

“I AM NOTHING MORE THAN A WORD IN HUMAN FORM”. VIIVI LUIK’S POETICS OF IDENTITY¹

“Literature [...] is the verbal expression of human feelings, a message from a human being to a human being, a message about [another] human being to a human being. How would we be able to understand others if we did not believe that they feel the same as we do?”² This is how Estonian novelist, poet and essayist Viivi Luik (b. 1946) expresses her poetic credo and her view on the essence of being human in an interview for the literary journal *Looming* from 1983, two years before the publication of *Seitsmes rahukevad* [*The Seventh Spring of Peace*] (1985), an iconic autobiographical novel about the postwar generation. Retaining its urgency throughout her literary career, the topic of the need to relate to the other re-emerges in a longer reflective essay where Luik mentions a lifelong longing for “a perceptive and encouraging OTHER”, who would support the belief that “despite everything, you are not alone in the world, that somewhere there have been and still are OTHERS who feel the same [...] the (main) purpose of art is [to bring] this kind of message and pass it on from person to person”³.

In this article, I offer a discussion of Luik’s work with a focus on her third novel, *Varjuteater* [*The Shadow Theater*] (2010), a recognizably self-representational, generically ambivalent work where the desire to comprehend human existence emerges through the poetics of encounter and reciprocity of address, forming parallels and points of connection with Adrina Cavarero’s philosophical paradigm of the narratable self. Arguing that in the work of Viivi Luik, the poetics of identity – for her inseparable from the perception of the world and her self(hood), shapes and ultimately comes to prevail over the politics of identity, the article seeks to make visible the processes of construction of subjectivity that resist the expectations of gendered, national and (Eastern) European categories of identity.

Viivi Luik is one of the most well-known and well-loved contemporary authors and public intellectuals in Estonia, the author of three novels⁴ and thirteen poetry collections whose work has been viewed as “constitut[ing] a representative

¹ This article was written during my time as the Juris Padegs Research Associate at the Yale MacMillan Center for European Studies.

² Viivi Luik, “Vastused *Loomingu* küsimustele” [“Answers to the *Looming* Editors’ Questions”], *Looming*, 1985, 2, p. 253.

³ Viivi Luik, Hedi Rosma, *Ma olen raamat* [*I Am a Book*], Tallinn, Kirjastus SE&JS, 2010, p. 104.

⁴ Besides the two mentioned novels, Luik also published *Ajaloo ilu* [*The Beauty of History*] in 1991.

model for a whole generation of authors in Estonian literature”⁵. *Seitsmes rahukevad*, taking place in the fall of 1950 and the spring of 1951, is an autobiographical account of the author’s childhood in post-war Estonia in a family of the so-called new settlers (*uusmaasaajad*)⁶ in rural Viljandimaa. *Varjuteater* focuses on the time that Luik spent in Rome with her husband, Estonian diplomat and writer Jaak Jõerüüt, who held the position of the Estonian ambassador to Italy from 1998–2002, unravels as Luik’s metaphorical (life-long) journey to Rome that, constituting for her the quintessence of Europeanness as an existential rather than a purely cultural dimension. In terms of genre, it is an ambivalent or even enigmatic work in which the multiplicity of ways of reading and interpretation and the multifaceted dynamics of the addressee form an integral part of the organic texture of the work. On the one hand, *Varjuteater* is self-representational writing where the author emphasizes, sometimes in a hyperbolized manner, that she is mediating her life experience, that which she has lived through. On the other hand, self-revelational processes of direct autobiographical nature do not define the presented self or the novel’s text. In Adriana Cavarero’s paradigm of selfhood based on the narratable and interactive nature of identity, appearance can be comprehended as the narratability of the self. Identifying parallels and points of connection between Cavarero’s philosophical paradigm and modes of self-narration that characterize Luik’s literary *oeuvre*, I will focus on the poetic strategies of self-representation in *Seitsmes rahukevad* and in *Varjuteater*, where the desire to comprehend human existence emerges through the reciprocity of address and possibility of encounter and the creation of an autobiographical subject develops within a dynamic of appearance.

In her *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood* (1997/2000), Adriana Cavarero presents a theory of selfhood that is centered on the concept of the narratable self, connecting self-perception to “the spontaneous narrating structure of memory and the narratability of identity”⁷. A comparable view has been advanced by Paul John Eakin who has highlighted the central role of self-narration in the creation of identity, allowing identity to be viewed as “living a narrative”⁸. This “fabric of lived experience” shapes and organizes life daily in the format of

⁵ Arne Merilai, “Of Hard Joy: Half a Century of Viivi Luik’s Creations. Poetry”, *Interlitteraria*, 18, 2013, 1, p. 212.

⁶ The so-called new settlers were given land confiscated from well-to-do farmers (farms with over 30 hectares of land) during the land reform of 1940–1941. The two waves of deportations – one in June 1941 in particular and the one in March 1949 included farmers whose households, in many cases, were very far from being “kulak farms”, that is, farms based on the exploitation of farm labor according to the Soviet ideology.

⁷ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 34.

