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Revolution and Decadence in the Poetic Universe of Gustav Suits¹

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In Estonia, Gustav Suits (1883–1956) is the first name to be associated with nationalism and literary innovation at the beginning of the twentieth century. This article will analyse his early poetry in connection with his political activities. Suits was the initiator of the Young Estonia movement [Noor-Eesti] (1905–1915) that focused on aesthetic innovation and brought into Estonian literature many new features that have been associated with decadent style. As John R. Reed has remarked, it is important to make a distinction between decadent style and decadent manner, because the former is a ‘verifiable technique’, while the latter is a loose combination of ‘idealistic yearning’ and ‘trappings’.² Although decadent style became more and more dominant in Suits’s poetry, decadent manner is notably missing – Suits obviously had no intention of *épater le bourgeois* with dirty details or perverse imagination.

As an outstanding innovator in the field of poetry, he was also a political revolutionary, who had already attracted suspicion as a schoolboy.³ In 1905, a wave of strikes and peasant revolts swept across the Russian Empire, including Estonia. In January, a total of 15,000 industrial workers went on strike in Estonia. These strikes were accompanied by political demonstrations and meetings, and casualties were reported in clashes with the police and military. In February, students at Tartu University joined the political strike of the students in St. Petersburg. Meanwhile, the peasants’ struggle against the landlords began in the countryside and, from January to March 1905, strikes and riots by manor workers broke out in nearly 120 manors. The Social Democrats called on the people to overthrow the autocracy and establish a democratic republic, the most common slogan was ‘Down with the autocracy!’ The revolution reached its peak in autumn, when the workers of Tallinn joined the general strike, in which 20,000 industrial and railway workers in Estonia took part, i.e., three-quarters of the total number of workers. After the revolutionary

movement became active in the cities, unrest began again in the countryside, only being eliminated by the arrival of Cossacks and penal squads. These violent repression measures forced many intellectuals to flee Estonia and to remain abroad for several years.

During and after these turbulent events, Suits remained in Helsinki to study, but stayed in touch with the refugees and was quick to offer help to save them from death sentences.⁴ After some time, he felt like a refugee himself, although remaining in Finland spared him many hardships. In 1917, immediately after the October Coup in St. Petersburg, Suits proposed the idea of a Finnish-Estonian political union, aiming to create a transimperial form that could become 'lõplikult ehk saab selleks suurpoliitiliseks kompromisskujuks, millega niihäästi kõigi maade rahvavõimu tunnistajad kui strateegid ja diplomaadid oleksid valmis leppima' [a major political compromise that both the witnesses of popular power in all countries and the strategists and diplomats would be ready to accept].⁵ Influenced by Karl Kautsky's ideas, Suits believed that '[r]ahvusriik on demokraatlikust seisukohast kindlasti kõige täielikum riigi kuju' [the nation-state is undoubtedly the most perfect form of state from a democratic point of view].⁶ As a radical social democrat, Suits was openly critical of Marxism and presented a draft of an Estonian Workers' Republic, thereby making the first gesture towards the political independence of Estonia.⁷ At the same time, Suits's poetry became increasingly complex, refined, and ambivalent.

A man with gigantic desire

Gustav Suits's first major work *Elu tuli* [The Fire of Life] (1905) is widely regarded as the most revolutionary and militant poetry collection in contemporary Estonian literature, although it bears many hallmarks of nineteenth-century Romanticism. The overall tone of the book is extremely affected and rebellious, predicting a social upheaval and occasionally announcing creative destruction. Suits's poetry clearly demonstrates that decadence can be refurbished 'as a second useful container term for the profound sense of breakup and change during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'.⁸ However, as Suits heralds the imminent collapse of the Russian

Empire with a thinly disguised vehemence, his political poems irrevocably approach the prophetic tendencies evident throughout Europe at that time.⁹ Suits is not criticizing the establishment or hoping for any reforms; he is openly calling for war:

Las kasvame, me tõusev sugu,
ja ootame, et tuleb tund:
kord neile, kes veel näevad und,
me müristame kõrvu sõjalugu!

