koidula, the symbol of national purity, the “Virgin of Writing” (*kirjaneitsi*), as she was called. Kreutzwald stops the assault by killing Kalevipoeg. All this Unt describes with an objective, dispassionate voice, inserting well-known historical facts and quotations from Kreutzwald’s historic letter to Koidula. Thus Unt transposes national history to the level of narrative fiction, removing ontological boundaries between historical reality and fictionality. Koidula, Kalevipoeg, and Kreutzwald prove to be fictional to the same extent: they all belong to the pages of Estonian cultural history and to the mythical sphere of the nation, yet at the same time, because of the historiographic style of the narrative, they seem to belong to history. Unt amalgamates the fictional and the factual on the level of historical discourse. A similar example can be found in Enn Vetemaa’s irreverent *Kalevipoja mälestused* (The Memoirs of Kalevipoeg; 1971), featuring Kalevipoeg’s self-critical analysis of his motives and acts as a national epic hero. Such an approach to nationalism cannot be thought to serve as direct resistance to the Soviet system. Rather, it articulates a more genuine postmodern stance: “We were, after all, so precocious and had seen so much — or were we egocentric? — that any ‘human socialism’ or its end left us relatively indifferent” (Unt, “Maapoisi” 1252). Postmodernity was for many intellectuals — or became under the Soviet regime — just the given living condition, without special bearing on national or other social principles (which seemed to have been folded into the endless totality of the Soviet simulacrum). Postmodernity corresponded to an everyday life that did not consist of a permanent struggle against the Soviet regime.

6. **After the turn: The flourishing of a postmodern literature in the modern state**

The decisive turn in the socialist system took place in the late 1980s, of course. With the collapse of the seemingly changeless Soviet present, the grand national narrative re-emerged, and the postmodernity of late socialism was replaced again with a modernity, the project of nation-state building. But this time, the modern project succeeded in turning the system upside down.

In the course of this modern national reawakening, postmodern literature continued to appear. Postmodernism — of the type seen in capitalist countries in the 1960s, one that employs a complex of anti-modernist artistic strategies — spread but without taking into account the “de-postmodernization” of the new social situation. The outcome of this was a dissonance between the critical metalanguage and literature. Postmodernist fiction — that depicted for example Tarzan’s activities in Estonia during the nationalist celebrations of independence (Raudam and Burroughs, 1991) or the return to Tallinn of Lydia Koidula’s husband in the role of a contemporary Dracula in Unt’s *Doonori meelespea* (Donor’s Guidelines; 1990) — was accompanied by the aggressive critical voice of a yearning for “real literature” and the claim that “nothing is happening in Estonian literature” (Veidemann 793). Against the critical expectation of great
modern national artifacts, literature provided small stories of a postmodern world, in place of well-wrought myths, their deconstructions.

One might say that whereas literature before the collapse of the Soviet regime was postmodern to a large extent because of its social concerns, literature after the collapse of the Soviet regime was postmodern in spite of its social concerns. Before the Turn, it was presumed that postmodern literature was an outcome of a postmodern society. Culture and society being inseparable, cultural spheres were understood as part of a certain social condition. After the Turn, however, it became clear that postmodernist literature could flourish in a modern state of society, in times of national state-building, of people singing in the streets, of everyday mass-meetings, of an overall excitement at the prospect of a new-born world. Culture and society moved in a less rigid correspondence with each other, and expressed a different pathos.

Is the relationship between culture and society, between modern, postmodern and national, thus wholly arbitrary? One could more precisely say that the logic of literary/cultural developments follows a different muse than the logic of social developments. Society might start “anew,” might rebuild something it had lost, but literature cannot jump back to an earlier stage. Mati Unt, having already written of Kalevipoeg’s attempt to rape Koidula, cannot write a straightforward novel depicting the modern spirit of the new times. Instead, Unt makes the best of the situation and writes the postmodern — but nationally flavored and politically attuned — Doonori meelespea, in which a contemporary Dracula abandons his sanguinary lust in deference to the new national feeling. Out of appreciation for Estonia’s strivings for independence in late 1986, Dracula commits himself to the use of blood banks in the future, rather than continuing to prey upon a small nation in such trying times. As he puts it in a delicious pastiche of contemporary sloganeering, “I started to sense your strivings towards liberty, your natural right to determine your own course and conduct business in your own fashion, your undeniable wish to be a free folk in a free country” (156). Thus Postmodernism has proved the most resourceful in the triad of concepts — Postmodernism, late socialism, and nationalism — that we have explored: late socialism has collapsed; nationalism has folded itself into the postmodern.
Postmodernism in literature doesn’t represent organised movement with leaders or central figures so we cannot say if it is ended or when it will end. It reached its peak in the 60s and 70s with the publication of some very important works, Catch 22. Lost in the Funhouse, Slaughterhouse Five, Gravity’s Rainbow, Common Themes and Techniques used. The need for the new era in literature after modernism had exhausted itself. Many of the well-known postmodern novels deal with WWII, one of the most famous was Joseph Hellers Catch 22. The antiwar and anti-government feelings in the book belong to the period following the end. The general disintegration of belief took place then and it affected Catch 22 in that the form of the novel almost disintegrated.

Postmodernism in Kazakh literature began in the years of independence. In the works of poets like Maraltay Raiymbekuly, Akberen Elgezek, Yerlan Zhunus, Ularbek Nurgalym, Yrysbek Dabey, Azamat Taskarauly, postmodernism remains one of the most difficult issues. Is there postmodernism in Kazakh literature? There are different answers to this question. Doctor of Philology, professor, critic B. Maitanov writes: Modernism and postmodernism in the modern era in Kazakh literature are not at the level as directions, because they are not separated from each other, today they live as artistic and literary tendencies. Instead, we can use traditions, trends, styles. History of Soviet repressions and victims of deportations in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – a material for the occasion of June 14 deportation anniversary. The two occasions on which the Baltic states were forcibly joined to the Soviet Union had an especially tragic impact on their inhabitants. Many were executed, imprisoned or sent to Gulag camps, though the largest number of victims comprised those deported from their homelands to inhospitable corners of Soviet Russia.