⁸ Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically. How We Create Identity in Narrative*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2008, p. 2.

series of partially unconscious fragments⁹ that, as an “interplay between socio-cultural structures and individual creativity”¹⁰, highlight the relational nature of identity and subjectivity¹¹. Although the conceptualization of selfhood and identity of Cavarero and Eakin bear certain resemblances, for Cavarero, the self is not synonymous with that of the individual or subjectivity but is close to Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of singular existent, which for Nancy replaces the concept of the subject, denoting “a singularity or a hereness (*haecceitas*) as the place of emission, reception, or transition (of affect, of action, of language, etc.)”¹². Cavarero’s paradigm relies on Hannah Arendt’s understanding of the uniqueness of each individual, which cannot be elaborated through philosophical thought that can only include those qualities and features that an individual shares with the other human beings¹³. Uniqueness – the “who I am” – is, according to Arendt, mediated through actions and speech and, according to Cavarero, through the (life) story¹⁴. It is not based on the individual’s ability to mediate his/ her story, but on the desire to be narrated: identity emerges through someone else’s mediation of our story¹⁵. The narratability of every human life is an essential category that precedes the story that someone lives and leaves behind. Cavarero’s understanding of the nature of identity is based on Arendt’s postulate of the necessity of the other: the uniqueness of the self can only be expressed through appearing to the other(s), which Cavarero, in turn, connects with the desire for narration¹⁶. In the preface to the English translation of Cavarero’s work, Paul A. Kottman emphasizes that in Cavarero’s approach, the “other” or the “necessary other”, as Cavarero refers to it, must be understood primarily as another person, as an existent, as a unique being¹⁷. According to Arendt, “appearing is not the superficial phenomenon of a more intimate and true ‘essence’. Appearing is the *whole* of being, understood as a plural finitude of existing”¹⁸.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 1-4.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 106. See also Marianne Gullestad, *Everyday Life Philosophers: Modernity, Morality, and Autobiography in Norway*, Oslo, Scandinavian University Press, 1996.

¹¹ Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories. Making Selves*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 43-98.

¹² Jean-Luc Nancy, “Introduction”, in E. Cadava, P. Connor, J.-L. Nancy (eds.), *Who Comes After the Subject?*, New York and London, Routledge, 1991, pp. 4-5.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 181.

¹⁴ Paul A. Kottman, “Translator’s Introduction”, in *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. vii-viii. See also Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 13.

¹⁵ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 20.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 20. See also Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 183.

¹⁷ Paul Kottman, “Introduction”, p. xii.

¹⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 20. See also Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, San Diego – New York – London, Harcourt, Inc, 1971, p. 19.

According to Cavarero, everyone perceives herself and others as unique individuals whose identity can be told as a (life) story¹⁹. Identity (and uniqueness) rests on memory but is embedded not in the conscious process of remembering but in the spontaneous narrative structure of memory²⁰. The narratable self is an essential category through which we perceive ourselves and others. It has no (direct) connection to a specific (auto)biographical story, telling the story of one's or another's life in an oral or written medium. Cavarero refutes several assumptions of traditional (auto)biographical narrative, such as the possibility of conveying the truth about oneself, which has been one of the fundamentals of defining the so-called autobiography proper. According to Philippe Lejeune, autobiography entails both an autobiographical pact – a supposition “that there is identity of name between the author (such as he describes, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character that is being talked about” and a referential pact, on the truth (value) of autobiography, that functions as a “supplementary proof of honesty” indicating the extent of the autobiographical truth²¹. Cavarero, however, claims that the author does not tell the truth, but only claims to do so: “the self is the protagonist in a game that celebrates the *self as other* [...] presuppo[sing] the absence of another who truly is an other [...] the self is [...] here both the actor and the spectator, the narrator and the listener, in a single person”²². According to Cavarero, the uniqueness of identity can only be expressed via a perception of the narratable self and the desire for unity revealed as a story. Thus, the self cannot emerge by conscious and purposeful manifestation. Yet, in her work, Cavarero keeps returning to different forms of (auto)biographical narration, attributing to them, as it were, the possibility of transmitting selfhood and identity through narration. The narratable self is neither a word nor a text, but relying on the examples that Cavarero uses to make her argument, for example, the self-representational strategies of Karen Blixen and Gertrud Stein; it can be argued that both the word and the text are privileged sites for the self to be narrated, thus depending on the skills of storytelling.

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In *Varjuteater*, the author/narrator retains affiliation with the national memorial framework via episodes touching upon the repressions of the Soviet period and the regaining of independence in August of 1991. The novel also focuses on the post-socialist unease of a European (be)longing after the collapse of

¹⁹ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 33. Although Cavarero's concept of the narratable self is not gender specific, female pronouns “she” and “her” are used in the English translation.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

²¹ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 12, 22.

²² Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 40.

the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although the novel was published in Estonian and addressed primarily to the Estonian reader, the axes of self-definition outlined in the novel connect to broader discussions of European memory and identity, along the axes of the distinction between East and West of Europe against the backdrop of the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the enlargement process of the EU. From the perspective of the (former) East, identity processes are hampered by the fear that there is no escape from marginality and that recognition on equal grounds in Europe may remain an unattainable ideal²³. Discussing how the meaning of Europe is imagined from Eastern Europe, Slavenka Drakulić proposes that Europe is "something that must be reached, that must be earned", something that grows both within reach and out of reach as "the promised land, [as] a new Utopia"²⁴. In *Varjuteater*, this is, for instance, made visible through the author's almost fanatical determination to view her whole life as a journey to Rome, the heart of old Europe, that I will discuss in more detail later on. The poetic-philosophical mindset of all Luik's work and present in *Varjuteater*, via an emphasis on relationality and narratability, facilitates the emergence of an autonomous agency that has the capacity of unhinging itself from the burden of the traumatic pasts via an intense focus on the universal characteristics of human existence. Although this does not exist independently of historical and sociocultural contexts, it can form connections and liaisons across time and space by surpassing the narrow(er) confines of contextually defined identity.

Similarly to the *Seitsmes rahukevad*, where gendered concerns have been cast aside both by the reception and by the author herself in favor of highlighting its status as the voice of the postwar generation, despite the fact that the protagonist of the novel is a five-year-old girl, in *Varjuteater*, gender is not highlighted as an identity category of major relevance. The protagonist of *Seitsmes rahukevad* is never called by her name and is only minimally defined by gender attributes. Also, in her consideration of the autobiographical roots of novel, Luik always refers to the protagonist as "a child" and never as a "girl"²⁵. Although it is not always possible to distinguish between the levels of "me" and "us" in the text, a consideration of the novel as a work of life writing enables a view of the novel as a story of a girl's childhood and the journey of becoming a female writer, a perspective also present though not strongly highlighted in *Varjuteater*. In *Seitsmes rahukevad*, the construction of subjectivity is centered around the struggle of psychological and poetic survival and the possibility of attaining autonomous subjecthood. Among the ruptures and dislocations characterizing the young protagonist's time-space, those caused by the breaking down of the

²³ George Schöpflin, *The Dilemmas of Identity*, Tallinn, Tallinn University Press, 2010, p. 266.