[Let us grow, we, the rising race,
let us wait for the coming hour:
once we will thunder the melody of war
into the ears of the dreamers!]¹⁰

Epp Annus has highlighted the Nietzschean tendencies in Suits's concept of history. Like Nietzsche, Suits detests the antiquarian type with a scientific and impartial interest in history, and looks to the spirit of the Renaissance as a model for future activities. She writes:

Suits kasutab selliseid üldisi väljendeid nagu Eesti iseteadvus, millega võiks igal järgmisel põlvkonnal olla võimalik suhestuda. Aga jätkutaotlust me ei leia. Siin on katkestus, järsk ärapöördumine, eitatus - meil, uuel põlvkonnal, pole vanadega midagi ühist. Sellisena öeldakse õigupoolest: meil ei ole ajalugu, enne meid ei olnud midagi. Meie oleme algus. Või veelgi provokatiivsemalt: meie ei mõtle ajalooliselt, meie elame olevikku, intensiivset nüüdhetke, milles osaleb minevik vaid halva näitena ebaõnnestunud aegadest.

[Suits uses such general expressions as Estonian self-consciousness, which every next generation could relate to. But we find no request for continuation. Here there is a break, a sudden turn, a denial – we, the new generation, have nothing in common with the old ones. As such, it is effectively said: we have no history, there was nothing before us. We are the beginning. Or even more provocatively: we do not think historically, we live in the present, an intense now-moment, in which the past participates only as a bad example of failed times.]¹¹

It is easy to notice that in Suits's imagination, revolution is both preceded and followed by hard work. With a perplexing naivety, he declares 'Italia – nii olgu Eesti tulevik' [Italy – that should be the future of Estonia], and insists on the 'nõiasõna' [magic word] to reach that goal – 'Töö selle nimi on, töö ilma võitja on' [It is called *work*, for work is the winner of the world]. Nonetheless, here an obvious ambiguity creeps in, because '[n]ii mõnelgi tööst kahvatanud palged | ja rinnas idanevad haigus-idu alged [many people look pale because of the work | and miasmas will sprout inside their breasts].¹² This hints at a deeper ambivalence in his revolutionary project. Although

Suits often is sincerely naive, he also uses naivety as a mask. In other words, naivety is a device that supports militant activism, but the poet cannot help but acknowledge its darker side. Indeed, the dark side becomes more visible through the mask of innocence, and Suits revels in sombre and sinister moods. This creates an ambiguous mode, where optimism also carries a pessimistic undertone and vice versa.

The keyword to this ambiguity is *iha* [desire], a word that was not common in the poetic vocabulary of the nineteenth century. In Estonian, *iha* can denote both longing and sexual attraction, but its connotations can be taken much further. Put simply, desire involves a spiritual aspiration in Suits's early poetry. This can be seen in his epic poem 'Üks ennemuistne jutt' [A Primordial Tale], in which a man wanders through a dark forest in search of the meaning of life. After encountering mocking fairies from the underworld, he arrives at a large oak tree that requests a sacrifice of his heart's blood. The man consents to the sacred tree's request:

Ohverdas siis rinna seest
punast, sooja südameverd,
mees, kel hiigla-iha paisus.
Kõrgele tõstis ta ülesse
vaimumõõga välkuva,
vandus siis vannet vägevat:
Et ei taha ta puhata
enne kui pannud päikse paistma
Üle selle õudse metsa,
metsa musta ja magava.

[So he offered from his breast
the red, warm blood of his heart,
that man with bulging, gigantic desire.
Rising high up above his head
the shining sword of the spirit,
he took a powerful oath:
That he won't have any rest
before he has made the sun to shine
Over this gloomy forest,
this black and sleeping forest.]¹³

The man with the gigantic desire appears to be Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, the author of the epic *Kalevipoeg* [Kalev's Son], as Suits's poem is written in commemoration of him. However, it

could also be an alter ego of the poet himself. In a simple lulling poem ‘Ühte laulu tahaks laulda’ [I’d like to sing a song], Suits says that he would like his song to be ‘kui vägev merelaene’ [like an enormous wave of the sea] that would flood the whole country and rumble through the soul of the nation ‘hiigla-ihana’ [as a gigantic desire].¹⁴ Desire is directly connected to the idea of patriotism, and the poet can rekindle it, or otherwise drown.¹⁵ In any case, he can never forget ‘vägevat merd, | suuruse aated | sügavus-ihad’ [the mighty ocean, | the ideas of greatness, | desires for the depths] that swelled within him when he reached the high seas.¹⁶

Desire can also lead to madness. This is most evident in ‘Pöörase laul’ [Song of a Madman], in which the speaker is tied up and imprisoned yet continues to rail against the social order. The poem is actually based on Sándor Petőfi’s venomous ‘Az őrült’ [The Madman] (1846), which Suits had read in a German translation, ‘Der Wahnsinnige’.¹⁷ Despite being subjected to involuntary treatment in a mental institution, the madman predicts a great fire that will burn the house down:

Kuid, oodake, korra,
kui hullusid enam
siin koguneb kokku:
missugune mürin,
kui pistetakse põlema
hullude maja!
Las’ põlevad sisse
kõik tervise-targad,
kõik kelmid ja vargad!
Hahaha!

