

# LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 16, No.2 - Summer 1970

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## KARL RISTIKIVI'S HISTORICAL NOVELS — A PANORAMA OF SHADOW AND LIGHT

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"More than the dusty facts of the chronicles I love the blue mist of the legends," tells Karl Ristikivi in the first novel of his gigantic historical series. Thus it is altogether proper that the present treatment of his work does not pretend to be an exhaustive exercise in literary criticism, but tries to remain a poetic, highly personal, and impressionistic sketch of the vast panorama reaching from the Crusades up to the Renaissance.

Ristikivi's first historical novel created somewhat of a disappointment in Estonian literary circles. It has to be remembered that — while only 25 years old — Ristikivi had won a nationwide literary prize with his first novel "Fire and Steel", and his previous novel "All Souls' Night" seemed like a modern turning point in Estonian prose. Now — a conventional historical novel?!? Really, is that all?

Seven years and seven books later, it was finally clear: no, it was not all; it was only the beginning.

For the benefit of non-Estonian readers — also for Estonians who cannot simultaneously recall all the eight books — I shall outline the main themes: eight years of writing compressed into eight minutes.

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*The Burning Banner*, Ristikivi's first historical novel, takes place in Southern Germany and Italy in 1266 -68. The narration follows young Conradin, the Duke of Swabia and the last Hohenstaufen, on his ill-fated campaign to unify both countries and to become the new Roman Emperor. The sixteen year old Conradin, honest, noble and completely dedicated to his mission of creating order in the chaos of interregnum, follows a path of victory through Pavia, Pisa, Siena and Rome. Then in a single brutal afternoon at Tagliacozzo his victorious army is defeated by a ruthless tactical maneuver of Charles I. Conradin is captured and beheaded at Naples, "abandoned by the Germans, betrayed by the Italians, murdered by the French".

The second novel, *The Last City*, creates an apocalyptic vision of the fall of the last Christian stronghold — Acre — to Moslems in 1291. It is a chronicle of doom and despair, narrated by Roger Blondel de Tressalin, an old Knight Hospitaller. The narrator traces out his life starting with his childhood in Athens, followed by an escape to the island of Cyprus. Almost accidentally (or by divine design?) he joins the Knights Templars in Acre. After years of honest service the Templars cast him out (due to a treacherous false accusation). He becomes a Knight Hospitaller, dedicated to the care of the sick and wounded. The last three chapters of his story is a highly dramatic description of the bitter final battles and destruction of Acre. He writes the story as a very old man, known by others as Roger the Simpleminded.

Novel number three is titled *Riders of Death* and follows the battles of the mercenary Grand Catalan Company under its legendary commander Roger de Flor in 1302 -11. The story covers almost the whole Mediterranean landscape — starts in Mallorca, moves to Sicily, and follows the numerous victorious battles around Constantinople. After Roger is assassinated in the Emperor's Palace, the revengeful Company ravages the countryside they originally came to defend and in a final battle (another ruthless tactical trick!) annihilates the 8000-man cavalry of the Duke of Athens, capturing the city and becoming a new nobility. The narrator — a member of the Catalan Company — gets disillusioned, then has to escape the wrath of the new Duke, and finally becomes a simple merchant in Genoa.

The fourth book in the series is an interlude called *Island of Miracles*. It follows the form of a medieval manuscript so closely (purportedly by Niccolo Casarmana) that a number of readers — especially after three authentic historical novels

by Ristikivi — took it for non-fiction. It is actually a flight of fancy, following a ship that during the plague of 1348 sails westward and discovers Allotria (Greek for "Strange Land") that resembles various legends of Atlantis. Furthermore, "Island of Miracles" is amazingly similar to a Hollywood "epic" on the same theme (Ristikivi has an old weakness for movies!), but with two significant differences — the movie glorified only technical achievements and was dead serious, Ristikivi concentrates on the psychology of the people in this "ideal social paradise" and covers the whole scene with hidden humor, irony and parody. In beautiful, simple medieval language he describes modern ideas like sex education, contraceptives, Marilyn Monroe, a game strangely resembling football, etc. A commercial for NECTAR & AMBROSIA (the favorites of Greek Gods) is especially delicious. The end of the island reflects shadows of the atomic age... or is it three-dimensional stereophonic super-television?? Ristikivi leaves both possibilities up to the reader...