²⁴ Slavenka Drakulić, *Café Europa. Life After Communism*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 12.

²⁵ Viivi Luik, *Inimese kapike [Our Human Storage]*, Tallinn, Vagabund, 1998, pp. 7-12.

dynamics of gender roles of the prewar Estonian society as the result of World War II and the onslaught of the Soviet regime play an important role.

In the opening pages of *Varjuteater*, the author/narrator briefly returns to the places, moods, and self-representational strategies of *Seitsmes rahukevad* (1985). This, however, does not point only toward the need to interpret the recognizable references to *Seitsmes rahukevad* in terms of thematic continuity but, as importantly, in terms of the poetics of self-representation. Thematic continuity emerges with reference to farms left empty due to the mass deportations of 1949 in the author/narrator's home area in Viljandimaa. The author/narrator relates this setting to her first memory of Rome, describing discovering a "thick, high-quality book with a picture of the Roman Colosseum" on the floor of a deserted farmhouse from which all family members had been deported²⁶. Emphasizing that "there would be no reason to play this old, worn, raspy and creaky deportation record yet again, had it not been the beginning of [her] journey to Rome"²⁷, Luik seems to refer to the outdatedness of the repressions of the Soviet regime as a literary topic at the end of the first decade of the new millennium and the frameworks of national memory based on the paradigm of "suffering and resistance"²⁸. In 1985, when *Seitsmes rahukevad* was published, deportation was not a topic that could be openly discussed. In the novel, it was mediated through the description of the games of the young protagonist wandering around deserted farms like a playground, claiming parts of the deserted farms as her possessions – a view not directly contradicting that of the Soviet ideology. If no other places are available, "children also play on gravesites", Viivi Luik has argued in an interview focusing

²⁶ Viivi Luik, *Varjuteater [The Shadow Theater]*, Tallinn, Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 2010, p. 9.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

²⁸ Ene Kõresaar, Kirsti Jõesalu, "Mälutööst elulooliste mälu-uuringuteni. Märkusi biograafilise kultuuriuurimise ja nõukogudejärgse Eesti mälu-uuringute seoste kohta" ["Post-communist Memories and Life Stories in Estonia: From Memory Work to Life Historical Memory Studies"], *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, 27, 2021, 2, p. 358. In their overview of the development and foci of memory studies in Estonia, Kõresaar and Jõesalu point to the excessive dominance of "trauma narrative focusing on repressions of the Soviet regime" in the public discourses of memory that, in their opinion, had, by the turn of the century, started harming public memory by considering irrelevant the more calm and peaceful experience of the Soviet everyday. However, over the last years, the question of addressing traumatic memory has emerged with new intensity with a focus on intergenerational processes of transmission of memory both in the literary and essayistic work of the second and third-generation authors. See, for example, Imbi Paju, *Kirjanduskliinik [The Literary Clinic]*, Tallinn, Gallus, 2023, and Lilli Luuk, *Minu venna keha [My Brother's Body]*, Tallinn, Hea Lugu, 2022. In my research on the deportation narratives of Estonian and Baltic women, I have argued that despite the relatively wide circulation of the notion of collective trauma in public discourses of memory, emphasis on the successful survival of the regime has limited the possibilities of making visible the hurtful and potentially traumatic nature of individual repression experience. See, for example, Leena Kurvet-Käosaar, "Travelling Memory and Memory of Travel in Estonian Women's Deportation Stories", in Melanie Ilic (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 183-198.

on the impact of war and occupation on children's perception of the world and their possibilities of orienting themselves in it²⁹. When roaming around in empty farms, the protagonist simultaneously embodies the Soviet mentality of the early 1950s, "its treacherous pathetic optimism and cruel brightness" which, in Luik's view, is transmitted through certain features of the girl's character, e.g., her recklessness and unconcern for the others³⁰ and struggles to handle her fears on postwar rural landscapes surrounding her where one could find "a gun or a human being buried under a pile of timber"³¹. By returning to a scene from her earlier novel, using a different manner of describing it – now directly naming the reason why the farmhouse has been left empty – Luik also reminds her readers of the more indirect presence of this theme in *Seitsmes rahukevad*, the inclusion of which was at that time a very close call in terms of censorship.

In terms of politics of memory and identity, Luik's return to the deportation scene familiar from *Seitsmes rahukevad* in her *Varjuteater* can be interpreted both as an affirmation of belonging to a generation affected by the repressions and highlighting the need to retain a national memorial frame based on it as well as a way of distancing herself from it. *Varjuteater* delineates an identity trajectory that displays the solidarity of the author with her childhood rural landscapes distorted by the war and its aftermath and the footprints of the repressive apparatus of the Soviet regime that allows to relate the author to the conceptual frame of postmemory, as part of the generation referred by Eva Hoffman as a "hinge generation [...] the second generation after every calamity"³² that while retaining a loyalty to it also seeks the possibilities for a (semi)autonomous frame of memory and identity.

²⁹ Valle-Sten Maiste, "Maailm ja inimene kardavad vabad olla" ["The World and People are Afraid to be Free"], *Postimees: Arter*, 2000, August 26, p. 12.

³⁰ Viivi Luik, *Inimese kapike*, p. 10.

³¹ Viivi Luik, *Seitsmes rahukevad* [*The Seventh Spring of Peace*], Tallinn, Eesti Raamat, 1985, p. 3. The novel takes place during the times when the guerilla movement was still active, especially in Virumaa, Pärnumaa and Viljandimaa (where the novel takes place) and Võrumaa, that were Estonia's most deeply forested areas. By the time of mass collectivization, the dream of restored independence had vanished and revenge against the Soviet regime had become the major driving force behind the guerilla movement.

³² Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, New York, Public Affairs, 2004, pp. xv, 103. Questions of transgenerational memory, including Garbiele Schwab's conceptualization of "the legacies of violence not only haunt the [...] victims but also are passed on through the generations" (*Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010, p. 1) emerge more strongly in Luik's first novel, *Seitsmes rahukevad*, and would merit a separate study as the focus of the current article is dominantly on questions of *Varjuteater*, whereas what can be referred to as remnants of postgenerational trauma could only be addressed via a more thorough discussion of *Seitsmes rahukevad*.

The most prominent autobiographical feature of *Seitsmes rahukevad* is the young narrator/protagonist's strong sense of time(s) and her struggle for the right to a future time frame accommodating her hopes and freedoms beyond a present that is in constant danger of being invaded by the events of the past. To confirm that the past does not have the power to define her, the phrase *minu asi* (my business) is frequently used in the novel, mediated both by the adult author/narrator's voice and that of the child narrator. It emerges especially powerfully in the episode where the young protagonist pokes around in a beehive and finds a German bayonet that she considers to have been "brought from a distant battlefield"³³. She feels "suddenly involved in a dark story", a feeling that cannot be alleviated or resolved in the way she usually deals with her fears by viewing them as her "prerogatives" as in this situation where she is on her own, her "privilege of fear" is of no help³⁴. After some reflection, she "cold-bloodedly wraps the bayonet in the paper again" and puts it back in the beehive, assuring herself: "This was none of my business"³⁵. Describing the discovery of a picture of the Colosseum in a picture book thrown on the floor by the deporters in *Varjuteater*, Luik revives the temporal frame familiar from *Seitsmes rahukevad*. "This did not concern me. It wasn't my business"³⁶ is her conclusion of the traces of deportation on the floor of an empty farm.

In an episode focusing on the events of August 1991, the exact time when Estonia declared independence, Luik describes walking on the streets of Tallinn, "with a cold weapon, a Swiss pocketknife in my pocket which our friend Heinz Stadler had given to JJ as a sign of friendship" that she now was holding on to "like a human hand"³⁷. Unlike the German bayonet in the beehive, this knife is not only "her (own) business", but forms a connecting link between her and other people she met on the streets in those days, who, like her, "were childishly and desperately [tucking] their hands into their pockets"³⁸. The author, however, is not only united with the others by the wish to protect themselves and their country but also by the willingness to use it. "I was ready to thrust the knife in the eye of a living person, a Soviet soldier, if necessary", she writes. "My flesh, bones and blood vessels will remember this decision until the hour of my death"³⁹. This lasting embodied memory attests to the inevitability of relationality at the limit of being human.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 23-24.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

³⁶ Viivi Luik, *Varjuteater*, pp. 9-10.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

Although the desire to determine the course of one's life without being haunted by the past is strongly highlighted in both novels, in *Seitsmes rahukevad* even with the help of a different font, it ultimately proves impossible. This is mediated via direct autobiographical representation that in *Varjuteater* seems to be further highlighted by the reduction of the author's life (course) to a journey to Rome, the starting point of which the author connects to the main theme of *Seitsmes rahukevad*: the journey toward her own time and space. Although the author does not let the reader of *Varjuteater* forget this symbolic trajectory along which she constructs her subjectivity, its power gradually fades away when the limits of direct self-representational practices increasingly come into focus.

Reminiscing about the events of August 1991, Luik points out that "a lot has been said and written about [...] in Estonia. There are as many thoughts and opinions about it as there were people who lived in Estonia that day"⁴⁰. Although elsewhere in her novel, the "I" cannot behold the self, in the description of the events of August 1991, the author's own experiences, impressions and memories emerge as the focus of the narrative: "I am talking about what I lived through"⁴¹, she highlights repeatedly. The emphasis on the "I" in the account of the events of August 1991 do not fit into Luik's conceptualization of the "I" as impersonal that for her is the basis for wholeness that unites the world and people. Yet it is precisely through the need to mediate her personal experience of the events of August 1991 that questions of utmost importance concerning her existence are posed to her: "I didn't know then that life is a tightrope, like walking on a knife's edge, and what is here today may be gone tomorrow. I didn't know yet that the little things in life that you find so annoying and share with others constitute happiness"⁴², she writes. During the two days she spent alone at home in August 1991, a connection is formed between her personal experience and perception of life and those of other people, her compatriots.

Relationality, which is the basis of self-perception in the novel, is mediated in different episodes from strongly differing vantage points. The author/narrator overhears a conversation in a grocery store about the fear of Soviet military action against people on the street and in the seat of the government seeking to restore national independence. Comparing the reactions of the people in the grocery store to her own, she writes: "This state of being ready for anything united the saleswoman with the writer and the physician with the plumber like blood, united people as a nation perhaps more than all patriotic speeches put together"⁴³. Here, she does not relate to her fellow Estonians through a perception of narratability as a defining feature of all human beings but through clearly perceived and expressed

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

knowledge of similar modes of comprehension of the experience of a concrete historical event.

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A dialogical essay co-authored by Viivi Luik and Hedi Rosma titled *Ma olen raamat [I am a Book]* (2010), which was originally planned to be published together with *Varjuteater* provides a differing perspective of mediation and narratability – one that ultimately prevails in the novel as well⁴⁴. Referring to her whole literary oeuvre more broadly but embracing also *Varjuteater*, in her response to one of Rosma's questions, Luik elaborates her poetic credo that mirrors her perception of the meaning and nature of art at the beginning of her literary career that was outlined at the beginning of the article. Addressing Luik, Rosma marvels “you are exactly what you write, and you write exactly as you are”, and Luik replies:

[...] you are talking about something here that I feel in a very special way about myself. That I am a book. What I write is not “a creation”, is not “a text”, is not “poetry” and not “prose”, but ME. And yet this ME is impersonal in a strange way, it is part of the world. [...] I feel that I am nothing more than a word in human form. WHOSE word and WHAT word, I still must find out with my life⁴⁵.

