

Pseudomythology in Estonian Publicity in the 19th and 20th Century

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In the 1840s and 1850s the pioneers of the Estonian national movement, F.R. Faehlmann and F.R. Kreutzwald, created an Olympus of Estonian gods: the main god Taara or Uku, song god Vanemuine, divine smith Ilmarine, waters god Ahti, the forgotten land of good fortune, Kungla, etc. Much was taken over from the mythology of the Finns, much was the fruit of personal fantasy. It all resulted from the desire to prove that the ancient Estonians had high culture before the foreign conquest in the 13th c. In the 1860s and 1870s the new inspiring mythology became popularized, greatly thanks to C.R. Jakobson, a radical national leader. Poets used the names of mythological heroes in patriotic songs, poems and dramas were written on mythological subjects, national societies were named after mythological gods, etc. In the 1920s, when the national movement had achieved its aims, the folklorists definitively demonstrated that the 19th c. Estonian gods belonged to pseudomythology lacking any root in folk beliefs. Although the society accepted the statement, many pseudomythological names remained firmly rooted. The 19th c. mythology had had a significant role in the formation of Estonian national identity. Today, when the social and cultural life of Estonia has again become especially active, we can notice an analogical interest in antiquity, though entirely different denominators are used.

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One of the most renowned Estonian folklorists, Oskar Loorits, wrote in 1932: "Der fatalste Irrtum in der Behandlung des estnischen Volksglaubens ist nämlich der gewesen, dass man den estnischen Stoff um jeden Preis durch die Brille der Antike und des Germanentums hat betrachten und verstehen wollen; ja noch mehr, wo man beim Volk weder den geringsten noch zufälligsten Anhalt dazu fand, da ahmte man einfach fremde Vorbilder nach und kombinierte solche künstliche Gebilde in der kindlichen Überzeugung, dass das Volk sie "vergesen" habe. Das ärmliche Milieu der Zeit des nationalen Erwachens erforderte die unerschütterliche Autosuggestion, dass alles, was andere über eine reichere Entwicklungsgeschichte verfügende Völker besitzen, auch bei den Esten zu finden sein müsse." And he added a long list of mythological names, mainly bor-

rowed from the Finnish or created by personal fantasy (Loorits 1932: 39–40).

That "fatal error", was made in the 1840s and 1850s by the romantic ideological pioneers of the Estonian national movement, Friedrich Robert Faehlmann and Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald. It, however, actually exercised a very positive influence on Estonian social and cultural development. For people, who had lately been liberated from serfdom, the myths of ancient gods were an important source of self-confidence. The historian of Estonian literature Endel Nirk (1958: 658) is right underlining the fighting national function and unique singularity of this artificially created mythology: "Our people had no such mythology, but it was given to them and the keenest minds adapted it with enthusiasm; this so-called pseudomythology has in the Estonian



Fig. 1. "Waina-Möinen, the Finnish Orpheus." G. Merkel, "Die Vorzeit Lieflands" I (1798).

life and national movement played a greater role than a true and scientifically proved mythology for many other nations."

The name of the reputed main god, *Taara*, has a highly interesting history. Henricus de Lettis in his 13th century Livonian chronicle mentions several times the "great god" (*magnus deus*) of Saaremaa islanders *Tharapita* (XXIV: 5; XXX: 4–6). The late-17th-century chroniclers Thomas Hiärne and Christian Kelch interpreted it as a war cry of Estonians, calling the Scandinavian thunder god *Thor* to help them: *Thor avita!* This interpretation that was common throughout the 18th century caused vivid discussions among the Estophiles of the early 19th century. As a result, the name *Taara* was accepted, although in Estonian folk tradition there were no traces of

Taara. *Taara* was widely connected with *Thor*, but some scholars (e.g. the well-known collector of folk songs Arnold Knüppfer) maintained that it was an old original name, to which there were to be found equivalents in other Finno-Ugric languages. As a matter of fact, *Taara* has been quite arbitrarily derived from *Tharapita*. In West-Estonian tradition the Scandinavian *Thor* has really left some traces, but only under the name *tooru*.

Faehlmann and Kreutzwald eagerly accepted *Taara*. Faehlmann (1848) even tried to prove that with the cult of *Taara* the Estonians had reached monotheism, the highest stage of faith that, e.g., for the Finns before the Christianization was yet unknown. He also made a connection between *Taara* and the university town, Tartu, pointing it out as a central place of worship in the ancient Estonian religion (Faehlmann 1840: 40). Kreutzwald, though not accepting the monotheism of ancient Estonians (1848: 42), repeatedly mentioned the ancient faith of *Taara*. For him, Tartu was "an old sacred place of *Taara*", where on *Taaramägi* ("*Taara Hill*") once a sacred *Taara tammik* ("*Taara oak grove*") was growing (Kreutzwald 1976: 124). He also invented the name *taaralased* ("people of *Taara*") as a common name for ancient Estonian gods (Kreutzwald 1961: 428).