*The Bridal Veil* — fifth novel of the series — returns to real historical persons and facts. It follows the life of St. Catharine of Siena (1347-80). The daughter of a simple artisan, Catharine started to have mystic visions in her childhood ("Somehow they forgot to close the door to Heaven and I clearly saw them all.") Ristikivi pictures her simple, austere life, sacrificed completely to the sick and the poor. She becomes a nun in the third Order of the Dominicans. Miracles start to happen in the footsteps of "The Bride of Christ". Street ruffians, priests and noblemen — all experience a strange metamorphosis when they meet "La Popolana" (The Daughter of the People) with her message to love all mankind, to be brothers to all men. Almost illiterate herself, she starts dictating letters that she sends to bishops, cardinals, kings and finally the Pope himself. She finally goes to Avignon and convinces Pope Gregory XI to return from the "Babylonian Captivity" to his people in Rome.

The "hero" of the sixth novel, *Hymn of Joy*, is David Cambrianus, the son of a Welsh peasant, who lives roughly between 1360-s and 1420-s in a France torn by the Hundred Year War. His stormy life has only few sunny moments of happiness — even the latter tend to end in disasters. In his childhood a remarkable singer, David on his long travels learns to master various musical instruments, loves many girls (from the castles to the streets), works for many masters (from outlaws to the King of France) and finally becomes what a few centuries later everybody would call a composer. The dream of his life is to write a "Hymn of Joy", to praise the Lord and all that is good and beautiful in life. As an old man, after losing his whole family in war and riots, he finally composes (perhaps in a feverish illusion?) his masterpiece — about three men praising the Lord in the burning fiery furnace... (for this novel K. R. received the Visnapuu prize.)

*Student of Witchcraft*, the seventh novel, has certain similarities to the Seventh Seal (or Seventh Veil?). At least one reviewer was captivated by the outer shell of the story that takes place between 1410-40(?): Dr. Johann Faber studies mysticism, anatomy, alchemy and is finally sentenced to die for bewitching a young maiden (ah - ha, the Faust legend!); there is a short retelling of the Dracula episode, etc. But hidden behind the medieval witchcraft is a mind that grows up, searches for truth, matures, and finally makes peace with the universe. It is a book of new, fleeting ideas and questions in the mind of the new kind of medieval man: Can you really trust a 2000-year old medical authority? Can there be a connection between noble metals and indivisible numbers — like gold could correspond to 79 or 97? Couldn't all people of Europe unite under the same ruler? But the man who asks these strange questions is sentenced to be burned at a stake... and the moment they light the fire, the landscape is darkened by a solar eclipse...

Number eight, *The Gates of Sigtuna* Karl Ristikivi has called simply — a storybook. Ten seemingly disconnected episodes run from 1453 to approximately 1560-s. The mood changes from back-slapping laughter, to tongue-in-the-cheek, to smiling-through-tears, to pure poetic. The cast of characters includes: a Greek philosopher, "who never learned to shut up"; a German refugee in Italy writing witty lampoons about the Pope; amorous Don Juan meeting pious Joan of Arc in limbo, where both finally have to admit they were not superhuman — just human; a traveling rogue of a storyteller in Flanders — telling old fairytales with a new ironical twist at the end; the travels of a Swede to the vodka-conscious Novgorod; a Finnish minor war completely garbled by a young over-anxious historian; an Estonian peasant carrying home his master — a dead Livonian Knight — through half of Russia, and finally and old, cruel Baltic Governor, seated on his castle wall on a late autumn night, listening to the sad, accusing cries of the swans flying under the cold, moonlit sky.

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A matter of extreme importance — at least to a poet — is form, i. e. the frame surrounding the picture. The beauty inherent in a precise framework (e. g. a Shakespearean sonnet) sooner or later exercises a strange magic on any true poet. And I claim that Ristikivi in his historical novels exhibits a remarkable knowledge of poetical form.

Not only has he created an interesting framework for the series of eight novels: three tragical books always followed by a humorous flight of fancy, but the "frames" surrounding each individual book show also the careful handiwork of a true craftsman.

In "The Burning Banner" each of the twelve chapters is named after a symbol of heraldry (Flag, Rose, Star, Heart, Sword, Cross, etc.), properly matching the nobility and chivalry of young Conradin.

In "The Last City" — a story within a story — the old crusader uses short biblical resumes of each chapter for subtitles ("Here Brother Roger shows among other things, that even when we walk on the paths of sin, the hand of God guides our every step.")

"The Riders of Death" is divided into five parts, each starting by and describing in detail two stanzas of medieval ballad "La Grande Compania Catalana".