The perception of the uniqueness of identity – who I am – and its narratable nature that emerges from such self-definition can be related to Cavarero's thought. According to Cavarero, it is not the purposeful process of remembering or the (specific) parts of the story mediated by memory. Still, the perception of the narratability of the self to oneself and others matters. The narratable self, which according to Cavarero is the “home of uniqueness”, is above all a feeling or perception of familiarity “in the temporal extension of a life story” which is always relational: “to the experience for which the I is immediately [...] the self of her own narrating memory – there corresponds the perception of the other as the self of her own story”⁴⁶. For Luik, words acquire their power through formulation: “What I write about, what I want to EXPRESS, has nothing to do with writing or being able to write, but becoming a word [...] for me, the world exists when it is worded”⁴⁷. Although she perceives “I” as a word, she does not perceive words as her “I” representing her subjectivity. Just as in Cavarero's definition of identity,

⁴⁴ One critic has viewed the work as an “explanatory note to *Varjuteater*” that complements the novel where “images and thoughts that did not fit into the novel, but help to grasp better the author's attitudes” can be found (Joel Sang, “Sõnale alluv maailm” [“The World Subjected to the Word”], *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 2011, 3, p. 212).

⁴⁵ Viivi Luik, Hedi Rosma, *Ma olen raamat*, pp. 35-36.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 56, 58.

the narratable self does not mean knowing one's own story, but knowing the narratability of the self, for Luik, (her own) words do not explain her self, at least not in a comprehensible, perceptible way at the given moment. From such a perspective, the need to look for a recognizable, unified autobiographical narrative disappears, even if *Varjuteater* retains its status as also a work of life writing. According to Cavarero, biographies and autobiographies "never have an author [but] result from an existence that belongs to the world, in the relational and contextual self-exposure to others"⁴⁸. What Luik reveals in her work (in a direct autobiographical vein) is not what appears there. It is possible that what she reveals seems incomplete or insufficient for the reader focusing only on that. This may also be the reason why *Varjuteater* may seem ambivalent genre-wise and not satisfy readerly expectations of those not leaving room for "the exposible and the narratable"⁴⁹ that assumes a presence within the gaps of (direct) self-representation⁵⁰.

The perception of the impossibility of Luik's own words that cannot explain her self to her can be related to Cavarero's paradigm of selfhood that is based on the need for the mediation of one's story by another. In *Seitsmes rahukevad*, Luik

⁴⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 37.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

⁵⁰ Several well-known literary figures of the older generation also view *Varjuteater* as a remarkable novelistic achievement. Viewed as the long-awaited sequel to the iconic *Seitsmes rahukevad* (Joel Sang, "Sõnale alluv maailm", p. 212), it has even been considered the yardstick by which to evaluate the contemporary landscapes of Estonian fiction, "as proof of what real literature is in relation to what is presented to us as literature today" (Rein Veidemann, "Viivi Luik – ajatu teeline" ["Viivi Luik – a Timeless Traveler"], *Postimees. AK*, 2010, November 27, p. 9). Jaak Jõerüüt has highlighted the ways in which the novel "subverts the canonic borders of the genre [...] in its internal currents, subtexts, its seemingly simple (a long journey to Rome) but internally very subtly complex composition like an icebreaker that makes way for something, leaving free water behind" (Jaak Jõerüüt, "Muutlik varjuteater. Küsinud Doris Kareva" ["The Changeable Shadow Theater"], *Sirp*, 2011 January 7, p. 7). However, for several critics, *Varjuteater* does not so much fall between generic categories but fails them. For instance, according to Johanna Ross, "based on external parameters [the text] could easily be classified as a travelogue, a memoir or even an essay" ("Miks häbeneda muinasjuttu?" ["Why Should One be Ashamed of a Fairy Tale?"], *Vikerkaar*, 2011, 3, p. 100) and according to Maarja Kangro, "an uninformed reader [...] could consider *Varjuteater* to be a travel diary with a fictional element" ("*Hommage* iseendale" ["*Hommage* to Oneself"], *Looming*, 2011, 4, p. 583). Both point to such generic categorization possibilities partly because, in their opinion, the work does not live up to them. Ross's slightly ironic definition of the work as a fairy tale (Johanna Ross, "Miks häbeneda muinasjuttu?", p. 100) shows that it would not be convincing if viewed as a travelogue or a memoir due to the fictionalization process that exceeds the boundaries of ordinary reality. Kangro admits that if the author herself wants to define the work as a novel, the reader/ critic should accept it, at the same time indicating that the work would not meet the requirements of the travel diary genre, especially in terms of its representation Rome as the reader is not provided with an overview of its culture and history, but with a subjective inside view of the author's "own Rome" (Maarja Kangro, "*Hommage* iseendale", p. 585).

describes a game she liked to play with her grandmother called “Tell me what I did!” or “Tell me what I was like!”:

Hardly could anything have happened with my participation, when I already demanded that it be retold to me, and during this telling, my actions were elaborated in detail and an effort was made to guess what I may have been thinking during these actions. [...] Although I remembered very well what someone had done or said, it had to be repeated to me by... the others⁵¹.

Rosma comments on the game in the following manner: “The retelling seems to CONFIRM what happened and give it MEANING. But it also means observing events from a distance”⁵². In Cavarero’s paradigm of the narratable self, narrating is not actual retelling but the perception of the self as narratable which, according to Cavarero, is the only possible way of self-perception that is always also relational. In the passage quoted above, the desire to be narrated assumes the shape of a story mediated by the first-person narrator. Although Cavarero’s thought is developed based on many literary stories, the knowledge of oneself as a narratable self does not require its mediation as a story but the recognition of narratability in oneself and others. *Seitsmes rahukevad* is a polyphonic work in which the perception of the world of the adult first-person narrator who has become aware of her vocation as a poet and the five-year-old child’s limited perception of the world intermingle. The whole narrative structure of the novel could be viewed from the principle of narratability: the adult narrator does not “retell” what she could have perceived and thought as a child, but different layerings of narrative impulses emerge in the novel, forming not-so-much a coherent narrative but an existential unity. At the same time, the structuring that emerges in the novel through the emphasis on “my business” (and “my time”) subordinates the child protagonist’s world to the aims of the adult narrator.

