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Corresponding author:
Jaan Undusk
jaan@instlit.ee

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From life to labyrinth. The cumulative universe of Arvo Valton

Jaan Undusk

Under and Tuglas Literary Institute of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, Kohtu 6, 10130 Tallinn

ABSTRACT

Arvo Valton was one of the most prolific authors in Estonian literature, practicing in almost all modes of expression. Both his creative psychology and the stylistic strategy of his writing are described in this article as following the cumulative principle. This means, firstly, the dominance of the act of writing over the perfect work of art. For example, Valton could produce a shorter and a longer version of the same story. That, in turn, means that one cannot detect any single central work in his production. Secondly, the poetic structure of Valton's texts is also basically cumulative. He composes for the most part horizontally, without vertical gradations up and down – and continues with weird writing. A banal situation turns out to be a puzzle: in a railway station, a man with a green rucksack starts reading a book out loud, causing a complete chaos in the authoritarian society of that period. A respectable judge goes home and simply barks like a dog for half an hour every day. I call the turning point in an everyday reality the superimposition of a labyrinth. The labyrinth can disappear as suddenly as it appears, or it can stay forever. The only message is that life is an existential problem arising from the banality of everyday experience. This type of composition works well in the form of a short story. In a longer text, the use of such alienation effects seems to lose its impact. The Valtonian type of short story was one of the most important achievements in the Estonian prose renewal of the 1960s and 1970s. Valton's Marxist critics honoured him with the title 'the first existentialist writer in Estonia'. Essentially, his short stories are parables, at the heart of which one can often discover an aphorism in the form of a paradox.

Introduction

Arvo Valton (1935–2024) was one of the most prolific authors in the Estonian language, practicing in almost all modes of expression, a master of absurdist parables, and, according to his Marxist critics, 'the first existentialist writer in Estonia'. In this essay, both his creative psychology and the stylistic strategy of his writing are described as following the cumulative principle.

Total writer

Valton passed away two years ago. His *Kogutud teosed* (*Collected Works*) were published over the course of more than a quarter century (1998–2024) in 31 volumes on roughly 15 000 pages. In terms of the number of volumes, Valton is surpassed only by Eduard Vilde, the classic of Estonian realist narrative prose. Vilde's *Kogutud teosed* were published in 33 volumes in 1923–1935. Yet the average thickness of the volumes of Valton's *Kogutud teosed* is nearly 500 pages, mostly at least twice as bulky as Vilde's volumes (the overall page count of his collected works is about 7500). Perhaps only one author has an even more extensive collection of works in the Estonian language and that is Vladimir Ulyanov, with the pen-name Lenin. His *Teosed* (*Works*), translated from Russian, were published in Estonia in 45 volumes in 1948–1970. The comparison is, of course, inappropriate in the sense that Lenin's works were supposed to be the basis for Bolshevik ideology of the totalitarian state, whereas Valton's works deal with caricaturing and demolishing totalitarian ideologies.

The sheer quantity of Valton's works is the sign of a very productive writer who could work extremely quickly, as was also the case with Vilde. Vilde characterised his early literary production with the concept 'compulsive over-productivity' (Wilde 1923, p. 6), conditioned by the fact that, alongside everything else, newspapers demanded widely read serials from him. He had to submit them from issue to issue – sometimes without even knowing what would happen in the next episode of the story. Valton was under no such pressure, although, as a freelancer, he sometimes had to earn a living for himself and his family by writing. But that was not the main thing. While Vilde attributed the stylistic shortcomings of his works to the chronic

lack of time caused by newspaper deadlines, the stylistic relaxation in Valton's works, which started emerging towards the end of the 1970s, was due more to changes in the author's aesthetic – or perhaps, to an even greater extent, his ethical perceptions. The priority of writing increasingly replaced the priority of the work of art. The writer's task is not to prepare texts that are as perfect as possible but rather to continue and not interrupt the process of writing – to write down everything that seems unavoidable. The work of art must not be allowed to start ruling the ethical conscience of the writer.

I have spoken elsewhere about the motif of 'continuity of writing' in connection with Jaan Kross (Undusk 2016a, pp. 666–673). Consistent daily work on unfinished texts and writing discipline governed that writer's ethics. Only this could ensure both the sustained completion of his works and their high quality. Kross needed a dedicated chamber to write – a room of his own, a well set-up space. He did not work in random places or on the move. While Kross was disciplined, Valton was more of an undisciplined producer of text. Overall, it could be said that he was a total writer. By all accounts, Valton worked indiscriminately – in the best sense of the word. He could write on trains and at railway stations, on planes and on board ships, on refrigerators, if need be, or even in the toilet. The totality of his writing calls to mind Jaan Oks (1884–1918), an earlier Estonian writer who died young. Instead of refining his text, he started rewriting it, so to speak, which resulted in an entirely new story (Tuglas 2009, pp. 347–348). Valton told his interviewer in 1980: 'Maybe it's superficiality, and it probably comes from my nature, but I've learned that it's best to toss it aside right away, if you feel the story isn't any good, and write a new one, even on the same theme' (Köst 1986, p. 128). Hence – no need to waste time on refining, rather set your sights on the next story that you are already mulling in your mind. For Valton, consistency in writing did not mean the duration of tinkering with one work of art but rather the continuous flow of ever more new texts. Refinement amplified the aesthetic autonomy of the text and increased its formal isolation. That did not kindle Valton's imagination. His passion was rather the uninterrupted reproduction of texts, the appetite within the text itself for the next – and perhaps even better – text.

In that sense, Valton can be considered a motherly creator. Conspicuously masculine in his outward manner, as he himself loved to stress ('I like women and the only problem is that practically no woman would like the fact that I like other women as well' – Valton Vallikivi 2014a, pp. 85–86), as a writer he represented rather a motherly production principle: you simply have to let children come, and they are all equally beloved regardless of whether their procreation was easy or their birth difficult, whether they turned out comely or homely. The writer's duty is to activate his full writing potential, to give the world as much as possible. On a tangential note, erotica and sexual pleasure have no particular value in Valton's works. Instead, they follow a clearer aim: mostly children, of course, that is to say, the nation's offspring. Or it is a physical way of substantiating freedom, loyalty, and a sense of duty. 'The sexual sphere in Valton's stories is prevalently functional, that is, it is associated with procreation', Mihkel Mutt once observed (1986, p. 249).

An older male character dreams during sex that 'life will sprout inside the woman from his sperm', but a young lover also mulls thoughts of 'the completely clear need with no mystery to continue life in a nasty, contradictory, eternally fighting world, where it is eternally unknown in what direction it will develop and what it will become' (Valton 1972, p. 169; Valton 1968a, p. 23). So, while being emphatically masculine in his outward manner, Valton's subconsciousness appears to represent a more primeval feminine joy of procreation. Valton himself said that he did not tolerate any kind of violence, which in and of itself is a humanly likeable trait: 'I never kill any single bug or animal if it doesn't attack me first […]' (Valton Vallikivi 2014a, p. 160). 'Good must defeat evil, and every story must have a happy ending', he says with a slight smile but is actually expressing his credo (Valton 1972, p. 13). That motherly trait adds to the writer the conciliatory disposition of a teller of fairy tales but somewhat weakens the expressiveness of his poetic world.

And thus it happened that while Eduard Vilde had more or less completed his creative work by the time he turned 50, having finished his last novel *Mäeküla piimamees* (*The Milkman of Mäeküla*, 1915), the 50-year-old Valton shifted his typewriter into overdrive and operated as a knight of the pen probably until his last breath, when he left this world at the age of 88. The quantity of his production in his later decades exceeded that of his earlier writings, and there was a political reason for that: Valton turned 50 in 1985, when the reign of Mikhail Gorbachev began in the Soviet Union and when *perestroika* and *glasnost* became catchwords. The writer's field of work broadened thematically as well as in terms of mentality. In short – long-awaited, but actually so unexpected, freedom arrived, when one could soon write exactly the way one's soul yearned to. Valton realised, perhaps better than quite a few others, that this was not only an opportunity for a writer but also a duty – a duty to put down on paper that which previously could only be spoken of in parables. Whether that also meant a path to new creative triumphs is the next psychologically sensitive question – because Valton was first and foremost a master of parables.

What again likened Arvo Valton and Eduard Vilde was diligence in preparing the collection of works expressing their last will. In Estonian literature, three prosaists have stood out for exercising, so to speak, a divine providence over their oeuvre for the sake of future generations: Eduard Vilde, Friedebert Tuglas, and Arvo Valton. They have all been passionate about personally forming with their own hands the final version of their author's canon that would go down in history. That could also prove to be a dangerous activity. Vilde's most conspicuous principle (besides modernising the original, sometimes a bit outmoded language of his stories) was simply leaving many texts out of his author's canon – the 33 volumes of his collected works did not by far include everything that readers would have yearned to see. Tuglas's principle was 'densification of content and form', meaning actually the compositional and stylistic 'correction' of texts.

In one of his interviews from 2011, Valton was clearly against that: 'In principle, I don't rewrite things. It's nonsense if an 80-year-old writer revises something he had put down on paper as a 15-year-old – like Tuglas did with his *Hunt* (*Wolf*)' (Valton Vallikivi 2014a, p. 449).[1] Tuglas unfortunately damaged himself by such a principle because he revised all of his works during and after Stalin's terrorist rule in the 1950s, when his inner censor forced him to remove details and words from his texts that could seem politically dangerous and become obstacles to their possible reprints. Such 'stylistic correction' sometimes led to serious mutilations and flattened out quite a few of Tuglas's key texts (Undusk 2009).