[But wait, until here
the number of madmen
will multiply:
imagine the uproar,
once the whole madhouse
will be ignited!
Let them burn inside,
all them wise doctors,
all them scoundrels and thieves!
Hahaha!]¹⁸

After the fire, the madmen will sing a victory song, the rhythm of which will be suggested by ‘hullude südameveri’ [the heart’s blood of the madmen],¹⁹ and which will echo the roaring sea, the cheering hurricanes and the drumming of a thunderstorm. The sacrifice of blood is invoked once

more, and revolutionary madness is glorified as the only solution to the social impasse. However, the storm of destruction alone is not enough: even the sun must be augmented because the current one is 'liiaks on väike | ja valgustab vähe' [too small | and scarce of light].²⁰

In the 'Song of a Madman' [Pöörase laul], the symbolism of fire meets the symbolism of water. Both are pivotal in *Elu tuli* and both are deeply ambivalent. The sea symbolizes spiritual power and the 'sügavus-iha' [desire for the depths],²¹ but it also represents the great flood, the symbol of social upheaval and a return to the very beginning, where everything can be erased and restarted. Fire symbolism is even more complicated. Fire symbolizes youth and erotic desire, as well as spiritual aspiration and the essence of human existence. However, it also symbolizes revolutionary violence and creative destruction in the Nietzschean sense. Suits read Nietzsche extensively in 1904 and, besides revelling in *Götzen-Dämmerung* [Twilight of the Idols] and *Also sprach Zarathustra* [Thus Spoke Zarathustra], he was particularly impressed by *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* [Beyond Good and Evil].²² In the eponymous poem 'Elu tuli', this multifaceted fire burns like the sun, flashes like thunder, illuminates thoughts, and ignites the 'ihalduste tulised tunglad' [torches of desires], but also 'inimeste südameid sööb' [eats away the hearts of men] and dies out, extinguishing everything. All that remains is 'peotäis tuhka' [a handful of ashes]. However, although the ashes are holy, 'elu tuli punane püham on ise' [the red fire of life is more holy itself].²³

Borderline narcissism

This multiple symbolism creates an atmosphere of unrest, abundant possibilities, emotional uncertainty, frustration and rage. Revolutionary activity is simultaneously inevitable and unreliable, because it may not achieve anything. Suits has certainly reflected on this ambivalence in his literary work. While living in Finland, he discovered a correlative of similar feelings in Eino Leino's poetry. In *Elu tuli*, several translations are included, among them a translation of Leino's poem 'Kumpi on kauniimpi? [Which One Is More Beautiful?]'²⁴ Here the ambivalence is distilled into a series of antitheses. Leino asks – and Suits echoes the question – is it more beautiful to fight for freedom

in the hope for change, or to fight for freedom despite the lack of hope? Another pair of antitheses is even more puzzling because the alternatives now stem from the idea of hopelessness: would it be more beautiful to give up the fight as unreasonable, or to keep fighting without reason because this is your destiny?: ‘olen päikese loode laps, ei koidu, | olen valguse mees, ei küll võidu, | murduda on minu elu?’ [I am the child of sunset, not sunrise, I am the man of light, though not victory, that’s why I’ll have to collapse?]²⁵ Suits has translated Leino’s poem almost literally, but has added a question mark that is missing in the original. In a sense, he sidesteps Leino’s pessimism, yet he enhances the scorching ambiguity of the poem, rendering it even more devastating. He is undoubtedly a man of immense desire, but it is split, like his revolutionary fervour, oscillating between the urge for creative destruction and a sense of impending doom.