The possibility of perceiving one’s narratability (only) through the mediation of another also emerges in *Varjuteater*, perhaps most clearly in the episode that recounts how Luik showed up at the door of the Writers’ House in Tallinn on a windy winter evening at the age of sixteen when she left home intending to become a writer. This episode is mediated by two interrelated perspectives: what the author herself mediates as her memory and how her arrival at the Writers’ House was narrated by the hostess of the House at the time, Aunt Malle, “who packed and cleaned and checked in the evenings whether the windows were closed, and the doors were locked”⁵³. This event has a special meaning for the author as she connects it to the pattern that she gives her life: “I was on my way to Rome on that winter night of 1963”, she writes, “sixteen years old, without any

⁵¹ Viivi Luik, *Seitsmes rahukevad*, p. 184.

⁵² Viivi Luik, Hedi Rosma, *Ma olen raamat*, p. 62.

⁵³ Viivi Luik, *Varjuteater*, p. 181.

money, wearing only a thin coat, walking against the wind at the nightfall to catch the bus, to catch my fate”⁵⁴. When the author/narrator returns to this episode later, she is, however, unable to link it to the life pattern that she had previously set up as the nexus of her life story. Now, this episode’s meaning does not lie in the author/narrator’s ability to recount what she remembers but in Aunt Malle’s mediation of the story to the others. In this form, the event can be viewed as a key to comprehending the dynamics of representation and appearance in the novel. “Aunt Malle, who at one time worked at the Writers’ House, saw this face of mine, which I have never seen”, writes the author/narrator:

She had a story that she sometimes lovingly told the older writers. [...] It was a story about how one winter evening she stayed late in the Writers’ House [...] and how a voice seemed to tell her [...] Malle, go and see if the door on the street side was still closed... And then what did she see? [...] What did she see there behind the door when she saw me? No one knows, neither do I, but I know that it was the same as what I have seen when I have seen a few times in my life that which remains behind the mask and makes all living beings one breed⁵⁵.

When the grandmother in *Seitsmes rahukevad* is not willing to respond to the main character’s demand, “Grandma, what was I like when I did not want to come any further?”⁵⁶, the child narrator tries to derive possible versions of her story based on her previous experience of the story-telling game. However, these versions do not satisfy her desire to be narrated, as they do not relieve her feeling of being “perplexed and helpless”; given the possibility of “liv[ing] them through once more through her grandmother’s words” would have made it “more homely, more everyday and understandable [for her] than it had been in reality”⁵⁷. Although the game seems to be merely a creative pastime of a somewhat needy child with a vivid sense of fantasy, it makes visible the pervasive presence of fear on the landscapes of her rural postwar childhood where in spring, in addition to flowers, “secret graves and hideouts” may have become emerge from under the melting snow⁵⁸.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 181-182. The phrase “makes all living beings one breed” (in Estonian “kõiki elavaid teeb üheks tõuks”) comes from a well-known poem by Luik titled *Inimese käsi liigub valgel lehel* [*Across the Empty Page Moves a Human Hand*], published in her most well-known collection of poetry *Rängast rõõmust* (1982). According to the poem, what “makes all living being one breed” is an understanding that “all times have their own particular kind of pain”, that can be understood as a perception of the historicity of human existence that in the poem permeates the flesh and bone of the speaker but cannot be (as yet) formulated in words. See Viivi Luik, *Rängast rõõmust* [*Of Hard Joy*], Tallinn, Eesti Raamat, 1982, p. 38.

⁵⁶ Viivi Luik, *Seitsmes rahukevad*, p. 184.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 185.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 190.

In the case of Aunt Malle's story, however, the author as an autobiographical subject cannot identify herself with the main character of the story but can become aware of her narratable self whose unique existence can be perceived, but not named and described, is revealed to her. "If one would know what it was" that Aunt Malle saw, "[i]f only one would know", writes Luik⁵⁹. Reaching an understanding that it is not possible to represent oneself, Luik tells the story of the other, revealing him/her and her own unique identity as a narratable self. The "I" that Luik can write about, which is "impersonal" and as such a part of the world, is transferred to everything that can be written/narrated about: "If I talk about some landscape, some city or some person, I am that landscape, that city, that person"⁶⁰. The basis of writing is the perception of the whole, the inevitability of relationality that is held together by the frames time where the difference can be grasped in simultaneity. "For me, the world is a whole", writes Luik, "everything that happens, happens at once", but "all times have their distinctive kind of pain"⁶¹, and it is the ability to perceive difference in this way that allows us to see the world as a whole.

Much of *Varjuteater* consists of portraits of people about whom it is impossible to tell clear-cut stories with truth value that would convince the reader according to commonplace understandings of the nature of life writing. These are the people whom the narrator briefly meets in Rome and Berlin and with whom she exchanges only a few awkward sentences, sometimes constricted by multiple language barriers: e.g., the girls of the "Mask of Venice" chapter, the girl in Berlin whom the author gave her blue flower, the freezing beggar girl in Rome, the girl in Tallinn whose hand held the two-branched lucky Christmas tree with a mitten with crimson magic clover ornament. Some of these stories, such as the story of the beggar girl in front of the Parioli supermarket, are mediated in detail, fictionalizing or even mythologizing the main character(s) right before the reader's eyes. Standing with outstretched arms in a "classical pose", the beggar girl has "eyelashes like bird's wings", "clear eyes [...] like altar candles", and her child's eyes "mischievous [like] those of a cherub", her long hazel hair covering her like "a coat and a coat collar"⁶². Abounding in cultural references, the description includes, for example, references to the virgin combing her hair in a forest cave in the popular sentimental romance novel *Waga Jenoweve* [*Pious Jenoweve*], which was published in Estonia in several translations at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, and references to stereotypical Italian notions of female beauty and the heritage of classical antiquity. Such description removes the beggar girl from her immediate everyday context where the author meets her and

⁵⁹ Viivi Luik, *Varjuteater*, p. 182.