Valton had no external pressure or subjective desire to stylistically or ideologically 'improve' his collected works. In some sense, he still went the farthest in preparing them since he did not choose the path of narrowing the number of his texts but rather of expanding them. While Vilde left quite lengthy, previously issued products out of his *Kogutud teosed*, Valton not only included in his own all that had been published previously but, starting with the first volume, also added extensive parts from manuscripts. In shaping his creative canon, he did not proceed from the principle of aesthetic perfection but rather of quantitative completeness, i.e. that everything possible he had ever put on paper as a writer would be assembled between the book covers. That could be referred to as the cumulative principle, and I will return to that. Valton initially planned to stop at 24 volumes and devote the decade that proved to be the last one of his life to translating the literature of Finno-Ugric kindred peoples (Valton Vallikivi 2014a, p. 468). However, his total writer urges forced him to break this promise, and, in the time left for him, he filled seven fat volumes with original writings.

So, Valton dug hitherto unpublished texts out of the bottoms of drawers for his *Kogutud teosed*. They evidently do not add anything very valuable to his production in the aesthetic sense, but they might contain key elements for those who in the future will start studying the logic of Valton's creative work – valuable psychological material. As a creative person, he probably felt a touch of vanity in bringing weaker texts before the public (see how much unpublished material I have!), but I speculate that in Valton's case, an engineer's thinking, a practical approach, contributed somewhat: if these texts have already been written at some point, why not print them in collected works. They are after all collected, not selected, works. And why should future scholars have to search dusty manuscripts in the archives when it would be far more convenient to read them between the covers of a book?

Furthermore, while Tuglas aspired towards a single definitive version of his stories, destroying rough drafts and parallel versions, Valton could create several variants of some of his narratives, and, as each was the last expression of the author's will, all of them were part of his creative canon. For instance, Valton published the short story *Üks tund võitleva ateistiga* (*One Hour with a Militant Atheist*) with key differences in two successive collections of short stories, *Kaheksa jaapanlannat* (*Eight Japanese Women*, 1968) and *Sõnumitooja* (*Messenger*, 1972). Both variants are in the third volume of his *Kogutud teosed*, and readers can choose which of them they like best – in the author's opinion, they both have an equal right to life. *Aruanne* (*Report*) is another short story in *Kaheksa jaapanlannat*. It was included in the first volume of the two-volume *Valitud teosed* (*Selected Works*, 1984) in a slightly reworked form under the title *Inimene* (*Human Being*) and later inserted into his *Kogutud teosed* in its original form under its original title.

But Valton did not stop there. He supplied the volumes of his *Kogutud teosed* with bibliographies and detailed authorial commentaries. Moreover, he commissioned a postscript for each book from a different person; sometimes there were even several of them. Thus, his collected works contain a rich metalevel: insights into Valton's creative work by more than 30 Estonian men and women of letters. The only one with two afterwords in the *Kogutud teosed* is Pärt Lias, evidently Valton's most enthusiastic and devoted exponent in the 1970s and 1980s, who wrote a substantial chapter on Valton in *Eesti kirjanduse ajalugu* (*History of Estonian Literature*; Lias 1991), which is perhaps among the best texts that Lias has ever written (see also Valton Vallikivi 2020, pp. 323–324). One reason for Valton's vigorous self-canonisation could have been the fact that the Estonian literary audience – as that same Pärt Lias mentions – was unable to find a place for him in literary history, or a way to canonise him, although he was widely known and read (Lias 1991, p. 448). That assessment, divulged at the dawn of the new political freedom, referred of course to Valton's creative work from the period of Soviet occupation but did not necessarily lose its validity later. Valton's textual world swelled so large and spilled over so broadly that nobody ventured to start defining its meaning. So the author himself had to undertake the positioning of his production, all the more so since he had good personal archives, precisely recorded accounts of how the works came about, publication data, and a chronicle of critical reviews.

The large group of postscript writers balances out Valton's personal initiative in shaping his literary reputation. Valton gave them a free hand and did not try to censor their opinions, even if they were not all laudatory. So, for instance, Haljand Udam mused upon his historical short stories: 'Arvo Valton has the peculiar ability to develop […] a kernel and a crust found from a history book into a story that sounds modern. […] his stories very often go too far in that respect; their quantity becomes tiresome. The first writer that comes to mind regarding what has been described above is the Argentinian J. L. Borges, who mostly knows how to end his stories much faster. Valton loves his text and doesn't want to leave it so easily' (Udam 2003, p. 407). That is an accurate observation, and Valton probably agreed with it tacitly. Writing as a process – text production – dominates in him over the work as a unit of composition. On the one hand, that demonstrates the authenticity of writing: the text carries itself on its own strength. It needs no help from an artificial fertiliser. On the

[1] Valton was apparently referring to Tuglas's short story *Siil* (*Hedgehog*), which Tuglas had published at the age of 15 in 1901, and which he reworked exactly 50 years later.

other hand, the author's self-control, based on the intuition of the entelechy of the work as a whole, is often relatively slack – and even more so for the later Valton, who preferred lengthier texts.

At Valton's request, I wrote the postscript for the 28th volume of his collected works, which contained new material from his later period in the years 2018–2020. But that did not inspire me so much, and I felt the need to alert the reader to something altogether different, namely the importance of early Valton as an iconic character in Estonia's cultural scene. And so I wrote about how Valton came into my life in my boyhood and youth at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s, half a century ago. Along those lines, I wrote rather of what my soul yearned for, at times focusing on seemingly secondary aspects, such as the importance of Edgar Valter's illustrations for *Kaheksa jaapanlannat* (Undusk 2021). As far as I could tell, my text surprised, perhaps even disappointed Valton a little, but I remember his voice as I heard it through the telephone after he first read it: 'You can't prohibit a creative person if he wants to write like that'. He even repeated it several times over. And I was grateful to him for that liberality. A tolerant attitude towards writing differently was surely part of Valton's artistic credo.

The elusive centre of creation

The vast body of text that Valton has left us, covering all literary genres (in his old age, Valton even wrote out his own brief conspectus of the history of philosophy from the Persian prophet Zarathustra to Ludwig Wittgenstein, which is knowledgeable in every respect – Valton Vallikivi 2020, pp. 365–390), stands before us like a mountain and we have to find some place and meaning for it. One way to do that would be to identify a central text within the author's oeuvre. A central text does not necessarily have to be the most celebrated, the most widely read, the most translated, or the thickest book. It does have to convey the writer's world view and the core of his aesthetics, his ethical positions, the main aim of his artistic quests, and the inner glow of the author as a creative individual.

If we take this approach, we are suddenly left empty-handed because there is no clearly distinctive centre in Valton's creative work, such as *Kevade* (*Spring*) by Oskar Luts, *Tõde ja õigus* (*Truth and Justice*) by A. H. Tammsaare, *Toomas Nipernaadi* by August Gailit, *Kolme katku vahel* (*Between Three Plagues*) by Jaan Kross, and *Sügisball* (*Autumn Ball*) by Mati Unt. Or also *Hingede öö* (*Night of Souls*, 1953), a novel published by Karl Ristikivi in political exile in Sweden, exceptional in its surrealist mode but still central in that author's oeuvre – and a work that evidently strongly influenced Valton's literary expeditions of discovery. Valton himself says: 'I consider Karl Ristikivi the best Estonian writer of all time. Of course, such an assessment is namely my own and everybody else can think differently. *Hingede öö* especially moved me when I read it for the first time' (Valton Vallikivi 2020, p. 261; see also Belobrovtseva 2024, pp. 46–47). The confession is one hundred per cent believable because the spirit of *Hingede öö* – a kind of rational mysteriousness, life as wandering through a house with an enigmatic structure, where the rooms are filled with acquaintances but which you can never leave – could characterise a large proportion of Valton's own creative work. Furthermore, as a writer on historical themes, Valton ultimately found his calling after he had read Ristikivi's collection of historical short stories entitled *Sigtuna väravad* (*Gates of Sigtuna*, 1968), under the influence of which he wrote the short story *Vanad arved* (*Old Scores*) in 1971, which appeared in *Õukondlik mäng* (*Court Game*, 1972), after which came other works that reached back into history. Ristikivi was the first outstanding Estonian prosaist who chose the subjects of his novels and stories from the history of distant lands and cultures, and Valton became his first disciple in that field. The disciple himself has observed that 'Ristikivi and I are both from flat Lääne County, from where probably fewer writers have come than from any other Estonian county' (Valton Vallikivi 2003a, p. 419). Yet despite their affinity, Valton apparently did not write his own *Hingede öö*.