After *Elu tuli* was published in Helsinki, Eino Leino wrote a review for the daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. Although he was quite content with the younger poet’s debut collection, he hoped that Suits’s love poems would become more refined in future. Suits later confessed in a personal letter that the day he read Leino’s review was the most terrible day in his life.²⁶ This confession is telling. Suits had undoubtedly met Leino several times in Helsinki, and he idolized the Finnish poet, who was five years his senior and already a celebrity. One might have expected him to be happy with Leino’s recognition and friendly criticism. However, Suits seems to have had a borderline personality disorder characterized by an acute fear of abandonment. This brings him even closer to the Baudelairean atmosphere of ‘borderline narcissism’, which Eugene W. Holland has analyzed as ‘a historical rather than a psychological category’, arising from the disillusionment caused by ‘the recurrent failures of the democratic ideal promised by modern society to prevail over the continually resurgent authoritarianism’.²⁷ Democracy is a mirage looming on the horizon that is never fully attained. For Suits’s decadent sensibility, it is difficult to distinguish clearly between personal crises and societal failures, or, as Aino Kallas succinctly puts it, ‘ajan nousu on hänenkin nousunsa, ajan taantumus hänenkin lamaannuksensa’ [if the times are ascending, it’s his ascent also, and if they are declining, it’s his depression also].²⁸ The line of separation between

politics and personal turmoil becomes blurred. At the same time, his multifarious desires are torn between two opposing forces, sometimes soaring to great heights and sometimes sinking to great depths. This is clearly visible in Suits's earliest work and is elaborated in his subsequent oeuvre.

The Estonian day

Suits's second book of poetry *Tuulemaa* [Wuthering Land] was published in 1913. It is a solemn, gloomy, agonizing, and bleak work. Most of the poems were written after the bloody repressions of 1906 and before the outbreak of the First World War. Suits graduated from the University of Helsinki in 1910, but could not find a job in Estonia, where his revolutionary ideas had no impact.²⁹ He therefore remained in Finland, developing a cold and perspicacious attitude towards his homeland that was not altogether devoid of rancour. In 1912, he published a fierce and agonizing lament about the state of the liberal arts in Estonia, complaining that he had no 'meelepäralist korterit' [suitable apartment] there for his spirit or his body. The only possible solution, he argues, is Nefelokokkygia, the imaginary Cloud Cuckoo Land from Aristophanes' comedy *The Birds*. Suits continues, explaining the current situation in terms of the pragmatic mindset and scarcity of symbolic capital among intellectuals:

Kunstitegewus eeldab nii walmistaja kui ka tarwitaja kohta palju waba aega. Meie inimesed on äri inimesed. Elu ei ole neile mitte estetikaline, waid majandusline problem. Äri kihutab tagant, tulu ja praktika wangistab meeli, mitte waatlemine, mitte teadus, kunst, kirjandus. Meie haritlased on haritlased esimeses, harwa teises põlwes. Üks Inglise tarksõna aga ütleb: *Three generations are necessary to bring up a gentleman* – kolme sugupõlwe on tarwis täieliku aumehe tekkimiseks, mis täiesti ka meie tõusikutekihi kohta sünnib.

[Artistic activity requires a lot of free time from both the maker and the user. Our people are business people. Life is not an aesthetic problem for us, but an economic one. Business is our driving force, profit and practice captivate the senses, not observation, not science, art, literature. Our intellectuals are intellectuals in the first, rarely second generation. But as an English proverb says: *three generations are necessary to bring up a gentleman*.]³⁰

The final sentence of Suits's text is written in English. To a reader of the newspaper *Päevaleht*, in which it was published, this must have seemed snobbish and precocious, given that the second language of Suits's contemporaries was usually German, occasionally supplemented by Russian or

French. However, Suits did not care about sounding provocative – on the contrary, he embraced provocation as a means of disseminating his ideas. Moreover, he associated English with Thomas Carlyle, the major influence on his ideas about political revolution. Of course, accusing the local population of being ‘business people’ and not caring about aesthetics are exaggerations, as one could hardly find a nation in Europe that would not primarily treat life as an economic problem. However, Suits knew that this would strike a chord with the local readers and chose this approach quite deliberately to express his frustration.