⁶⁰ Viivi Luik, Hedi Rosma, *Ma olen raamat*, p. 35.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

⁶² Viivi Luik, *Varjuteater*, pp. 231-233.

gives her a deeper symbolic meaning. At the same time, the story's linguistic, poetic, and narrative components are partially made visible, emphasizing the narrator's contingent and limited access to the beggar girl. From the telling, it can also be questioned whether the author/narrator perceived the beggar girl in this manner or whether the narrated story expresses only her narratability that is here realized by the mediation of one possible story. From this perspective, the story of the beggar girl forms an interesting point of comparison with Aunt Malle's story, as the author does not have access to the meaning of Aunt Malle's story. The story about the beggar girl cannot be conveyed to the girl as it would not be understandable to her due to the language barrier and symbolically also because the beggar girl is illiterate. These stories reveal the unique identity of both Luik and the beggar girl: their narratable self, the capacity of every human being for a story, which, however, can only emerge within the relational possibility of addressing the other.

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By featuring the trajectory of her life as a journey toward Rome, Luik highlights the relevance of the role of a pattern in the self-perceptual model based on narratability. In an entirely different vein, the question of the pattern or design constitutes a point of departure for Cavarero concerning the story of a stork in Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* that is included at the beginning of Part IV in the section titled "The Roads of Life". It tells the story she repeatedly heard in her childhood, of a man who wakes up at night to a loud noise and runs outside to see that the water has broken the dam in his yard. Tripping and falling, guided only by the sound of water in the dark from the broken dam, the man repairs the dam. When he wakes up in the morning, he is surprised to see that his footprints have left the image of a stork on the ground⁶³. The story itself, however, is not so important as its mediation. "When I was a child", Blixen writes, "I was shown a picture – a kind of moving picture, since it was created before your eyes and while the artist was telling the story of it"⁶⁴. By "moving picture", Blixen means that, while telling the story, "the storyteller began to draw [...] a plan of the roads taken by a man"⁶⁵, and as a result of the mapping process, the image of a stork appears. According to Cavarero, the way of mediating a story is a confirmation that a drawing or a pattern is not an illustration of the story: "The design is the story", just as "the pattern that every human being leaves behind is nothing but their life story"⁶⁶. According to Cavarero, the question that Blixen asks herself (and the

⁶³ Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa*, Putnam, London, 2017, pp. 224-225.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 224.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 2.

reader) is of central importance – “When the design of my life is completed, will I see or will the others see, a stork?”⁶⁷ – because it highlights the inability of human beings to perceive their existence. For Cavarero, the design “is not one that guides the course of life from the beginning [...] the design is what life, without ever being able to predict or even to imagine it, leaves behind”⁶⁸. Each life draws a unique pattern with its course, which does not rely either on the fulfillment of a certain role or the embodiment of hidden depths, but which is a “totally apparent figure of a unique existence suggests a unity”⁶⁹. Returning to Blixen’s question, Cavarero emphasizes that the “figural unity of the design, the unifying meaning of the story can only be posed, by the one who lives it, the form of a question. Or in the form of a desire”⁷⁰.

Repeating over and over in the opening chapters of her novel that she has been on her way to Rome all her life, Luik creates a clear pattern through which she seems to interpret herself. After the first mention to the book with the picture of the Colosseum on the floor of the empty farmhouse, the journey to Rome is mentioned a few pages later: “Whatever I did these forty-nine years, I was still on my way to Rome”, she confirms, only to return to the topic a few pages later: “I was on my way to Rome and it was no joke”⁷¹. However, as both the words “I” and the phrase “on the way to Rome” appear at the beginning of the novel with excessive frequency, they seem to appear as a poetic exaggeration while their function as a reliable thematic structuring device is called into question.

In Luik’s novel, Rome comes to function as an existential category, an identity trajectory that would get her closer to an understanding of the “who” she is. At the same time, it is a central marker of politics of identity and though its intensity seems to point to hyperbolization harboring the possibility of eventual dissipation, it can also be read as an urgent need for a (re)vision of European belonging disrupted by the fall of the Iron Curtain that redrew possibilities for spatial and cultural imaginaries. When padre Vello (Vello Salo), an Estonian Catholic cleric based in Frascati near Rome, writes to Luik to ask her advice in relation to the publication of anthology of Estonian poetry in Italian, they develop a(n) epistolary friendship, and Salo invites her to visit him. “I marveled about that over and over and over”, writes Luik, “as I never thought that this was a place that really existed, and that one can go there”⁷². Yet when she reaches Rome, her perception of “this center of the Christian world” shifts as she feels the immenseness of the distance

⁶⁷ Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa*, p. 226. See also Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 2.

⁶⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

⁷⁰ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 2.

⁷¹ Viivi Luik, *Varjuteater*, p. 12, 21.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 27.

separating the people “on this and that side of the Alps”⁷³. Discussing the novel *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* [*Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator at Piazza Vittorio*] (2006) by the Algerian writer Amara Lakhous, Lucia Boldrini argues that “the truest meaning of [...] Europeanness may best reside in those that arrive into it seeking integration, not in those that already assume, unthinkingly, their belonging to it”⁷⁴. In the case of Luik, the question is more complicated as she is at the same time (throughout her life) arriving but also already part of Europe and becoming, together with fellow Estonians, part of Europe again when Estonia declares its independence in August 1991.