The most successful Estonian film of all time, *Viimne reliikvia* (*The Last Relic*, director Grigori Kromanov), premiered at the Kosmos, Tallinn's finest cinema at the time, in the spring of 1970. Arvo Valton had written its screenplay based on Eduard Bornhöhe's story *Vürst Gabriel ehk Pirita kloostri viimsed päevad* (*Prince Gabriel, or The Last Days of Pirita Convent*, 1893). That was Valton's diploma work as a correspondence student in film dramaturgy at the highly sought after Cinematography Institute in Moscow. The film's future fame already preceded it. People came to enjoy knightly romance and eroticism in the bosom of Estonia's midsummer nature. Viewers streamed to Tallinn even from southern Estonia and Latvia (the main female character was the enchanting Latvian actress Ingrīda Andriņa – in dresses, suits, and naked). Long ticket queues meandered in front of the cinema, which was already sold out a couple of weeks in advance. For 10- to 15-year-olds, the combined effect of music and moving pictures overshadowed everything else in the film in a way that some years later was experienced perhaps only in Federico Fellini's *Amarcord*. The film's most famous song 'Põgene, vaba laps' ('Flee, Free Child') became a refrain for living. We ascribed it to the magical effect of music, and we ourselves did not yet grasp how greatly the message of freedom, penned by the author of the lyrics, Paul-Eerik Rummo, synchronised with the music composed by Uno and Tõnu Naissoo, father and son. We boys and girls did not yet exactly realise how great our yearning for freedom was!

Spring turned into summer, then came autumn, and I entered the fifth grade. According to the custom of that time, children had to bring their new textbooks home ten or so days before the school year began. So, in August 1970, I carried home the new fifth-grade *Kirjanduse lugemik* (*Literature Reader*), which contained a surprise. It provided a glance into the 'secrets of the art of film', and six pages of Arvo Valton's screenplay for *Viimne reliikvia* were printed in it. That was the technical version, so to speak, of the film's scenario, which indicated the scene number, its shot size (from wide shot to close-up), and the content of the scene. I quickly read through the screenplay excerpt together with the included

photographs. It made me yearn to do something similar. Valton's name started associating with something desirable: sweet freedom, the last relic.

But on the whole, Valton's name as the screenwriter of *Viimne reliikvia* remained widely unknown to the general public. The disposition of Valton himself doubtless affected that. As it retrospectively turned out, changes made in the screenplay without the author's consent infuriated him. According to Valton, Lennart Meri, the film's story editor at that time, who later became President of the Republic of Estonia, was behind them. Valton's main criticism was that, following Bornhöhe's example, the negatively depicted leader of the rebel gang was given the name Ivo Schenkenberg, the leader of an Estonian resistance group at the time of the Livonian War (1558–1583) (Valton Vallikivi 2014a, pp. 452, 456; Valton Vallikivi 2020, p. 292). Schenkenberg's band of several hundred men had fought against the Russians, which naturally made the filmmakers cautious. But Schenkenberg had been one of the national heroes of Valton's youth under the influence of historical novels by Enn Kippel and Edgar Valter Saks published in 1936. The fact that a man with that name mutated into a scoundrel in a screenplay with his signature vexed Valton for the rest of his life. In 2018, he published the novel *Üks päev Ivo Schenkenbergi elust* (*A Day in the Life of Ivo Schenkenberg*) to rehabilitate himself and said in that same year, when he received the Jaan Kross literary award: 'I admit that I wrote this novel with the wish to make amends for the wrong that has been inflicted on my soul by the film regardless of my will' (Valton 2018; see also Valton Vallikivi 2019, pp. 381–382). Thus, *Viimne reliikvia* is the most famous work of art connected to Valton's name, but Valton distanced himself from it.

We evidently cannot see the centre of his creative work in any single one of Valton's novels. The first of them, however, merits consideration. His debut novel, *Tee lõpmatuse teise otsa* (*Road to the Other End of Infinity*), published in 1978, coincided well with the arrival of the high point of enthusiasm in Estonia for Oriental philosophy. After the years of Stalin's terror, attempts were made to find humane traits, the potential for some kind of socialism with a human face, in the utopian rationalism of imposed Marxism. Yet after the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968, it became clear that there was no hope for its implementation in the Soviet Union, which had fallen into the grip of stagnation. Various forms of counterculture, rock music, and the hippie movement amplified Oriental yearnings. The sacred Buddhist book *Dhammapada* reached Estonian readers in Linnart Mäll's translation in 1977, followed by the foundational Taoist text *Daodejing*, the Hindu *Bhagavadgītā*, and several others. Valton's novel brings together the extremes of power and of the spiritual world, the ruler of the world Genghis Khan and the Taoist monk Chang Chun. It inspired not so much professional criticism, which all in all was still commendatory, as university students, especially in Tartu, where the university's Cabinet of Oriental Studies was one of the main centres of the free exchange of ideas. Valton created excitement by proving the simple fact that a writer living here and now in Estonia can write a novel about ancient cultures that captivates the young people of his time who are seeking the fragile meaning of life. Mika Waltari had accomplished that in Finland decades earlier when he published his main work *Sinuhe egyptiläinen* (*Sinuhe the Egyptian*, 1945). Linnart Mäll, the key figure of that time at the Cabinet of Oriental Studies, has in retrospect conceded that *Tee lõpmatuse teise otsa* is 'Estonia's best novel on the East' (Mäll 2005, p. 463). The historian-writer Tiit Aleksejev sovereignly recapitulates that 'One single prose work would have been enough for Arvo Valton to leave his mark on Estonian literature, which, needless to say, is *Tee lõpmatuse teise otsa*' (Aleksejev 2019, p. 377). Here Aleksejev lets us perceive that in 1978, the 'marvellous year' for Estonian historical literature, when *Keisri hull* (*The Tsar's Madman*), the breakthrough work in the world abroad by Jaan Kross, and Leo Metsar's *Keiser Julianus* (*Caesar Julianus*) were both published, Valton's novel proved to be the most broad-minded glimpse into the kernel of life. Indeed, it deals with the form of eternity that is the closest, the dearest, and at the same time the most unattainable for humans – in other words, immortality.

Contemporary criticism was somewhat less enthusiastic when the novel was published, if not to say fluctuating. 'I don't recall any other novel in recent years that brought up such ambivalent thoughts and feelings', admitted Linnart Mäll at the time, as he viewed it through the lens of an Orientalist (1979, p. 740). Yet even aesthetes were at a loss to respond. A lengthy essayistic review by the poet Hando Runnel, Valton's confidant among Estonian writers, was expressive in that sense. This was Runnel's first attempt to dissect Valton's creative work. The push-pull principle pervades it throughout. The carrot alternates with the stick, and the reader cannot fathom what exactly the novel has offered to the critic (Runnel 1984, pp. 182–195). While Mäll speaks of the need for a deeper dive and Runnel speaks of Valton's impatience, Pärt Lias criticises the novel's artificiality and static nature. Yet as a theoretician, he finds a lifeline for Valton's method – he sees it as an altogether new type of novel, a historical-philosophical fresco (Lias 1979, p. 368). In any case, with his first novel, Valton had strikingly brought Estonian literature into the mentality of Eastern peoples, among whom linguistically kindred Finno-Ugric peoples later became his true devotion. *Tee lõpmatuse teise otsa* is Valton's most important novel, but it nonetheless probably did not become his *Hingede öö* or *Sinuhe*, the crown of his creative work, because Valton rushed onwards in new directions and did not stop to fortify the position he had seemingly won.

Under the influence of reviews, Valton retrospectively christened *Arvid Silberi maailmareis* (*Arvid Silber's Trip Around the World*), published in 1984, a novel. It consists of ten short stories, in each of which a couple of lovers takes a fantastic trip to a city in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Germany, Greece, Brazil, or Hawaii. But there is actually no trace of those cities in the stories, and their names are random. There are even no trips, only talking about trips and about everything else in the world, and it takes place in a dreamlike, discontinuous time and mutating space. People have tried to comprehend this verbally rambling work, which, according

to a perhaps somewhat exaggerated assessment, is 'one of the most characteristic representatives of the 20th-century modernist novel' in Estonian literature (Lias 1991, p. 458). Numerous lofty terms have been used to describe it, linking it with the surrealist (Valton himself embraced that) or the magical-realist novel (Talvet 2005, pp. 469–472). But perhaps it would be even more informative to sum up its basic content the way Astrid Reinla did back in the day: 'Somebody (Arvid Silber? Karl Beuve?) went (?) somewhere (Riga? Budapest? Athens?) and every time met a woman (women?) there named Ilma (?)' (Reinla 1984). A large proportion of the work consists of dialogues between a man and a woman in all sorts of combinations (father and daughter, mother and son, husband and wife). It is as if the subconscious minds of two people run together and intermingle. The book can be considered a paragon of chaotic text, but upon exiting from it, the reader is doubtless left with the taste of some kind of psychological veracity, of how chaotic, fragile, and conjectural human contact is, even between two lovers, and ultimately how solitary each of us is. *Arvid Silberi maailmareis* is evidently acceptable to few as a work of art, but even so, it has been translated into several languages, including Dutch (1991), German (1995), and in part into French (Valton Vallikivi 2005, p. 475). A favourable review of the book appeared in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, one of the most important German newspapers (Hasselblatt 2011, p. 357). Mihkel Mutt has struck upon something intrinsic to Valton in reviewing his Arvid stories: 'If everything mutually relativises, it loses a tad of its effect' (Mutt 1981, p. 1332). If every fantastic transition from one situation to another is already allowed as a presumption, then the text's surprise value fades. That is a danger of Valton's writing style in quite a few other works.