It is noteworthy that Kristian Jaak Peterson, who in 1822 published the German translation of Christfrid Ganander's "Mythologia Fennica", did not mention *Taara* in its Estonian commentary. Nevertheless, he suggested that in Estonian folk songs there were traces of a god of singing, similar to Finnish *Väinämöinen* (*Wainemoinen* by Peterson), though the name of the god had not survived (Ganander 1822: 26–27). The "Finnish Orpheus" *Waina-Möinen* had become familiar in the Baltic countries already at the end of the 18th century through an illustration in Garlieb Markel's well-known book "Die Vorzeit Lieflands" I (1798: 228). That inspired Faehlmann to use a grey-bearded *Vanemuine* in his German-language "Estonian" legends as one of the Estonian main gods, connected basically with singing (Faehlmann 1840: 42–44; Faehlmann 1852). In Faehlmann's myth of creation (1848: 64) the companions of the god were the divine

blacksmith *Ilmarine* (<Finnish *Ilmarinen*), joyful *Lämmeküene* (<Finnish *Lemminkäinen*) and the powerful archer *Viboane* (<Finnish *Antero*) *Vipunen*). The abode of all these *Kalevid* was, according to Faehlmann, *Kaljove* or *Kaljovald* (<Finnish *Kalevala*), i.e. the realm of rocks (= Finland). There are some other divine persons we find in Faehlmann's charming tales: loving couples *Koit* ("Dawn") and *Hämarik* ("Dusk"), *Juta*, daughter of Vanemuine, and *Endel* (*Endla*), son of Ilmarine.

Concerning the Finnish-origin names, the Baltic German folklorist Alexander Heinrich Neus expressed his doubts in his private letter to Kreutzwald, and the latter shared his opinion (Kreutzwald 1956: 58,60). But it did not prevent Kreutzwald from using the name of Vanemuine in the folk songs he sent to Neus (Neus 1850–1852: 180; Kreutzwald & Neus 1854: 24, 46). And as a parallel name to *Taara*, he used the Finnish-origin *Uku* (*Ukko*) known to him from his home district Virumaa in north-eastern Estonia. He also introduced to Estonia the Finnish name of the god of waters, *Ahti*.

In these early years the Estonian mythology was presented and discussed in German and was accessible only to quite a small circle of educated German-speaking Estonians. It was not before 1862, when the epic "Kalevipoeg" by Kreutzwald appeared in Estonian (2nd printing 1875), that the "new" mythology was more widely introduced. The opening verse "Laena mulle kannelt, Vanemuine!" ("Vanemuine, lend me your lyre!") calls special attention to one of the main heroes of pseudomythology. On the whole, the name *Vanemuine* occurs in the epic three times, *Taara* – about fifty times, *taaralased* – 11 times, *Uku* – 27 times, *Kungla* (invented by Kreutzwald as a name for a land of good fortune) – 13 times, and *Ahti* – once.

The epic appeared at the right time. In the 1860s the national awakening of Estonians gained momentum. Quite expectedly, the first singing society, founded in Tartu in 1865, was named "Vanemuine". And in 1866, at the time of a German singing festival in Tallinn, Faehlmann's nephew had built for the procession of singers a triumphal arch on which sat the song god Vanemuine thrusting garlands on top of



Fig. 2. Vanemuine's song. Title picture of C. R. Jakobson's collection of choir songs (1869).

the flags of choirs. It was approvingly mentioned in the Estonian press (*Eesti Postimees* 1866, 20, 7). The "Vanemuine" society organized in 1869 in Tartu the first all-Estonian singing festival which was the beginning of a national tradition that lives on today.

Of special significance in making the mythological heroes widely known were the Estonian translations and recitations of Faehlmann's legends. The first of them were published in the newspaper "Perno Postimees" in 1866 (Nos. 3, 24, 25). One of the most active leaders of the national movement, Carl Robert Jakobson, at once made use of the ancient world of gods. His exceptionally popular reader (Jakobson 1867) includes three ancient Estonian gods: *Ukko*, the god of thunder, *Vanemuine*, the god of singing, and *Taara*, the god of war. In his first famous "fatherland"-speech



Fig. 3. August Weizenberg's "Vanemuine" (1886).