Perhaps the peak of his poetic expression of frustration and resentment is ‘Laul Eestist’ [The Song of Estonia].³¹ First published in 1907 in the Tartu student calendar *Sirvilauad* when Suits was still studying in the University of Helsinki, the viewpoint of the poem does not belong to an insider, but to a deeply involved outsider, trying to convince others of something he himself is reluctant to believe. The speaker seems to be situated outside of history, detached from any earthly determination yet he is affected by his subject and unable to escape the focus of abjection. The first three stanzas sound like an epitome of doom:

Õudne kui needmine ajalugu,
maha tallatud jõuetu sugu,
kõverad, küürakad vaevakased,
juurtega, juurteta mädasoo mülkas
See on Eesti.

Kes küll kuivatab korra neid soosid?
Noorelt ju närtsivad põskede roosid,
roostetab tegude haljas teras.
Rängalt rabavad hallaöö piitsad.
Oleme Eestis.

Kes küll heledalt naerda siin suudaks?
See, kes mured kõik rõõmuks muudaks.
Koorma all kummargil õhkab elu
veel aga Hādaoru küla kohal.
Eesti elu.

[History terrible, like a curse,
a downtrodden, enfeebled race,
crooked, hunchbacked dwarf birches,
rooted, rootless in quagmire morass.
This is Estonia.

Who shall ever drain those swamps?
Roses of cheeks wither, still young,
the bright steel of action corrodes.
The whips of frost strike ruthlessly.
We are in Estonia.

Here, whoever might merrily laugh?
She, who could turn all worries to joy.
Life bent under burden, moaning
over the village of Destitution.
Estonian life.]³²

The poem goes on to contrast images by comparing Estonian pines and willows with imaginary oak groves and 'viinapuulehestikus' [vine foliage] in the Mediterranean – nobody places a laurel wreath on the head of an Estonian singer and this is the meanest of all possible fates. In the final stanza, Suits switches to the first-person plural, evoking images of sinking into the 'neetud sohu' [cursed morass], while '[m]illest aga unistame, surmalapsed? | Paremast teistele elupäevast' [we, the children of death, | dream of a better day for the others]. In a grotesque reversal, that day would be called 'Eesti päevast' [the Estonian day].³³ However, this sudden reversal is not so surprising when we consider Suits's affection for urban culture and his belief in the transformative power of modernity. As Pirjo Lyytikäinen has observed, 'Estonian decadence was linked to the young artists' aim to be modern and "metropolitan"; they were influenced by Taine's ideas emphasizing the need for a proper milieu and were therefore concerned about the "backwardness" of Estonian life and society'.³⁴ Nevertheless, the vision is so bleak that it is difficult to believe that Suits is writing about a country that was once his homeland, which he often visited during his time in Finland. Suits does not write these lines as a cold and nonchalant farewell, but with a fervent desire to return.³⁵ He yearns for the 'mädasoo mülgas' [quagmire morass] and the 'Hädaoru küla' [village of Destitution], even under the 'hallaöö piitsad' [whips of frost]. This desire is irrevocable.

Aino Kallas, who often met the young poet during these uncertain years, characterized the overall emotional pattern of his poems as a 'morituri-tunteen täyttämä' [morituri-mood], but she nonetheless thought that Suits has here 'pääsee monta vertaa lähemmäksi rotunsa paineenalaista

psyykeä' [got much closer to the oppressed psyche of his race] than in his previous militant poetry.³⁶ Her comment seems to be an attempt to excuse Suits's tendency to veer from one extreme to another. Kallas portrays Suits and other members of the Young Estonia movement from various angles, angles that do not always converge. As Mirjam Hinrikus has observed:

[i]n Kallas' essay collection on Young Estonia, reciprocal influences between modern ways of speaking, thinking, behaving, and perceiving give rise to an unusual synthesis, which bears Kallas' unique signature, but also evokes a more general European experience of modernity. This multiple ambivalent modernity spans many contradictions: an Enlightenment vector aligned with positivism and belief in progress, and a vision of regression, fed in the fin de siècle by discourses of decadence and/or degeneration.³⁷

Hinrikus maintains that Kallas is particularly attentive to the second term of this polarity: 'a hereditary lack of psychic vitality, reverse natural selection, and an overheated, accelerated tempo of modernization accompanied by forms of moral, physical, intellectual, and psychic decline'.³⁸ Undoubtedly Suits found a certain narcissistic pleasure in his repulsive vision of the 'quagmire morass', but he remains on the borderline, never taking the final step to wallow in the mire or identify with decline and lack of vitality.