Valton himself considered his best book to be a series of narrations, which almost no ordinary reader knows and regarding which critics have once again been bewildered (Valton Vallikivi 2006a, p. 514; Valton Vallikivi 2014a, p. 171). *Pildikesi filosoofi, prohveti, kunstniku, poeedi elust* (*Pictures from the Life of a Philosopher, Prophet, Artist, Poet*, 1992) contains four short novels on the life of intellectual aristocrats: *In-Sei elu ja töö* (*In-Sei's Life and Work*), *O-geni usk ja kannatus* (*O-gen's Faith and Suffering*), *Te-wangi tõus ja mõõn* (*Te-wang's Ebb and Flow)*, and *Co-co ekstaas ja tüdimus* (*Co-co's Ecstasy and Tedium*). Three of those stories were written in the latter half of the 1980s, but *In-Sei elu ja töö* merits the most attention. Valton had already put it down on paper in 1968, and when he had completed it, he felt he was mature as a writer, so it was time to become a freelancer. That is what he did – but the work, which had already been cast in lead and was to be published in the *Loomingu Raamatukogu* (*Looming Library*) series at the start of 1969, was not printed. Recall that Moscow had asserted military control of political power in Czechoslovakia in August 1968 with the support of Red Army troops and more than 6000 tanks, after which ideological supervision was of course 'enhanced' in Estonia as well. *In-Sei elu ja töö* got stuck in the narrow gate of censorship on its second attempt in 1981 as well, and that remained so for the whole subsequent decade (see Valton Vallikivi 2000, p. 447; Valton Vallikivi 2003a, p. 427). Hando Runnel had rated the novel's manuscript highly in 1979 and hoped that it would go to print right away: 'That manuscript, a milestone in the writer's biography, which represented all his creative tendencies and repertoires of devices, was halted and left waiting – waiting to make it into print, now at least as a literary historical document, as a publication'. But since nothing came of this 'literary historical publication' either at that time, the sentence was cut out of the book version of Runnel's review in 1984, and, for some reason, a (hypocritical?) question mark was placed after the name In-Sei (cf. Runnel 1979, p. 745 and Runnel 1984, p. 186).

Had *In-Sei elu ja töö* really been published in 1969, it could have created a literary and political sensation. Despite the main character's Oriental-sounding name, the novel's setting seems more likely to be Europe. After ending up in prison, In-Sei starts writing his vulgar anarchist tract in his cell between the lines of a work by the dictator Rasmus the Great. He writes how 'everything changes and is simultaneously many, nothing is definite, chance makes the selection', 'the houses of cards of dialectics disappear into the historical trash, two is only a little more than one', 'viewpoints are equally valuable', 'the materialist and the idealist need one another to make fun of the other', etc. (Valton 1992, pp. 14, 15, 22). He even turns his world view into a formula, namely the total functional dependence formula: 'x = f (y, z, a, b, u ... n), where y = f (x, g, p, z, a ... m) and so on, where we see feedback, recurrence, and the fact that we have no idea of most factors, so the round dance is insolvable from whichever end' (Valton 1992, p. 23). The fact that In-Sei purely physically writes 'between the lines' is symptomatic because people had to read the message of honest literature in the Soviet era 'between the lines'. One goal of his tract was evidently to parody Marxist-Leninist 'dialectical style', with the political implementation of which everyone who seemed to be inconvenient for the authorities, regardless of whether they were labelled nationalists or cosmopolitans – or both simultaneously – could be handcuffed or beheaded (see Undusk 2016b). The prison reality into which In-Sei is closed off is also 'dialectical' to the extreme, so that the prisoners and prison guards switch roles, and in the dark of night, everyone gropes for a way out of the building, the door of which nobody can find. The work ends with the public execution of In-Sei.

Had it been published in 1969 and inevitably projected onto the background of the bloody events in Czechoslovakia or simply of Soviet philosophical-political rhetoric, this work would have hit the mark precisely with its between-the-lines allegory: authoritarian society is a prison where the guards and those they guard are both victims, and where a consciousness of power that is not only irrational but ultimately impersonal plays with words in whatever way it pleases. A quarter-century later, its critical reception demonstrated that the reviewers were unable (or did not want?) to read that work through a political prism anymore; it was of no interest to them as an aesthetic or philosophical manifesto either. Haljand Udam, for instance, confessed that he had long feared Valton's lengthier texts because they proceed uniformly like

a camel caravan towards the horizon without producing enjoyment from reading them. Even Astrid Reinla, who is generally well-disposed towards Valton, advises readers not to delve too deeply into Valton's 'chaotic universe', although its unknowability is something that alongside dejection can also arouse hope (Reinla 1993; Udam 1993).

Masendus ja lootus (*Dejection and Hope*, 1989) is exactly the title of Valton's most voluminous novel. The work itself reflects the five years the author spent in Siberia. In the course of the Soviet deportation carried out in March 1949, the 13-year-old Arvo was sent into forced Siberian exile together with his parents. He had to continue his studies in Russian, first in Novosibirsk Oblast and thereafter Magadan Oblast. After turning 18 and completing secondary school in Siberia, he was allowed to return to Estonia in 1954, when he set about acquiring the mining engineer profession at the Tallinn Polytechnical Institute. While, for instance, the years Jaan Kross spent in prison and banishment were relatively well known to the public, Siberia initially did not extend to Valton's generally known biography. In the *Eesti kirjanduse biograafiline leksikon* (*Biographical Lexicon of Estonian Literature*), published in 1975, it is written next to Kross's name that he 'was' (what an innocent euphemism!) in the Komi Autonomous Republic and Krasnoyarsk Krai for a certain number of years. However, Valton's secondary school years are simply forgotten in his biography, and in their place is an information gap, creating the impression that a man with an elementary education went straight into the technical university!

Valton himself did not make a display of his Siberian experience, and there was a faint glimmer of it in only a few of his works. He hinted at it for perhaps the first time in his saddest and most beautiful collection of short stories *Läbi unemaastike* (*Through Dream Landscapes*), where texts in italics are all inserts based on memories. In one of them, entitled *Mõte* (*Thought*), we find a laconically sketched landscape: 'A road along a frozen river, 55 degrees below zero, a schoolhouse' (Valton 1975, p. 61). Valton even experienced temperatures of minus 64 degrees in the settlement of Susuman in Magadan Oblast, where he attended school for half a year (Valton Vallikivi 2014a, pp. 103, 132). He knowingly wrote his Siberia novel in 1983–1984 not for publication because there was no hope of it. Thereafter he duplicated the manuscript, hid it in various places, and finally sent it with friends on a microfilm to California and Australia, just in case (Valton Vallikivi 2006b, pp. 565–566; Valton Vallikivi 2014b, p. 372). Yet its publishing time arrived faster than could be expected. Kalle Kurg has called this work Valton's unique 'turning away' from himself because stylistically it is anything but the above-mentioned reflections of his 'chaotic universe' or Valton's allegorical short stories, to which we shall return (Kurg 2006, pp. 555–556). The author's aim appears to have been to deny any sort of literariness, intrigue, and fabulation, as well as figurative speech, polysemy, emotional pathos, and symbolic levels that would require interpretation and thus introduce the discretion of the writer or reader. He wants to write white, colourless text, put things in their temporal sequence, and present the complete record, so to speak, of what happened to 44 Estonians and the five children born to them in Siberia. Hence, it is evidently the most comprehensive account in prose literature to this day of the deportation carried out in 1949 (Hinrikus 1990, p. 553). Maie Kalda has – perhaps somewhat ironically – called this 600-page magnum opus an 'encyclopaedia of deportation' because it contains an abundance of illustrative morsels of the life and conditions of Estonians in Siberia for all sorts of school readers (Kalda 1990). Perhaps that is precisely why this chronicle, put down in writing out of a sense of responsibility, did not become the centre of Valton's literary oeuvre.

Another reason was surely the novel *Maria Siberimaal* (*Maria in Siberia*), which Heino Kiik had already completed in 1978. It had circulated for around ten years in manuscript form among a select readership, accumulating a blue mist of legends around it. Kiik's work went through an ideological gauntlet before reaching print. Even in its year of publication, there were threats that it would be destroyed if anybody had the audacity to bring it before the public (Kurg 2023). Even so, the novel was published in the periodical *Looming* in the summer of 1987 and as a separate book in 1988. That work's publication was one of the pivotal literary events that marked liberation from the yoke of censorship, like the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the birth of Karl Ristikivi with a two-day conference at the end of 1987. Heino Kiik had no personal experience of Siberia. In writing about it, he relied on the recollections of his mother and younger brother, but even according to Valton's expert assessment, Kiik succeeded in achieving precision of detail while depicting conditions that were foreign to him (Kiik 1993, p. 12; Valton Vallikivi 2020, p. 286). Unlike Valton, Kiik focused on the fate of one individual and ultimately created a rather memorable female character that penetrated the hearts of many readers. Due to all these circumstances, Kiik's novel was a sensation and overshadowed Valton's work as the 'second' to the finish line.

Master of parables

We could likewise work through dozens of other texts in the search for Valton's main or pivotal work: *Üksildased ajas* (*Lonesome People in Time*; I–II, 1983/1985), consisting of six short novels, of which *Õndsusesse kulgev päev* (*Day Proceeding into Bliss*), a story about Juku the village idiot and his life dedicated to vodka and playing music, has attracted particular attention; at least a dozen other works that have been designated as novels; over ten collections of poetry; a thick volume of aphorisms; etc. But we evidently will not find the pivotal work of Valton's oeuvre, his personal core or kernel text, among them. A more clearly outlined structure does not characterise his literary output. It is instead its natural cumulativeness that does so – the same principle that Valton adopted as the starting point for his collected works. Not only might the individual distinctiveness of the writer be concealed in the tempestuous accumulation of different types of texts, but this accumulation might also contain his special cultural value.