"The Estonians' time of light, darkness and dawn" held in Tartu "Vanemuine" society in 1868, Jakobson presented Faehlmann's whole myth of creation together with all the names of the gods (Jakobson 1870: 8–10). The same legend, including the tale of Vanemuine's departure, can be found in the introduction of Jakobson's collection of choir songs published on the occasion of the first Estonian singing festival in 1869 (the title of the collection is quite characteristic: "Sounds of the lyre of Vanemuine"). And in the second part of his reader (1875) Jakobson included several legends by Faehlmann and his survey "The ancient religion of Estonians". In the piece for reading about the town of Tartu Jakobson dwelt upon its mythic past with the oak grove of Taara and the sounds of the lyre of Vanemuine.

Later on, Faehlmann's myths were often

published, especially in schoolbooks. For the first time, all the eight tales were published in Estonian in the collection of Faehlmann's writings in 1883 (ed. Matthias Johann Eisen). Revising the 7th printing of the 1st part of Jakobson's reader in 1887, school teacher Juhan Kunder included in it Faehlmann's myths "Creation" and "Song of Vanemuine". When in 1905 another reader, namely that of Mihkel Kampmann, became popular, it again presented as "Estonian fairy tales" three myths by Faehlmann and his "gods" which were introduced as real Estonian gods in a writing about the ancient Estonians (p. 271). The myths were also published in a number of special fairy-tale collections (Eisen 1913, Kampmann 1920, et al.).

So the mythological heroes created by Faehlmann were taught for more than half a century, leaving lasting traces in the national consciousness. The pseudo heroes became rooted as real, they acquired a symbolical meaning. In patriotic verses especially the names Taara and Vanemuine were repeatedly used. Books of poetry bore such titles as "Vanemuine or fourfold thread of singing" (Friedrich Kuhlbars, 1870), "The lyre of Taara people" (M. J. Eisen, 1876). Kuhlbars's poem "Vanemuine" from the year 1869 that glorifies the golden time of the Kungla people and Vanemuine's lyre sound throbbing in the breast of the singer, became the most loved song of the Estonian National Awakening period, and its popularity has persisted up to our times. In his literary reader Juhan Kunder (1890: 73) specifically pointed out that this poem of Kuhlbars is "in regard to its contents and beauty of language and the present state of our poetry one of the most beautiful Estonian songs".

Mythological themes were used in verse plays and long poems where among the main characters were to be found Vanemuine, Ilmarine, a.o. (Peeter Jakobson, "Koit and Hämarik", 1884; Anton Jürgenstein, "Juta", 1886; Jakob Liiv, "Spirit of the hill", 1903, etc.). In social life often mythological names were used and such societies were born as the musical societies "Ilmarine" (Narva 1873) and "Endla" (Pärnu 1878), the sports society "Taara" (Tartu 1898) a.o. The leaders of the Estonian national

intelligentsia planned in 1878–1879 to erect on Taara Hill in Tartu a statue of Vanemuine, but this project was not realized due to a lack of finances. The first Estonian sculptor, August Weizenberg, made a preliminary plaster model which he later (1886) carved in marble in reduced dimensions (Paas 1987).

For quite a long time the authenticity of pseudomythological heroes was supported by men of science. In 1851, delivering lectures on Finnish mythology at Helsinki University, M. A. Castrén acknowledged Faehlmann's myth of creation, and he also presented Taara as the main god of the Estonians (1853: 46, 210, 294–296). Such authoritative acceptance must have deepened the Estonians' faith in their new gods. The "Quellen und Realien des Kalevipoeg" (1869) by Kreutzwald's son-in-law Gustav Blumberg treated Taara, Vanemuine, Ilmarine, Ahti, Endla's maiden, Kungla, etc. as genuinely Estonian. The same attitude was taken by academician Ferdinand Johann Wiedemann in his comprehensive work "Aus dem inneren und äusseren Leben der Esten" (1876: 417–446).

Efforts were made to find out the origins of mythological names, e.g., the philologist Mihkel Veske (1875) derived the name *Vanemuine* from the comparative of the adjective *vana* 'old', i.e. *vanem*. Some more new mythological heroes were "discovered". The same M. Veske (1888) found in a false folk song sent to him a god of forest, *Tabovane* (< Finnish *Tapio*) with his wife *Mirmi* (< Finnish *Mimerikki*, *Mielikki*). The young active writer and collector of folklore, Matthias Johann Eisen, in a special article (1889) made quite an arbitrary conclusion that the worship of Taara (borrowed from the Goths or Swedes) flourished in Estonia especially at the beginnings of Christianity in the 13th–16th centuries and that only the Reformation began to push it aside. The authenticity of Faehlmann's mythological constructions was still stressed with conviction in the histories of Estonian literature that came out at the very end of the 19th century (Hermann 1898, Sander 1899).