Youth already old

On 16 August 1908, Suits visited Kallas in Kihelkonna, Saaremaa, where she was spending the summer with her husband and children. That night, Kallas wrote the following entry in her diary:

Gustav Suits oli meillä puolitoista päivää. Meillä oli hyvä ilta yhdessä, puhelimme kuin kaksi ihmistä, mutta seuraavana päivänä jäi kuitenkin outo tunne jäljelle hänen mentyvään.

Suits on käynyt merkillisen kyynilliseksi, johtaa aina puheen naisiin, joista hän muuten puhuu suurimmalla halveksumisella. Mitä se on hänessä? Kai miehekkyyden ilmausta.

Kuitenkin, tiedän, ettei se ole pohjakerros hänessä, vaan että sen alla on taas jotain muuta, suuripiirteisyyttä, hienoa runoutta, tosin nuoren ylimielisyyden ja uhman peitossa vielä.

[Gustav Suits spent a day and a half with us. We had a nice evening together, we talked like two human beings, but the next day there was still a strange feeling after he left.

Suits has become remarkably cynical, always directing the conversation to women, whom he otherwise speaks of with utter contempt. What is wrong with him? An expression of masculinity, I suppose.

However, I know that it is not the fundamental layer in him, but that underneath there is something else, a grandeur, a fine poetry, although still covered with youthful arrogance and defiance.]³⁹

Suits spent his summer on the island of Vilsandi, but maintained an intense correspondence with several female partners, which was often extremely affectionate.⁴⁰ The ‘suurimalla halveksumisella’ [utter contempt] that startled Kallas was the result of inner confusion and Suits found it difficult to make final decisions in his intimate relationships. His attitude towards other people was often controversial, oscillating between extremes while also remaining dissatisfied. Aino Thauvón-Suits, his lifelong companion, recounted a visit to a rented apartment in Helsinki on Eriksgatan 3, where the landlady had a lively, cheerful daughter aged about five or six. Suits complained that the child annoyed him because she often came to his room and asked what the ‘uncle’ was doing. However, Suits also said that it was this same child who had inspired him to write a poem celebrating the joyful, infantile delight of life.⁴¹ The first three stanzas are exhilarating:

Su hele naer mu tuppa äkki põikas,
su hele naer
mu raamatute nukrust läbi lõikas
kui järve aer.

Kaks palmikut ja lohud kenad põskis,
kaks palmikut
ja silmad säravad (need ema mõskis):
kaks salmikut.

Ja karg ja kihk su rõõmsais tantsujalus
ja karg ja kihk:
nüüd mängib tuulispääna terves talus
su elu ihk.

[Your bright laughter swerved into my room,
your bright laughter
cut through the melancholy of my books
like an oar cuts the lake.

Two braids and nice dimples in cheeks,
two braids
and shining eyes (that mother washed):
two little poems.

And leap and zeal in your dancing feet
and leap and zeal:

now like a hurricane moves in the house
your desire for life.]⁴²

Of course, the poem soon becomes moribund again. Suits contrasts the infantile joy with the grief of a man who must 'leina naerdes kanda' [carry his mourning with a smile] and 'vilistades käia Lethe randa | kui langeb öö' [walk by the shore of Lethe, whistling, | in the fall of night]. Such a conceit makes even this poem gloomy, while preserving the borderline ambivalence of affirmation and negation. The joy of life intrudes upon ponderous melancholy, irritating the recluse in his study, yet also rejuvenating him almost against his will.

In *Tuulemaa*, Suits's poetic voice gradually becomes more encrypted, elliptical, and enigmatic. While it is never impenetrable, it rarely becomes self-evident or straight-forward. Something always remains hidden because one line often obscures the previous one and then takes a different turn again. The eponymous poem, 'Tuulemaa', comprises four parts, each part expressing a simple idea – my poetic production is scarce; my revolutionary ideas have failed; I must strive towards the solitary heights; but there a lonely spirit will freeze. However, these simple ideas are expressed in condensed, hermetic language that leaves much room for conjecture. The conclusive lines, 'Vaim üksik vaatlemise leinas kangub | ja üle aja, ruumi tõstleb und' [The lonely spirit freezes in the mournful observation | and uplifts the sleep over time and space] cannot be interpreted unequivocally.⁴³ It has been suggested that the Wuthering Land is a refuge created by the poet himself – a 'homeland without a homeland'.⁴⁴ But it seems to be somewhat bleak and eerie to be a permanent residence.