We have referred to Valton as a total writer: a writer who, instead of refining an independent and isolated work to perfection, feels satisfied with a more general urge for textual procreation, and who admires the desire concealed in each text for a subsequent text. The total writer sets to work and gets into full swing, but directs that momentum not solely at developing the text at hand as energetically as possible but partly also at starting up the next one. While one text is still a work in progress, Valton already plans a new one. He cannot stand inhibitions, the feeling of having written out all his power, or moments of weakness after awesome punchlines. Beginnings attract him, not the state of completion. His stories that have started out hot often cool down before the end or are left hanging in the air, but he saves all the more energy for new beginnings. 'A gripping story or relationship that altogether forces one to expect a solution or at least a sequel is simply left there', noted Maie Kalda (1990, p. 709).

I too would describe Valton's own human character not in the relatively precise concepts of the centre and the periphery subordinated to it but rather in the somewhat vague concepts of totality and cumulativeness. It is entirely plausible that Valton did not want to, and perhaps did not even know how to, arrive at a clear understanding of himself. He wished even less that others would do so. When he perceived that people were trying to pour his creative credo into words or to psychologically force his person into some framework, he became contrary and laid out counterarguments. A further observation is associated with that.

While, relatively speaking, the works of Jaan Kross or Mati Unt contain quite a lot of speech by main characters that closely resembles what the author himself would say, Valton rebuffs attempts to associate his person with his characters. He does everything possible not to let the characters appear to be the mouthpieces of his own person. The kinds of characters who are very far from the author in terms of external attributes stand out most vividly in his works. Take, for example, that same village idiot Juku, who loves his simple and lazy life and is blissfully drinking himself to death, as well as other escapists from his series of short novels *Üksildased ajas*. Or the artist Hong from the short novel *Kirsioks* (*Cherry Branch*, 2010/2022), who paints but one motif all throughout his life, a cherry branch. What could be more contrary to the flood of motifs in Valton's pulsating creative work? The whole of his work exudes nostalgia for an unattainable meditative lifestyle, and that finds its first major incarnation in the figure of the Taoist monk Chang Chun (*Tee lõpmatuse teise otsa*). Valton loves to dive into worlds he cannot enter as a corporal being. Sometimes he creates the impression that the farther he goes from those conditions where he himself lives, the more he ventures to express sincere emotions, especially positive feelings and being happy. Thus, in his own words, he hides himself in an old Negro woman in the short story *Spirituaal* (*Spiritual*), who finds the meaning of life, which nobody discloses to her in words, just in following her mother's example (Köst 1986, p. 130). Here we have once again arrived at motherliness, now in the deep strata of Valton's self-identity. In America, Ilmar Mikiver has even spoken of Valton's feminism, his defence of women's rights, and his natural belief in matriarchy (Mikiver 1974, p. 46).

Even if it is impossible to identify a clear structure of Valton's creative work, we can still differentiate thematic and genre deposits that firmly perpetuate his name in Estonian literature. One of them is the historical and folkloric Oriental theme, ranging from China, Japan, and the Mongols to the peoples of northern Siberia and the linguistic relatives of Estonians in the East. Here Valton has been a pioneer as a novelist, short-story writer, narrator of fairy tales (*Põhjanaela paine* (*Anxiety of Polaris*), 1983), translator, and organiser of literary life. Incidentally, the Orient's invasion into the grimy reality of Eastern Europe had already begun with the short story *Kaheksa jaapanlannat*, written in 1967 and later translated into many languages, where delicate female dancers dressed in kimonos are taken on a tour of a chemical plant. Here the dream of Oriental lands germinates in a Valtonesque ethnic-biological fashion because the tour guide Georg yearns to marry all eight doll-like beings, and 'Georg allayed his nationalist feelings by assuring himself that the Japanese woman will surely become a local and […] the blood that she gives to his children is not that of an enemy' (Valton 1968b, p. 53).

Still, the infusion of fresh blood into short-story writing remains perhaps Valton's most important contribution, mainly in the collections he published during his golden decade – if we can call it that: *Kaheksa jaapanlannat* (1968), *Luikede soo. Karussell* (*Marsh of Swans. Carousel*, 1968), *Sõnumitooja* (1972), *Õukondlik mäng* (1972), *Pööriöö külaskäik* (*Midsummer Night Visit*, 1974), *Läbi unemaastike* (1975), and finally *Mustamäe armastus* (*Mustamäe Love*, 1978), which provides a selection of the previous collections together with new texts. His first novel, *Tee lõpmatuse teise otsa*, stands at the tail end of that period, markedly signalling his desire to give birth to lengthier texts. Just as that period was ending, Pärt Lias observed that 'Valton's name [tends to] become a synonym for short story' (Lias 1979, p. 366). Despite the immense heap of text that he thereafter added, I venture to argue that one of the most vivid phenomena in Estonian literature in the latter half of the 20th century was indeed the Valtonesque short story, much like the Kross-like historical novel. While there is no central work in Valton's oeuvre, there is nonetheless an area with a magnetising force that was, currently is, and will continue to be great. Incidentally, more or less at the same time as Valton in Estonia, which was forced under Soviet rule, Ilmar Jaks, a Lääne County man like Valton and Ristikivi, vigorously developed the Estonian short story in Sweden. He evidently remained more loyal to classical principles of form in the composition of his short stories (see Undusk 2016a, pp. 706–744).

The way Valton could split his short stories up into different bundles as reprints demonstrates that Valton himself related to structuring his creative work without restraint. *Mustamäe armastus* consists of 44 short stories, 29 of which are between book covers for the first time. The remaining 15 are selected from the collections *Kaheksa jaapanlannat* and *Pööriöö külaskäik*. The book is split up into four subsections, each containing 10 to 12 short stories: *Prohveti tagasitulek* (*Return of the Prophet*), *Mustamäe armastus*, *Kummituste*

maja (*Haunted House*), and *Spirituaal*. The short stories from *Pööriöö külaskäik* are distributed among all four subsections, while those from *Kaheksa jaapanlannat* are reprinted in the first two subsections. This means that Valton has not kept previously published texts as one book and together under a single title in reprints. Instead, he has placed them in new contexts with new titles – he actually planned four new collections of short stories with their help. Valton rearranges those same short stories again into altogether new cycles in his two-volume *Valitud teosed*. Such exercises can only have one moral: in the author's opinion, the works are not in any hierarchical or structural dependence among themselves, but rather they are situated freely in a field where they can be grouped one way or another.

The same effect occurs when one and the same short story is published in two successive collections, hence in two altogether different contexts. For instance, the short story *Tagantjärele* (*In Retrospect*) was published in *Pööriöö külaskäik* as well as in the collection *Läbi unemaastike* a year later. The author understands each of his works as a building block that can be placed in the walls of different buildings. We have already seen that Valton could change his originally published text, give it a new title, and easily publish it as a modification of the original story – as far as he was concerned, both had an equal right to life, and the existence of one did not cancel the other. He also published several texts in shorter and longer forms, such as *Ravitseja* (*The Healer*) and *Kirsioks*, first in periodicals (2010) and then in book form (2012 and 2022, respectively).

The latter circumstance points to the fact that the cumulative nature of Valton's oeuvre, the absence of a controlling centre, is related to the composition of his works. If a work that is ripe for publication can still be shortened or lengthened, and if those forms are both equally 'ready for use' artefacts, then the composition principle cannot be stepped, hierarchical; it must rather be sequential, agglomerative, cumulative.

The number of Valton's short stories is large, and there are stories among them with all sorts of frameworks. He also has stories with startling punchlines, such as *Hingekell* (*Death Knell*), where a man reaches climax in sexual intercourse at the very moment when the woman as the church bellringer pulls the ropes of the funeral bell: the acts of procreation and burial go hand in hand. Yet the typical Valtonesque short story more often ignores the classical rules of composition, according to which, for example, the exposition, the inciting incident, the turning point (the climax), the denouement, and the conclusion should ideally be differentiated in the text. Such a scheme is like a line that rises from the base at a greater or lesser angle and thereafter plunges sharply, shaping the gradation. On the contrary, Valton writes on the base. He is not keen on grand classical gestures. He does not like dramatic rise and fall or hierarchically structured text. One could also say that Valton dislikes artistic composition, ratcheting up the tension, which would lead to lightning and thunder, and thereafter the spiritual purification, or catharsis, of the reader. Such a purification effect is rarely found in Valton's works. He himself admits: 'I have never been able to write a play, and I have had difficulties in creating gradation. Sometimes a structural plan would no doubt be needed, but it mostly just happens the way it happens […]' (Köst 1986, p. 128; Valton nonetheless later wrote several plays). Regarding *Arvid Silberi maailmareis*, Andrus Org speaks of Valton's text with 'horizontal composition', where 'events follow one another in disorganised fashion, without vertical gradation, episodes become segmentary, for which reason even their sequence can be freely altered' (Org 2024, p. 584). That observation applies more broadly to Valton's prose. Maie Kalda observes that 'extraordinary resourcefulness in creating situations and some degree of helplessness in developing the plot' characterise Valton (Kalda 1968, p. 948).