It is noteworthy that Jakob Hurt, the founder of modern Estonian folklore study, was not captivated by the boom of pseudomythology,

although in his famous youth-poem "Bygones and the present" (1860) he positively presented Vanemuine, the Taara people, Koit and Hämarik. Later on, he treated the ancient Estonian religion with great reservation. In his longer writing (1871) that called upon people to collect folk tradition he said that "the dear doctor Faehlmann in Tartu has written down several ancient Estonian tales", but he avoided mentioning Faehlmann's mythological names when speaking of folk religion. In his survey of Estonian history (1879: 16) he wrote: "It is not yet possible to draw any conclusions about the pagan faith of Estonians, because we lack material which must still be diligently put down from oral tradition". At the same time, following the general trend, he spoke of the "Taara Hill" where Herman, the first bishop of Tartu, had a great cathedral built (Hurt 1879: 108). There was another matter-of-fact researcher, Jaan Jung, who wrote a book about the old religion of Estonians (1879) that was based on folk materials he had collected and did not contain a word about pseudomythology. Nevertheless, in his famous appeal of 1888 that started a mass collection of folklore, Hurt put forward a question: "Might it be that the old names *Ukko*, *Taara*, *Ilmarine*, *Vanemuine* are still living in the oral tradition of people?" (Hurt 1989: 53).

In 1889, a critical attitude towards Faehlmann's and Kreutzwald's mythological heroes was taken by Villem Reiman, a champion of Estonian national disciplines. But ten years later he included into his survey of ancient Estonian faith (1900) some elements of pseudomythology, which was in accordance with scientific views of the time. Decisive purification in pseudomythology was undertaken by M. J. Eisen in his book "Estonian mythology" (1920), although many of his earlier publications had clearly conduced to its dissemination. The only one that remained extant was the mighty heavenly god Taara whose fictitiousness later was definitively demonstrated by Oskar Loo-rits (1951: 35–37).

Henceforward pseudomythology was finally denied by men of science, but amidst people the deeply rooted names continued living. The "Vanemuine" society and theatre in Tartu re-

mained as central institutions of Estonian culture. In the Estonian Republic there was on the Emajõgi River and Lake Peipsi a whole fleet of boats that bore the names "Vane-muine", "Taara", "Ahti", "Uku", "Kungla". In 1920 in Tallinn a joint-stock company of metal industry, named "Ilmarine", was founded. In the mid-1920s the pseudoritualistic Taara faith became propagated as a historically "true" Estonian religion. That all was but a subsiding aftermath of the boom of pseudomythology during the time of national awakening when many of the supposedly mythological heroes were accepted as "real" by the people.

It is evident that in the difficult times people get strength and courage from mythological thought. A new, peculiar renaissance of such thought has been noticeable in present-day Estonia since the 1970s when intensifying Russification made people aware of the situation of national danger. In no time great popularity was achieved by the writer Lennart Meri with his fancyful travel book about ancient times, "Hõbevalge" ("Silverwhite", 1976) that was later followed by the second book, "Hõbevalgem" ("Silverwhiter", 1984). In these works a serious attempt was made to demonstrate that the ancient Thule of Pytheas was the Estonian island Saaremaa in the Baltic Sea. Greatly appreciated became Kaljo Põllu's graphical series on Estonian olden times "Kodalased" and "Kali-vägi" for which the poet Jaan Kaplinski wrote the texts. Successful were Olev Soans's graphical maps of Estonia, dedicated to different aspects of Estonian history and culture. Exceptionally broad resonance have found the musical fantasies on the Estonian antiquity by the composer Veljo Tormis. The archaeological hypothesis that already in the 3rd millennium B.C. there was a Finno-Ugric population on the Estonian territory (Jaanits et al. 1982: 122–125; Selirand & Tõnisson 1984: 46–49) has served as a basis for the proud conviction that we Estonians have lived in our native country for nearly five thousand years and are thus the most ancient people with a fixed abode in Europe.

As a matter of fact, the developing contacts between Estonians and the other Finno-Ugric peoples also attest to the growing interest in

ancient times. Lennart Meri has shot two successful films, "Veelinnurahvas" ("Waterfowl people", 1970) and "Linnutee tuuled" ("Winds of the Milky Way", 1978) about Finno-Ugric peoples and their traditional cultures. Joint exploring and collecting expeditions to the eastern Finno-Ugric peoples have been undertaken by the Estonian National Museum (till 1988 the State Ethnographic Museum) and students of art. Expeditions are organized to Lake Onega and the White Sea to copy and study the rock drawings discovered there. Recently in Tartu the Ural Society was established to promote Finno-Ugric research. So we witness a new boom of antiquity that meets the psychical needs of people under oppression and struggling for their independence.

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