# CITY WITHOUT a NAME

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The city without a name has been represented very often in Estonian poetry. It may be an abstract space or environment or an ideological symbol. Although Õnne Kepp writes that 'there are very few specific towns' represented in Estonian poetry and they 'can be identified through hints' and 'the author's biography' (Kepp 2003: 374), it seems the nameless city often has its own function and a specific meaning in poetry, and sometimes such anonymity is one of the keys to understanding and interpreting poems. Therefore the question of why an author writes about a nameless city and what it means arises when we read this kind of poetry.

**1. The world is a city**

In my opinion a city without a name is like a little world created by the poet, i.e. we may say 'the world is a city' – that sentence is a paraphrase of the sentence 'the world is a horse' (Lotman, Uspenski 1992: 58), which expresses mythological thinking. At the same time the city without a name in poetry is a phenomenon in which the mythological and non-mythological are mixed.

According to Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenski, a proper name is connected with a mythological consciousness (Lotman, Uspenski 1992: 60) which identifies the different objects in the world with homonyms, while poetry, on the contrary, is connected with synonymy. This means we can use different names or nouns to name the object in the poetic text, but in the mythical text, the object and the name are identified, indistinguishable. Consequently, poetry and myth are antipodes (Lotman, Uspenski 1992: 72–73), and we may speak only of some mythical elements or motifs in poetry – poetry itself is not a myth.

### 1.1. Temptation and destruction

It seems the city without a name in poetry is like a symbol, in Lotman's and Uspenski's sense, which refers to the myth as a genre or tries to create the mythological situation as a creative element – the word 'city' acts as a proper name. And at the same time the mythological world is like the metalinguistic category in this case, because the city without a name as a symbol belongs to the non-mythological consciousness. (Lotman, Uspenski 1992: 68.) For example, Estonian poet Johannes Barbarus represents the anonymous metropolis in his poem 'Again in the Metropolis' (*Jälle suurlinnas*, 1919). The word *suurlinn* ('metropolis') in the title is like a gate to the world of the city: on the one hand the word seems to refer to a mythical city which is a specific, personified and closed space with insistent sexuality, where the author's poetic 'ego' enters the womb or the tempting unrighteous city:

*Nagu tursunud rindadega imetajad naised*
*ulatad tornide, kuplite paised*
*kõigile vastu oma mahlased udarad,*
*kirikute sarvad ja majade kübarad;*
*tervitades kaugelt kui sõbrad ja tuttavad*
*laotes käsi, mulle vastu kõik ruttavad...*
*Nagu lapsel jälle uudist mu hingele pakud*
*mind jälle vaimustad, mu mured lakud,*
*suurlinn – teraapia – mu närve broom*
*su hingeõhk – see jumalik aroom*
*mind joobnustab, end kingin ära, eks?!*
(Barbarus 1919: 43.)

*Like breast-feeding women with swollen breasts*
*you reach the boils of your towers and cupolas*
*your juicy udders towards everyone*
*the horns of the churches and the hats of the houses*
*greeting me already from the distance like friends and acquaintances*
*everyone rushes to meet me with open arms…*
*Like a child, you offer again something new to my soul*
*you delight me and you lick away my troubles*
*Metropolis – therapy – bromine of my soul*
*your breath – the heavenly aroma*
*inebriates me, I'll give myself away, all right?!*

The name is not important in this poem – what is important is the specific world and situation which is created by the author, and it seems the world in the poem refers to the myth as the genre and this representation belongs to the non-mythological consciousness. In other words, the mythological text is translated into the non-mythological consciousness (Lotman, Uspenski 1992: 67–68) and 'We can see that the symbolic meaning of a text understood this way is close to the metaphorical' (Pärli, Rudakovskaja 2002: 584). Concerning Barbarus' poem, the word *suurlinn* acts also as a proper name, because it is possible to identify the mythical world with the name *suurlinn*. Thus the three notions, proper name, symbol and metaphor, approach each other and that phenomenon is connected with artistic creation (Pärli, Rudakovskaja 2002: 584).

On the other hand (although this may be only a hypothesis and depend on the reader) the reader may also see in Barbarus' text allusions to old myths about the concrete temptation of unrighteous cities such as Sodom or Gomorrah. Although we do not know the name of the city or metropolis represented in Barbarus' poem (Õnne Kepp supposes that maybe it is Kiev or some Galician town; Kepp 2003: 368), some elements can act as allusive signals in the text and may connect the old biblical texts with Barbarus' poem. The allusive signals (the underlined elements in the text below) may be the elements as lustful women, licentious and uncontrolled thirst for pleasure etc.

*Mind jälle meelitavad müral restoraanid,*
*ja naised paljad – himurad kui kaanid,*
*viin vahutav ja vürtsilised road,*
*täis segulõhnu eraldatud toad,*
*kus klaver nukker, unustatud noodid,*
*täis kõrtsiluulet higilõhnsad voodid...*
(Barbarus 1919: 43–44.)

*The noisy restaurants allure me again,*
*and naked women – lecherous like leeches,*
*wine sparkling, spicy dishes,*
*and separate rooms, full of mixed odors,*
*where melancholy piano, and forgotten notes,*
*and sweaty beds full of tavern poetry...*

According to Lotman and Uspenski, the old biblical myths act as metatexts to Barbarus' poem (Lotman, Uspenski 1992: 68) and allusive signals (or symbols in

Lotman, Uspenski) refer to the concrete elements in the old mythological texts or to the referent texts and so, as Lotman and Uspenski suggest, the symbol does not exit from the mythological consciousness. Consequently, although the poem and myth are antipodes, we may see that sometimes poetry also includes mythological consciousness as does Barbarus' poem.