Valton loves everyday life as the starting point of a narrative. He is enchanted by writing as a natural necessity, without grand gestures, like an ordinary working man. That is the foundation of his realism. He is convinced that the bizarreness of life emerges from banality. One only needs to precisely describe it, to go to the very end in peeling banality open. Valton starts from a rather ordinary situation or plain activity, which at some point proves to be weird. A man goes fishing but fails to find a body of water. Then he angrily fishes in a puddle of rainwater because, after all, he has come fishing, and he refuses to back down. But of course, he catches nothing. He does not accept that result, and when he gets home, he orders his wife to fry the non-existent catch of fish. For lack of anything better, she boils potatoes and feeds them to her husband (*Kalamees* (*Fisherman*)). And that is all, end of story – they are back in their routine. Without noticing it, the character finds himself in something like a labyrinth where there are no adventurous rises or falls, and where everything takes place in everyday conditions, but step by step, the situation becomes inextricable. The problem grows, the character roams about in the labyrinth, submitting to the logic of its corridors. No emotional solution or purifying catharsis follows. Sometimes this is how things stay. Another possibility is that the situation simply ends, the labyrinth is lifted just as unexpectedly as it was lowered – just like on a theatre stage. In any case, the bizarre situation is not played out using the means of compositional structure involving gradation (composition is indeed a machine for heating up and discharging emotions). It arises out of almost nothing and vanishes – if it vanishes – into nowhere. That is Valton's method. That method is not suited to writing lengthier texts because roaming about the labyrinth in them becomes tedious. The circumstance of ending up in the labyrinth, the moment when the labyrinth emerges, is key. That requires the scale of the short story.

The reader is mostly left emotionally dissatisfied in the Valtonesque type of short story. It has been argued that Valton is not a writer for the masses because his abstractness allegedly does not captivate the ordinary reader. Yet the issue is perhaps not so much abstractness as it is the fact that Valton's works mostly do not offer emotional relief from the anxiety arising from the banality of everyday life. At least some sort of monster could emerge, one into which readers could package their fear, but that does not happen! Valton does not believe that existential problems could be solved using

the emotional means of art, that art could subjugate or aesthetically restrain existence. Art only presents existence. Franz Kafka, too, played with abstractions, but he heated up emotions in his outwardly cold fashion via abstract violence. Valton does not tolerate torture, even in abstract fashion. Kafka, Camus, and Sartre had not been to Siberia and could boldly experiment on paper.

Valton's most famous and widely translated short story is *Rohelise seljakotiga mees* (*The Man with the Green Knapsack*). A man with a green knapsack enters a railway station and starts reading a book out loud. The book is an entirely ordinary Soviet publication, not some underground work. Reading out loud is also no sin, and the bored people in the railway station even like all that. The only catch is that this has never happened before, and the man has not sought the approval of the authorities. He continues reading on the following days. The labyrinth has been lowered into place. What should be done? Officials are cast into utter confusion. The authorities start monitoring the man, and everything he does is written down. Thereafter a commission is formed to work out pertinent regulations. The authorities start training professional readers to stifle the spontaneous initiative, etc. One day the man with the green knapsack no longer appears at the station, the labyrinth vanishes, and a new shock confronts society because that was not foreseeable either. What should be done with the vast machinery that has been started up?

Sõnumitooja is another well-known short story. A horseman gallops through the city, loudly declaring that he is a messenger. Naturally, the reader, bent over the short story, and the townspeople in it wait in anticipation for that important message – in other words, the story's punchline. But the story's punchline and the messenger's only message remains that he is a messenger who has nothing else beyond that to say – so not a punchline but an inverse punchline. A simple situation is before us that does not develop into anything staggering. Rather, it is static but points to a philosophical question: can my important message to the world be that I simply am who I am? That I exist? Is that the message? Why not. The existence of every person is a notification of existential importance. Every person brings something unique to the world that nobody else can ever repeat. Every person himself is a unique message of existence. And behold, a simple aphorism has already taken shape, a fragment of practical philosophy. Its content is in and of itself an extraordinarily important recognition, the primary basis of tolerance, the reverence for life, and, as Albert Schweitzer has said, respect for other beings as a different kind of perfection.

Some acerbic critics claim that Valton's texts remain feuilletons, although at best they condense into existential reflections on absurdity mixed with humour and fear – in the familiar style of Ristikivi's *Hingede öö* and the prose of Ilmar Jaks. That is how Hellar Grabbi, the former editor of *Mana* magazine in the United States, theorises – and Hando Runnel, whom Valton considered his only true friend among writers, also conditionally agrees with (Grabbi 1997, pp. 259–260; Runnel 1984, p. 185; Valton Vallikivi 2014a, p. 90; Valton Vallikivi 2020, p. 315). It is immaterial whether one sometimes reads the text as a feuilleton and sometimes as a philosophical fragment. It is only important that the latter reading also exists in principle. Otherwise, the parable will not emerge. Valton himself has said about the first impulse to write *Sõnumitooja*: 'Its mental impulse was the very widespread type of poetry that constantly spoke of what an important activity creating poetry is and from which one never found out what that poetry was about' (Valton Vallikivi 2000, p. 449). Compared to my lofty 'philosophical' explanation, this interpretation (the author's personal one!) is quite mundane and cultural-political. It is as if the author was hinting that *Sõnumitooja* is a feuilleton that pokes fun at a style of poetry that was once widespread. Yet nowadays, nobody would be able to guess what motivated Valton to write that short story without the author's hint. Hence, that hint is only of literary-historical value. It no longer plays along in its aesthetics and therefore comes across as more of a hindrance.

The parable, especially the Biblical one, is a distinctive genre in the sense that a simple formula, schema, or plot with a universal value is contained within it, around which stories can endlessly be spun. The potential of a good allegory only grows in time, and more general shades of meaning emerge. Humour is not at all contraindicated to generalisation, rather it functions as a lubricant in its birth. Valton has written parables for most of his life, that is, stories that hint at some other, greater and more dangerous, stories or mark some other, more momentous, events. Valton's work in short stories induced Estonian critics at that time to deal with the philosophical and aesthetic significance of the parable and to identify the possibilities for artistic generalisation found in it. Thus, Pärt Lias wrote about it as an 'algorithm that generates an endless quantity of [meaningful] texts', and Martin Neithal proclaimed the 'rebirth of the parable' in Estonian literature, highlighting both the role of paradoxical thinking and Kafka's influence on Valton (Lias 1972, p. 1741; Neithal 1983, pp. 829–831). According to Valton himself, he was not a conscious inventor of parables, and the label of parable writer was given him by the critics (Valton Vallikivi 2003b, pp. 489–490). Yet it appears that, over time, he took a liking to it and titled his last collection of stories *Selgeltnägija ja muid mõistujutte* (*The Clairvoyant and Other Parables*, 2018).

It is easy to read *Silmus* (*Noose*), one of Valton's best short stories, as a feuilleton. It is published in two consecutive collections of short stories, *Luikede soo*. *Karussell* and *Sõnumitooja*. On a deserted steppe, there are twenty paths leading in the same direction in front of a man, and a noose is hanging over only one of them. What is the purpose of a noose hanging above open country? It cannot be a trap because no animal is so stupid as to climb into it in an open field. Only a human, who could choose nineteen safe continuations, starts pondering the idea of the noose and decides to test whether he can get through it. Why? 'Because if it already exists, then somebody has to crawl into it', as the human ponders. Logical – or is it not logical? That is what the human thinks, tests it out, and passes through the noose. But the idea of the noose is now even more confusing. His curiosity grows, and the man tries to go through the noose a second time, but then the latches suddenly snap shut and the noose tightens. Consequently, it is a trap after all. Through sac-

rifice, that knowledge is achieved. And Valton ends the story as follows: 'Thus the man remained in the trap, and he is there to this day if some passing tractor or automobile driver has not rescued him' (Valton 1972, p. 13). Once again, a simple situation is before us, a noose hanging above an open field, which proves to be a problem for a human – and only for a human, not for an animal! Only a human ends up in a labyrinth in the middle of open country, for no known purpose. Because the labyrinth is in his mind.

Valton offers two sequels to *Silmus* in *Sõnumitooja*, which he later publishes under the titles *Silmus II* and *Silmus III*. They tell of what the man thought and felt as he hung in the noose for a thousand years – Valton does not let him die! They prove the cumulative nature of a Valtonesque text corpus: a completed story can always be continued.

Besides *Rohelise seljakotiga mees*, one of Valton's most famous and widely translated texts is *Mustamäe armastus*, for which he received the Friedebert Tuglas short story award in 1979. A single man and a single woman, who never meet in their lives and do not exchange a single word, watch each other in the evenings through the windows of their concrete panel blocks of flats. This becomes a habit for both of them, and love develops out of it. As they watch, they invent a life for themselves as a married couple – the man and the woman separately. At some point, the woman gets pregnant and gives birth to a child. In their imaginations they thereafter live a shared family life, affirmed by gentle glances sent across the courtyard in the evenings. They are both happy in their own way. 'Was that not an ideal marriage, of which men sometimes dream: to be sure of someone and free at the same time' (Valton 1978, p. 140). That is how the situation stays. Once again, an exceedingly simple situation is conjured before the reader's eyes: two people watch each other through windows. Nothing else that is 'real' occurs between them. But the situation deepens, and the labyrinth is lowered into place. This time it feels good to be in it because the two of them are there together. The life of a human being, called existence, is nothing more than a banal situation that proves to be complicated.