As previously mentioned, "Island of Miracles" is also a story within a story, successfully imitating a medieval manuscript set between a matter of fact introduction by the author, and a scholarly set of notes and commentaries.

In "The Bridal Veil" each chapter is sharply divided into two halves: first the author describes the scene and actions, then a personal witness stands up and testifies about the same incident in his own words (e. g. the first witness is a childhood friend and the last is Pope Gregorius XI).

A new variation on the same theme is used in the "Hymn of Joy", where each chapter is divided into three parts, the first and the last always being a narrative, while the center part is a highly personal "stream of consciousness" type of inner monologue of the main character.

Next Ristikivi uses once again the method of story within a story in "Student of Witchcraft", where Johann Faber tells the story of his life in three days. The fact that the story has to last exactly three days — no less, no more — is important. There are various hints about it (almost like in a detective story!) hidden throughout the book. This by the way explains the need for introducing the Count Drachenheim (alias Dracula) episode, etc.

The structure of "The Gates of Sigtuna" somehow resembles (at least to me) modern science fiction. It can be compared to a four-dimensional view from a flying saucer traveling over medieval Europe, both in space and time, hovering over certain landscapes at certain years, reporting how men were slowly, painfully, but irresistibly moving from the shadow into the light.

Obviously, all the themes and ideas treated in the eight novels cannot be discussed in a paper of present size. Only a short sketch of the main ideas is attempted for each book in the large panorama.

The first three volumes treat, correspondingly, the death of the old idea of the Roman Empire, as a symbol for a peaceful millenium; the collapse of the military might of the Crusaders and a corresponding blow to the old dogmatic religion, and finally a destruction of human and moral values (chivalry!) in the Catalan Company. It is highly characteristic of Ristikivi that the trilogy moves in this direction, from Empire to human being, as in Karl Ristikivi's philosophy much importance is placed on the values, aspirations, and potentialities hidden in each man.

The fourth book, as mentioned before, is an interlude where a medieval manuscript describes a fantastic island, where some universal human problems (especially certain problems of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries!) are treated.

The next trilogy describes in successive volumes: the rebirth of religion in a new, more human form, closer to the suffering and hopes of simple people; the birth of a new musical form that seems to open the gateways into what we now call classical music, and finally the first half-scared, half-superstitious steps into science — alchemy that shows the first promises of modern chemistry, astrology that hides the seeds of a future flight to the moon!

The eighth book symbolizes the travels of the new humanistic ideas northwards all over Europe.

For all reviewers the subject of ultimate fascination is to condense the ideas of the whole book into a single word. In this light the following shorthand equations can be offered:

- 1) first trilogy — the death of *Kingdom, power, and glory*.
- 2) second trilogy — the (re)birth of *religion, music and science*.
- 3) interludes — *flights of fancy* (in 4-dimentional space-time).

In his eight historical novels, Karl Ristikivi has created a vast panorama of shadow and light. His main ideas express a deep sense of humanity, brotherhood of all men, and a search for freedom and self-realization. He believes the immortality of all the above ideas, even while men and nations disappear in dust. And he remains always close to the people he describes ("Unluckily, my kingdom has always been of this earth") whispers one of his characters).

Both good and bad, ugly and beautiful are treated with equal honesty. Ristikivi's approach can be described best with an exclamation from the "Student of Witchcraft": "Better open-eyed in hell, than blind in paradise!"

In conclusion, in his historical novels Ristikivi's philosophy of life emerges as skeptical humanitarianism. He acknowledges the shortcomings, the pains and miseries of human existence, but he still believes that — at unpredictable times, even if only for a fleeting moment — a rare human soul can light up the whole dark firmament of mankind.

Põlev Lipp (The Burning Banner), 1961  
Viimne Linn (The Last City), 1962  
Surma Ratsanikud (Riders of Death), 1963  
Imede Saar (Island of Miracles), 1964  
Mõrsjalinik (The Bridal Veil), 1965  
Rõõmulaul (Hymn of Joy), 1966  
Nõiduse Opilane (Student of Witchcraft), 1967  
Sigtuna Väravad (The Gates of Sigtuna), 1968

All published by: Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv Fack 1, Lund 3, Sweden

*Other Novels*

Tuli Ja Raud (Fire and Steel), 1938  
Õige Mehe Koda (The House of a Righteous Man), 1940  
Rohtaed (The Garden), 1942  
Kõik Mis Kunagi OH (All That Ever Was), 1946  
Ei Juhtunud Midagi (Nothing Happened At All), 1947  
Hingede ÕÕ (All Souls' Night), 1953