This central trope of the novel nevertheless creates readerly expectations of the author’s ability to make sense of her life trajectory and the people she has met in a unified and comprehensive way when she finally arrives in Rome. However, on the evening of her arrival in Rome, right after she had seen the Colosseum for the first time, Luik feels lost: “I didn’t know where I was. I had deliberately not studied the city plan before coming to Rome, nor had I read any books on Rome”⁷⁵. During her first walk, she does not know if she can return home since she “had left [her] map on the corner of the table at home”. She is also not sure if her “key will even unlock the front door of the house”⁷⁶. Once there, the author/narrator doesn’t seem to know where the roads will lead her, some seemingly simple path or everyday errand has taken her not only to unknown places but also unknown times in the past. Gradually, Rome becomes even more uncontainable and unknown, canceling all previous assumptions and expectations. The first day in Rome seems to last seven years, the famous streets of the old city unexpectedly turning into underground passages and caves. The Roman winter feels “like the end of the world” that one might experience “in a time of plague and famine” and not in modern Europe. One can never be sure if the people one meets in Rome “are flesh and blood creatures at all, or if they are ghosts having a bit of fun at your expense”⁷⁷. “Everything is possible in Rome”⁷⁸, the author/narrator concludes.

In *Varjuteater*, the pattern exists for the author from the beginning of the work but from the beginning of her existence perceptibly and indisputably. Luik also recounts how as a child, she started writing numbers and dates into a checkered school notebook to reach the year 2000 to create a numerical pattern of life for herself. “I did not know how to solve this task”, Luik writes, “but the solution had

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 48.

⁷⁴ Lucia Boldrini, “Rock, Mirror, Mirage: Europe, Elsewhere”, in Vladimir Biti, Joep Leerssen, and Vivian Liska (eds.), *Europe: The Clash of Projections*, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2021, p. 116.

⁷⁵ Viivi Luik, *Varjuteater*, p. 34.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

to take me to the wide world”⁷⁹. On the one hand, through the motif of the journey to Rome, the author ties together memories of her childhood and youth: discovering the image of the Colosseum in a book spread out on the floor or an empty farm, making a list of the years in checkered school notebook and setting off for Tallinn on a winter evening in 1963 that highlights the need to comprehend life through (the image) of a single journey or pattern. On the other hand, the author/narrator acknowledges the incompleteness and inadequacy of such a process. Retrospectively commenting on the numbers in her notebook, she states: “And yet they were merely... numbers written in blue ink on squared paper in two slanted columns. A piece of brittle, yellowish paper and cheap primary school ink, nothing else”⁸⁰. It is, therefore, from the very beginning of the novel that the possibility of the clear pattern or design perceivable for a person as a guideline or a map of his or her life starts to crumble, proceeding in accelerating manner through the novel up to its last page where the author maintains: “In Rome, you learn that you don’t know what it all is, and that you don’t need to know it. [Just] live”⁸¹. The numbers written in blue ink in slanted columns cannot be solved like a mathematical task. The pattern we live, according to Cavarero, cannot be perceived by the one whose life it concerns. But it is possible to desire a pattern and a story.

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⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ *Ibidem* p. 307.

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“I AM NOTHING MORE THAN A WORD IN HUMAN FORM”. VIIVI LUIK’S
POETICS OF IDENTITY
(Abstract)

This article offers a discussion of the work of Viivi Luik, one of the most well-known and well-loved contemporary authors and public intellectuals in Estonia, with a focus on her two autobiographical novels, the iconic *Seitsmes rahukevad* [The Seventh Spring of Peace] (1985) and *Varjuteater* [The Shadow Theater] (2010). Although recognizably self-representational, Luik’s work is generically ambivalent, particularly *The Shadow Theater*, where the desire to comprehend human existence emerges through the poetics of encounter and reciprocity of address, forming parallels with Adriana Cavarero’s philosophical paradigm of the narratable self. Identifying points of connection between Cavarero’s relational paradigm of selfhood and modes of self-narration that characterize Luik’s

literary *oeuvre*, the article focuses on Luik's poetics of identity that shapes and ultimately comes to prevail over the politics of identity, resulting in processes of construction of subjectivity that resist the expectations of gendered, national and (Eastern) European categories of identity.

Keywords: life writing, Estonian literature, Viivi Luik, Adriana Cavarero, relationality, narratable self.

„NU SUNT DECÂT UN CUVÂNT ÎN FORMĂ UMANĂ”
POETICA IDENTITĂȚII ÎN SCRIERILE LUI VIIVI LUIK
(*Rezumat*)

Articolul analizează scrierile lui Viivi Luik, una dintre cele mai cunoscute și apreciate scriitoare și intelectuale publice contemporane din Estonia, și se focalizează pe două dintre romanele sale autobiografice, ambele considerate emblematice pentru creația sa: *Seitsmes rahukevad* [*A șaptea primăvară a păcii*] (1985) și *Varjuteater* [*Teatrul umbrelor*] (2010). Deși cu un caracter autobiografic vădit, creația lui Luik se dovedește ambivalentă generic, reprezentativ în acest sens fiind mai ales *Teatrul umbrelor*, în care dorința de a cuprinde întreaga existență umană ia forma unei poetici a întâlnirii și a reciprocității adresării, o poetică afină paradigmei filosofice a sinelui narabil, elaborată de Adriana Cavarero. Pornind de la identificarea unor conexiuni între paradigma relațională a sinelui, susținută de Cavarero, și modalitățile auto-reprezentării narative specifice *operei* literare a lui Luik, articolul problematizează poetica identității din textele lui Luik, care modelează și reușește să contracareze politicile identitare canonice, pentru a dezvolta un proces al construcției subiectivității ce se opune orizontului de așteptare stabilizat de categoriile identitare tipic masculine, naționale și (est-)europene.

Cuvinte-cheie: bioficțiune, literatură estonă, Viivi Luik, Adriana Cavarero, sine narabil.