Tõmbetuul (*Draught*) is another expressive story that Valton wrote in 1974, but which did not make it into print until 1980 in the collection *Võõras linnas* (*In a Strange Town*). Here, too, the action takes place in a concrete panel block of flats in Mustamäe. One Saturday morning, a ground-floor resident discovers that his fellow citizens have started passing through his flat to shorten their route. Instead of going all the way around the building outside, they climb into his flat by way of his balcony, march through the rooms, and jump back out via the inner balcony at the other end. And that is how it stays. The situation continues and nothing else happens in the short story. Even though the flat owner tries to figure out clever countermeasures, he is unable to root out those people's practice. He has to resign himself to the situation and finds in that task the meaning of his existence – in other words, his meaningful existence. Instead of the artistic gradation of events, we see the accumulation of a single situation into an existential complex of problems.

Having gotten this far, I have the duty to present a lengthy quote from Haljand Udam because – as it turned out in the course of writing this article – he has used the labyrinth concept earlier than me to understand Valton's world. Udam writes: 'In seeking a common figurative keyword for the stories in Valton's book [*Pildikesi filosoofi, prohveti, kunstniku, poeedi elust*], I returned time and again to the labyrinth, all others were less suitable. That labyrinth, in other words, the world in which a person lives, is simultaneously spatial and temporal. A person lives his life like a cybernetic mouse in its maze of crossroads. He tries to decipher some kind of a pattern in the sequence of twists and turns that crop up on the path of life to create for himself a systematic view of the world and on that basis to continue operating meaningfully – the belief that happiness is finding the meaning of the world is naïve. Yet there is no system here in the worldly labyrinth. The person seeking a system in a systemless reality is utterly tragic. Within a general worldly systemlessness, isolated little islands can of course exist, where there is neither system nor systemlessness, where their contrariness does not function – a human is himself and happy on such an island of solitude' (Udam 1993, p. 997).

Aphorism and existentialism

The distinctive feature of a parable seems to be that it can relatively easily be rephrased as an aphorism. Naturally, several aphorisms can be formed out of every allegory. It all depends on how a person reads and his verbal finesse. Some of Valton's above-mentioned short stories could be summed up as follows when compressed into aphoristic form. *Kalamees*: 'passion is older than the object of passion' or 'a passionate fisherman does not even need water to fish'. *Rohelise seljakotiga mees*: 'the main problem of a totalitarian society lies in how to use violence on an individual who does not violate any law'. *Sõnumitooja*: 'every person is a unique message of existence'. *Silmus*: 'only a human ends up in a trap in an empty field'. *Mustamäe armastus*: 'children are bred from love even without a father'. And so on. These are relatively random sentences born quickly. Their only aim is to demonstrate that allegorism and aphorism function mutually in a rather good metabolism. Of course, Valtonesque short stories include far more than an aphorism can incorporate: scraps of sensory reality, humour, social criticism, joy in words, etc. But if we assume that they are parables, an aphorism should also be found in their viscera.

Valton appears to have loved aphorisms almost terribly, so much so that Maie Kalda once called the aphorism Valton's 'old Pegasus' (Kalda 1990), the steed that the writer always readily mounts. Much earlier, Kalda in particular had dealt with largely the same theme that I touched upon in the preceding paragraph. Specifically, she tried to reduce Valton's stories not quite to aphorisms but rather to single-sentence slogans for improving the world (Kalda 1968, p. 947). Valton's first collection of aphorisms, *Uksed kriuksuvad öösiti* (*Doors Creak in the Night*), was not published until 1977 (its manuscript was reportedly ready in 1972), but he had inserted them into his short stories much earlier as plot catalysts. This first collection, which was allegedly born out of defiance to prove to the world that Estonians – contrary to a claim by Ain Kaalep –

can also be a people of aphorisms, was followed by abundant offspring. The thick 22nd volume of Valton's *Kogutud teosed* is entirely dedicated to aphorisms, but there were enough of them left over for inclusion in most of the last volumes (Nos 26, 27, 28, 30, and 31). So, grains of wisdom captivated Valton in his last years perhaps even more than before. Paradox is the common link between parable and aphorism, and Valton gave his collections of aphorisms mainly paradoxical titles: *Märklaud kilbiks* (*Target as a Shield*, 1980), *Tagasi tulevikku* (*Back to the Future*, 1985), *Vabaduse kütkes* (*In the Fetters of Freedom*, 1993), *Seltskondlik üksindus* (*Sociable solitude*, 2001); these were followed by collections published only in *Kogutud teosed*: *Süvenev pealiskaudsus* (*Deepening Superficiality*), *Noorenemine vanaduses* (*Rejuvenating in Old Age*), *Lõplik lõpmatus* (*Finite Infinity*), *Möödunud igavik* (*Past Eternity*), *Tormakas paigalseis* (*Impetuous Standstill*), and *Rutiini novaatorlus* (*Routine's Innovation*).

Classical aphorists such as La Rochefoucauld laid out a philosophy of life with more or less definite contours in the form of *sententiae* and maxims. It makes sense to try and see whether such a reconstruction will succeed in the case of Valton. In any event, he himself was of the opinion that, regardless of sentences that sometimes contradict one another, aphorisms reveal his basically complete world view (Valton Vallikivi 2013, p. 589). There is no doubt that Valton's thoughts fed off everything opposed to political violence, bureaucracy, spiritual shallowness, arrogantly scientific ways of thinking, etc. Yet, on the other hand, the linguistic elegance of aphorisms and their playful quality charmed him, that ease with which a sentence under the pen took the form of a *sententia*, whether it expressed personally cognised wisdom or turned some known truth upside down – or whether it was simply a mental somersault growing out of language itself. Valton's treasure house of aphorisms also contains a fair amount of wit lightly shaken out of his sleeve, in the style of 'the gaze is the distorting mirror of the soul', whose inspiration is dubious. His translation work on the collection of aphorisms *Sugemata mõtted* (*Unkempt Thoughts*, 1977) by the Polish writer Stanisław Jerzy Lec, which was published in the same year as Valton's own first book of *sententiae*, probably provided good practice for sharpening his own verbal skills. Valton had admittedly compiled his book long before the Lec translation, but the flood of aphorisms continued in his later years as well. The fact that he decided to undertake the translation of Lec's 'inspiring creative work' – as he called it – is a sign of true affection for that short-form philosophical genre. Still, Valton failed in his enterprise of the direct translation of the Polish text due to linguistic deficiency, and he turned for help to the renowned expert Aleksander Kurtna, who did the interlinear translation for him (Pchelovodova 2009, pp. 40, 115; Valton Vallikivi 2014a, p. 419). Lec's collection of selected sentences was published in the *Loomingu Raamatukogu* series in the same year that I enrolled at university in Tartu. The translation had a good reputation in the university dormitory for philologists, so it became the standard of hard-hitting self-expression for several young men.

The link of mutual impact between aphorism and parable in Valton's creative psychology, and technology, is of special interest. While an aphorism can be derived from every parable, the process in the opposite direction seems to be possible as well, namely that Valton gathered aphoristic sayings as the essences for future allegories. His own confession does not contradict it: 'While before that [i.e. the publication of his first collection of aphorisms] I had mostly derived ideas for short stories from my observations, now my attention focused equally on briefly worded aphorisms, and I have jotted them down over my entire subsequent literary life' (Valton Vallikivi 2013, pp. 587–588).

We pick out such a statement, for instance, from Valton's first collection of aphorisms: 'The farther man distances himself from animals, the more readily he admits his similarity to animals' (Valton Vallikivi 2013, p. 9). That brings to mind the short story *Tagasi!* (*Back!*), written in September 1968 (*sic!* Czechoslovakia again), to illustrate the preceding idea. The short story at the same time provides a prime example of the existentialist understanding of life, especially due to the famous notion of an 'unmotivated act' (*acte gratuit*, gratuitous act) that was put into circulation by André Gide: a person's primary right to exit whatever given behavioural system and make his selection at his own personal risk (see also Semper 1929, pp. 29–32; cf. *Rohelise seljakotiga mees*). The gratuitous act became one of the hallmarks of the Estonian prose renewal in the 1960s and 1970s and was masterfully depicted in the works of Valton, Mati Unt, and numerous others. According to Maie Kalda, Valton's characters act mostly 'strangely, enigmatically, senselessly, [their] background, motives, and distant objectives can remain a secret' (Kalda 2000, p. 442). Certainly, there is both sympathy and smirking in Valton's attitude, yet it was he who used the motif of the gratuitous act most frequently among the writers. Back to the short story *Tagasi!*: Raoul is a respected judge in the city. He spends his workdays wearing a judge's robe, as he administers a higher human justice. At the end of the workday, he enters the butcher's shop, with its udders, horns, singed snouts, and bloody livers, to buy himself a large shinbone. He places it in a fine, upholstered musical instrument case and hurries homeward. Upon arrival, he heads for the rear corner of the yard to the doghouse, takes the shinbone out of the case, gets down on all fours, growls, and salivates. 'His melodious snarling tickled his throat, went ever deeper, filled his lungs, seeped into his stomach, and soon his entire body convulsed with the all-encompassing pleasurable snarling' (Valton 1972, p. 100). When that act ends, Raoul continues his usual life in satisfaction as a husband and father.

The butcher's shop filled with bloody limbs is the opposite of the sterile courthouse and, at the same time, its revealing equivalent (destroyed human lives), but entering it does not in and of itself bring alienation. It is not until Raoul packs the bone into the musical instrument case that we realise that the labyrinth has been lowered into place, and the man is its prisoner. At home, in front of the doghouse, he already roams the labyrinth's inner depths – until it once again fades from around him as if due to the action of *deus ex*

machina. One can put one's imagination to work in the same way in explicating Valton's other aphorisms: 'The strong became apes, the weak and maladjusted became humans', 'Who should you ape when there are only apes all around?', 'To see that the work does not die, leave it unwritten', etc.