Perhaps the least controversial poem in the whole collection is 'Vanad noored' [Youth already old],⁴⁵ a nostalgic reflection on revolutionary times when young intellectuals were full of energy, enthusiasm, and fresh ideas. The poem is written in the past tense, describing a period of youthful activism, when anything seemed possible. Suits refers to the youth as 'otsijad, trotsijad katusekambritest' [defiant seekers from the garrets], who never lacked 'suurtest sõnadest, suurtest sõnadest' [the magnificent words, the magnificent words].⁴⁶ This unadorned repetition is not

ironic. Suits evidently does not think that the young seekers of freedom and democracy were wrong. His case is quite the opposite. He believes they were right, and even more right than they could have imagined. They simply could never have known that because acquiring that kind of knowledge takes time. In fact, experience needs time to become what it really is – or, more precisely, what it truly was from the outset. In ‘Kevade aimdus’ [The Anticipation of Spring], Suits confesses to having studied Henri Bergson, comparing his work to ‘mere põhjast helmed’ [pearls from the bottom of the sea].⁴⁷ Bergson’s concept of pure memory appears to underpin the poem philosophically. This makes ‘Vanad noored’ somewhat exceptional.

Conclusion

In Suits’s poetry, nationalism and decadence are united – one could even argue that they are inextricably linked as his poetry would be inconceivable without either. Suits’s poetic language is not a regular Estonian at all – it is an artificial, refined, elliptical, and innovative new creation, containing lavish neologisms, inverted syntax, and an abundance of polysemic shifts. However, Suits believed that he could express all of his revolutionary fervour through this artificial medium. Yet his concept of a revolution is inextricably connected to his vision of national independence.

Suits did not think of himself as a decadent poet and was probably more accustomed to the label ‘neo-Romanticism’, not just because this term tends to ‘hide the connections of foreign impulses’,⁴⁸ but as a Nietzschean who was somewhat uneasy with the notion of decadence. Nonetheless, his body of work aligns perfectly with the broader ideas of decadence at the fin de siècle, and he was not accepting of vanguard movements such as Futurism or Surrealism, which found their way into Estonian literature during and after the First World War.

Autobiographical traits are often clearly visible in Suits’s work. He was a complex character, whose personal ambiguities left a deep imprint on his poetry. This is evident in both his more intimate poems and his revolutionary statements and political sarcasm. Enthusiasm and frustration are often intertwined, and even the most sincere declarations are never definitive. The landscape

can always change, and the youth will change the world, but this youth is already old. For Suits, this realization evokes an overarching sense of melancholy, yet melancholy can also be comforting. There is no permanence – Suits’ universe is one of constant change, so there is no reason to persist in decay or hopelessness. Indeterminacy prevails.

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² See John R. Reed’s oft-quoted description of decadent style, in *Decadent Style* (Ohio University Press, 1988), p. 116.

³ See Eduard Roos, ‘Gustav Suits ja “Eesti Külvaja”’, *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 8 (1974).

⁴ See Leili Iher, *Gustav Suitsu jälil: fakte ja mõtisklusi* (Varrak, 2011), pp. 56-59.

⁵ Gustav Suits, *Vabaduse väraval* (Ilmamaa, 2002), p. 79. All the English translations of Suits’s work are my own.

⁶ Gustav Suits, *Eesti Töömabariik: Eesti Sotsialistide-Revolutsionäride Partei märgukiri Eesti iseseisvuse küsimuses* (Töö ja võitlus, 1918), p. 8. See also Karl Kautsky, *Befreiung der Nationen* (Verlag von J. H. W. Dietz, 1917), p. 46.

⁷ Mati Graf, *Eesti rahvusriik: ideed ja labendused ärkamisajast Eesti Vabariigi sünnini* (Linn, 1993), p. 209. See also Hasso Krull, ‘Luxembourgias: Gustav Suits ja Euroopa Liit’, *Looming*, 12 (2019), pp. 1765-66.

⁸ See Gerald Gillespie, ‘Decadence and Modernism’, in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 333.

⁹ For more discussion see Chris Baldick, ‘Modern Prophetic Poetry and the Decadence of Empires’, in *Decadence and Literature*, pp. 347-48.

¹⁰ ‘Noorte laul’, Gustav Suits, *Elu tuli: laulud 1900–1904* (Weilin & Göös, 1905), p. 9.