At the same time, Barbarus' poem also includes allusive signals (or symbols) to contemporary myths (the underlined elements):

*Nagu mõrsja uduloori, elektrisse mässitud*
*seisad sa õhtul. Kui kõnedest ässitud*
*voolavad inimesed, põristavad autod,*
*ruttavad vagunid, rööbastelle rautud,*
*kollasil silmil, kui hullunud lõvid*
*kisendavad pöörased autode kõrid...*
(Barbarus 1919: 43.)

*Like a bride embroiled in veils of mist, electricity,*
*you stand in the evening. As if instigated by philippic,*
*people stream, cars rattle,*
*wagons speed on iron rails,*
*with yellow eyes like lions gone mad*
*roam the throats of the furious cars...*

It is the modern city, the modern environment, which supports different myths about the city: one of them is a modern myth about the city as the environment of technical progress (cars, electricity, fast pace, cafés etc.) which was especially widespread at the beginning of the 20th century, and the other is the old myth about the city as a vicious and sinful place. The latter is connected with the above-mentioned old biblical myths. Consequently the city without a name has two mythological symbols in Barbarus' poem: one of them is the old myth about the city and the second is the contemporary myth about the technical metropolis; both of them are mixed and plaited in the poem.

The last two verses also emphasise the negative meaning of the city: it is a disastrous place. Thereby it is possible to connect the first verse with the old myth and the second one can refer to contemporary myths:

*Lähen, hing tühi, kui naine kes häbistet,*
*uulitsate mürast ja imevärgist läbistet...*
(Barbarus 1919: 43.)

*I go with empty soul, like a woman who has been dishonored,*
*penetrated by the noise of the streets and city wonders…*

At the same time, the non-mythological consciousness imitates the mythological atmosphere in the entire poem: the metropolis is a world which calls and entices, but also destroys. So Barbarus' poem demonstrates how mythological texts create metaphorical constructs in the conditions of the non-mythological consciousness (Lotman, Uspenski 1992: 69).

**1.2. The stones are my home**

Estonian contemporary poet Liisi Ojamaa has created a different world as a city than has Johannes Barbarus. In the collection *The Unsent Letters* (*Ärasaatmata kirjad,* 2002) she represents the nameless city, or metropolis, (we may only surmise that it is Tallinn) which is also a closed space, but romantic and idealised. Ojamaa's poetic 'ego' is not a stranger in the city; she lives there and also loves it:

*elus yhes maailmas on nad ju olnud & seepärast tuleb laulda*
*peegeldada kahwatul klaasil elatu meeletut ilu ma olen*
*näinud wikerkaart weebruaris & silmapiirini laiuwat linna*
*kui kiwide hymni hilises mais augustis olen ma armastanud...*
(Ojamaa 2002: 5.)

*they have been alive in a world & therefore one must sing*
*reflect the lived frantic beauty on a pale glass i have*
*seen the rainbow in february & the city stretching on the horizon*
*when i have loved the hymn of the stones in late may in august…*

Ojamaa's city is an ideal place for lovers and also as a home: nature and an artificial environment exist side by side and guarantee safety. The city is an organic unity, although it is not always represented geometrically and the poet only sometimes emphasises the walls of the city; most important is the good homey feeling:

*Kuigi et kylmad*
*Mis sellest et pime*
*Kiwid on kodu*
*See kodu on ime*
(Ojamaa 2002: 6.)

*Although cold*
*And dark so what*
*Stones are home*
*That home is a miracle*

It seems Ojamaa's poems refer to myths about ideal cities or places or utopias. According to Virve Sarapik, 'The ideality of these places was based upon the exceptionality of the inhabitants of their communities (the gods or other chosen, noble spirits; the different (human) beings of the past or the future): golden era (*aetas aurea*), Olympus, Garden of Eden, the City of God – *civitas Dei*, etc.' (Sarapik 2003: 109–110).

Ojamaa creates her world in imitation of the genre of old utopias, but at the same time she connects the old city with contemporary symbols (cars, trams, glass, advertisements, neon lamps etc.), which refer to contemporary myths about the young generations who have lived only in cities.

However, it seems that Ojamaa's poems represent a more non-mythological consciousness: only some allusive signals or symbols refer to text segments of the myths and utopias, for example sometimes the poetic 'ego' of the poet speaks with God, i.e. God may live in the city or care for it. But we may say that the city without a name in Ojamaa's poem acts as a proper name that means the ideal place or the City of God. At the same time, because non-mythological consciousness dominates in Ojamaa's poetry, we may also take the relations between older utopias and Ojamaa's poems more metaphorically.

**Conclusion**

Concerning the city without a name, it is a paradox that Barbarus' and Ojamaa's city is not nameless – its name is Metropolis or City (Barbarus mentions the name in the title of his poem and also repeats it in the ninth verse; Ojamaa also mentions the name in her poems). According to Lotman, the space of proper names is the space of explosion (Lotman 1992: 211), i.e. 'proper name signifies the individual, personal, unpredictable. [---] The individual *ad hoc* created inherently metaphoric word, so as opposed to the general word, generates new meaning....' (Pärli, Rudakovskaja 2002: 585.)

Thus, the topic of proper name is connected with 'the role of individual consciousness in cultural processes, and ... understanding cultural explosion moments

through mechanisms of individual meaning generation' (Pärli, Rudakovskaja 2002: 587–588). Consequently the city without a name receives a name when the explosion takes place, when the word 'metropolis' or 'city' gets a new meaning from the author or from the reader. This also means that nameless cities in poetry may always be different worlds – they may be the worlds of their creators.

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