I will not try to give Valton's personal philosophy a new name in this article, but I remind the reader that the child has long since been christened. Valton in particular was to 'blame' for the so-called existentialism debate that began in Estonian criticism in the mid-1960s, which only added to the fame of his golden decade. It all began with the essay 'Noored mehed kirjanduses' ('Young men in literature') by the 25-year-old Ülo Tuulik, who gave a brief, elegant explanation for the emergence of the perception of the absurd in modern consciousness: since the tempo of life has become immensely fast, the normality of today will seem absurd tomorrow, and what is absurd today, might be reality tomorrow. The perception of absurdity is thus legitimised and placed under the protection of reality. It is additionally said that it turns 'our former notions of existence upside down'. Thus, the concept of existence was also written into the justification of absurdity. And where there is already existence, existentialism is no longer far away. It seems to Tuulik that 'there is something in the tone and the primary philosophical fabric of Arvo Valton's recent short stories in which the word "existentialism" constantly begins to be perceived as a distant echo' (Tuulik 1966a, pp. 145, 147).

That was said honestly and appreciatively in every respect, but somewhat imprudently. The fifth congress of the Writers' Union of the Estonian SSR was held in February of that same year, 1966. Before and during it, writers argued about innovative prose, primarily Enn Vetemaa's *Monument* and Mati Unt's *Võlg* (*Debt*), but also about some of Valton's short stories. Valton's second prose book *Rataste vahel* (*Between the Wheels*) was published at the same time. In his review of the book, that same Ülo Tuulik quotes his recent remark on existentialism but adds to it a lengthier critical commentary, in which he incidentally says that he is 'against conceptions where, despite little everyday joys, work turns into some kind of faberian tottering, or what Marx called alienation and what Garaudy has now spoken about and thus caused a stir'.[2] He ends his line of reasoning with a decision that contrasts Valton's aesthetics and philosophy, the last five words of which have expanded letter-spacing: 'Reading Arvo Valton's stories is enjoyable. There is seriousness of thought and word in them but also mental gymnastics and wordplay. They are sustained and compelling, but they are supported by a philosophy that offers no perspective' (Tuulik 1966b). The name of that philosophy was existentialism, but it is no longer repeated.

Considering the customs of the era of Soviet rule, the impression tends to emerge as if Tuulik's critical coda was imposed, that is, written at the demand of somebody else so that he could excuse himself for the 'existentialist acclaim' that slipped out too energetically from under his pen. Yet Ülo Tuulik himself does not recall anything of the sort. Did self-censorship start up in retrospect or did the author's taste change in a couple of months? Or did the expression of that taste simply become more precise? Although the voice of the innovators had resonated at the fifth congress of writers – it was the 'congress where generational renewal was formalised in Estonian literary life' (Olesk 2015, p. 159) – people had to be careful for quite a while longer regarding the use of certain terms. I cannot end this paragraph without quoting an entry in Ülo Tuulik's diary from October 1974, as he sailed on the Atlantic Ocean. Tuulik reads Valton's newly published *Pööriöö külaskäik* there and writes down his summary, back then meant only for himself, of Valton's creative persona, in which it is mainly the sparklingly bright play of ambivalences that enchants him. Against that background, we can say that a dual attitude towards Valton's personality and creative work, a kind of pendulum swing between admiration and alienation, tormented Tuulik from the very start. Thus: 'I read and do not understand his philosophy of life: the futility of evil and good, the meaning and meaninglessness of life, love and abjection, great ideas and little desires. But then there is he himself: his joy in words, will to create, and struggle to maintain his position – that has some kind of meaning, satisfaction, aim in life for him. He still feels joy in his creative work, its necessity – otherwise he would long since have given up and would simply loaf about' (manuscript in Ülo Tuulik's possession).

Yet the debate regarding Valton's existentialism began in earnest after the publication of *Kaheksa jaapanlannat* at the start of 1968. Endel Nirk published an utterly laudatory review of that book of short stories, in which he said that alienation inherited from capitalism 'has by no means yet been overcome in the socialist world', as Valton's works demonstrate, but that Valton had at the same time 'drawn quite a clear dividing line between himself and existentialism' (Nirk 1968). An existentialist person feels that he has been hopelessly abandoned. Yet Valton's characters do not lose hope for finding contact with their fellow humans. Hence, the critic tries to absolve the writer by seeking a compromise between two 'dangerous' concepts: Valton highlights the phenomenon of social alienation, but he does not do it as an existentialist. This was one tactic that was generally accepted in defending Valton. The writer who deals with existence is just as much an existentialist as a worker at a conserve factory is a conservative, quipped Lembit Remmelgas (1968, p. 377). It was still out of the question for a long time to be a Soviet writer and at the same time an existentialist in every respective sense.

In the opposing camp, Eduard Päll, an experienced figure in the Communist Party, erected a monument to himself by criticising Valton. He published a combative article at the end of 1968 in two issues of the *Sirp ja Vasar* (*Sickle and Hammer*) cultural weekly entitled 'Eksistentsialismist, absurdismist ja meie kirjanduskriitika mõttepinge tsentrumist' ('On existentialism, absurdism, and the centre of the mental tension of our

[2] Jaak Kangilaski had introduced the views of the French Marxist Roger Garaudy on alienation to Estonian readers at the end of 1965 (see Undusk 2013, pp. 42–43).

literary criticism'). That text was further expanded when it was released in book form. This is evidently Päll's most cited piece of writing. Naturally, in the longer perspective, Valton reaped only benefits from such criticism. Päll seized upon the fateful sentence that Ülo Tuulik had offhandedly used (see how far-reaching the effects of a young man's 'mischief' can be!), considering it an 'extraordinary' admission, and established that the characters of Valton's short stories are 'to some extent consistently in a conflict situation with socialist society' (Päll 1973, p. 127). In Päll's view, this sets Valton in a far more unfavourable light than the French existentialists Camus and Sartre because they, after all, express their anger in the capitalist world and, consequently, against it. Päll feels that only a person who hates society as such altogether, the masses and simple 'ignorant' people, and who sings a 'hymn to death' can be at variance with Soviet socialist society. According to Päll's recapitulative assessment, Valton is the 'first writer in Estonia in the existentialist style' (Päll 1973, p. 141), which in retrospect comes across quite like a laurel wreath crowning the writer. Whether he wanted it or not, the honour of laying such a wreath belongs to Eduard Päll forever.

In conclusion

The exchange of views on existentialism and alienation continued even more heatedly after Päll's exploit, involving philosophers, sociologists, and readers. In the estimation of a later observer, Valton's supporters achieved a clear victory in that, although 'by rather demagogic means' (Vaher 2011, p. 1713; see also Aksiim 2024). Yet at that time, demagogy meant nothing more than the struggle against the system using its own weapon, which is why it can be forgiven. Valton himself did not take part in the discussion, but when it ended, he had it made, so to speak, in Estonian literature: he was the sharpest, the boldest, and in some state agencies also the most feared writer.

Data availability statement

All data are contained within the article.

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Labasusest labürinti. Arvo Valtoni kumulatiivne kosmos

Jaan Undusk

Artiklis kirjeldatakse Arvo Valtoni (1935–2024) loomingulist psühholoogiat ja stilistilist strateegiat vaatekohast, mida nimetatakse kumulatiivsuse printsiibiks. See tähendab esiteks, et kirjutusprotsess oli autorile tähtsam kui lõpetatud ja viimistletud kunstiteos. Valton võis ühest ja samast novellist anda mitu varianti või avaldada ühe ja sama teksti kord lühemal, kord pikemal kujul. Ühtlasi ei saa Valtoni loomingust leida mõnd keskset teost, mida käsitleda peateose või autori kirjanduslike püüdluste haripunktina. Teiseks on ka Valtoni tekstide ülesehitus olemuslikult kumulatiivne. Tekst rullub lahti enamasti tasapinnal, ilma gradatsioonideta, kompositsioon on horisontaalselt täienev. Inimese elu ehk eksistents ei ole muud kui komplitseerituks osutuv banaalne olukord: rohelise seljakotiga mees hakkab raudteejaamas valjusti ette lugema kõige tavalisemat raamatut, aga viib sellega kogu ühiskonna rivist välja; lugupeetud kohtuametnik haugub iga päev pärast tööd oma koduaia taganurgas nagu koer, et seejärel jätkata rutiini. Pöördepunkti argireaalsuses, millest saab alguse üha hämmastavam tegelikkus, nimetatakse artiklis labürindi laskumiseks. Labürint võib haihtuda niisama kiirelt, nagu see ilmus, aga võib ka lõpuni püsima jääda. Autori sõnum on see, et eksistents on ettearvamatu, juhitamatu, oma võimalustes haaramatu. Seda sorti kompositsioonitehnika võis anda tulemuseks efektseid lühilugusid, ent pikemates tekstides minetada oma üllatusväärtuse. Valtonlik novell oli üks 1960.–1970. aastate eesti proosauuenduse olulisemaid saavutusi, olemuslikult mõistujutt ehk parabool, mille tuumas peitus paradoks. Tulemuseks oli eesti kirjanduse „esimese eksistentsialisti" tiitel nii heas kui ka – ortodokssete marksistide silmis – halvas mõttes.