¹¹ Epp Annus, ‘Noorte püüded ja rõõmus ajalugu: Gustav Suits ja Friedrich Nietzsche’, *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 7 (2005), p. 529.

¹² ‘Tulevik’, Suits, *Elu tuli*, p. 13.

¹³ ‘Üks ennemuistne jutt’, *ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁴ ‘Ühte laulu tahaks lauda’, *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁵ ‘Mis oli see, mis juba lapsepõlves’, ‘Laulik’, *ibid.*, pp. 35 & 40.

¹⁶ ‘Meri’, *ibid.*, p. 42-43.

¹⁷ Mart Mäger, ‘Väliseid vastuhelke ‘Elu tules’ (Sandor Petöfi – Gustav Suits)’, *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 1 (1975), pp. 10-11.

¹⁸ ‘Pöörase laul’, Suits, *Elu tuli*, p. 57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁰ The tendency to glorify madness and rage is equally observable in Finnish decadent prose. For more discussion see ‘Passions against the Grain: Decadent Emotions in Finnish Wilderness’, in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riika Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Routledge, 2020), p. 118.

²¹ ‘Meri’, Suits, *Elu tuli*, pp. 41-43.

²² Nigol Andresen, ‘Elu tuli: Gustav Suitsu tule luulesse’, *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 10 (1977), p. 605.

²³ ‘Elu tuli’, Suits, *Elu tuli*, p. 1.

²⁴ See Eino Leino, *Talviyö: runoja* (Otava, 1905), pp. 10-11. The date under the poem is 1903.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁶ Aino Thauvón-Suits, *Gustav Suitsu noorus kirjade, luuletuste ja mälestuste põhjal* (Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv, 1964), p. 30.

²⁷ Eugene W. Holland, *Baudelaire and Schizoanalysis: The Sociopoetics of Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 173 & 276.

²⁸ Aino Kallas, *Nuori-Viro: muotokuvia ja suuntaviivoja* (Otava, 1918), p. 67.

²⁹ Iher, *Gustav Suitsu jälil*, pp. 66-81.

³⁰ Gustav Suits, ‘Meie kunstnikkudest ja nende töövõimalustest II’, *Päevaleht*, 146 (2012).

³¹ Iher, *Gustav Suitsu jälil*, p. 370.

³² ‘Laul Eestist’, Gustav Suits, *Tuulemaa: luuletused 1905–1912* (Noor-Eesti, 1913), pp. 15-16.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁴ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, ‘Nordic Cultures: From Wilderness to Metropolitan Decadence’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 222.

³⁵ The speaking subject in the poem is not first-person singular but plural and Suits seems to identify with an anonymous community. However, the implicit relation to the context of the utterance cannot be obscured: the poet is obviously expressing his personal feelings under the guise of an impersonal subject.

³⁶ Kallas, *Nuori-Viro*, p. 86.

³⁷ See Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Decadent Modernism and the Imprint of Taine in Aino Kallas' Young Estonia: Portraits and Trajectories', in Aino Kallas: Negotiations with Modernity, ed. by Leena Kurvet-Käosaar and Lea Rojola (Finnish Literature Society, 2011), p. 70.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Aino Kallas, *Päiväkirja vuosilta 1907–1915* (Otava, 1954), p. 90.

⁴⁰ Thauvón-Suits, *Gustav Suitsu noorus*, pp. 270-89.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁴² 'Ühele lapsele', Suits, *Tuulemaa*, p. 49 & 50.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁴ Nigol Andresen, 'Tuulemaa: pilguheite Gustav Suitsu luule teise perioodi', *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 11 (1973), p. 662.

⁴⁵ The Estonian title of the poem is 'Vanad noored'. This is untranslatable, because *vanad* is a plural form of the adjective 'old' and *noored* is a plural form of the adjective 'young'. Both adjectives can take the position of substantives, but here the emphasis lingers on *noored*, so that it can mean either 1) young people who have grown old, 2) old people who have been young, or 3) the people who are still young despite being old. However, from this conundrum we can also derive one more meaning, 4) young people already old while still being young. Here I have relied on the fourth possible meaning in my translation of the title because of its Bergsonian echoes and the retroactive implications of the poem.

⁴⁶ 'Vanad noored', Suits, *Tuulemaa*, pp. 29-30.

⁴⁷ 'Kevade aimdus', *ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴⁸ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riika Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková and Mirjam Hinrikus 'Decadence in Nordic Literature: An Overview', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, p. 4.