

The inspiring townscape of the Estonian writer Elisabeth Aspe: urbanization, desire and the influence of context

Elle-Mari Talivee, elle-mari.talivee@tlu.ee

1. Introduction

The Estonian writer Elisabeth Aspe, an early realist, wrote her three short novels describing the townscape at the beginning of the urbanization process in Estonia at the end of the 19th century. Quick urbanization (1880–1915) resulted in 1915, with more than 100,000 inhabitants in Tallinn, the capital city, as huge factories were built together with a railway network. As Estonia had been conquered by Danes and Germans in 1227, and later belonged to the Swedish Kingdom and the Russian Empire, the towns were founded by strangers, not by Estonians. The National Awakening began in the middle of the 19th century, giving Estonians reasons to acknowledge themselves as a nation. The peasants were set free from slavery in 1816 and were free to move away from their parishes in 1863. The towns grew rapidly, attracting the Estonian national intelligentsia. At the same time, the nation tried to remain essentially agrarian. The ideology of the National Awakening concentrated on the idea of the nation being tightly bound to the country, and encouraged peasants, now free, to buy the land which had belonged to the Baltic-German landlords: to have their own farmhouses, and to derive the strength of the nation from the countryside. Although, big metropolises, such as St Petersburg, were not unknown, the idea of moving to the city was highly disapproved of, as many educated Estonians left their country to seek work in Russia. Quite often the newborn Estonian intelligentsia moving into the towns or far-away cities lost their connections with family, nation and language, and the lower ranks saw their health destroyed in factories. Therefore, the city, which was attractive due to its opportunities and illusive freedom, was mostly depicted in newspapers and in early literature as an alien and unhappy environment.

Elisabeth Aspe Nieländer lived in the small town of Pärnu, and can in some ways be compared to Jane Austin.



Figure 1. The Estonian writer Elisabeth Aspe Nieländer (1860–1927). Photo: the Estonian Literary Museum, http://www.kirmus.ee/erni/autor/aspe_fo.html.

Aspe was born in 1860 in Pärnu, in south-west Estonia, and lived on the town border in her father's mill. After graduating from a high school for girls, she began writing for newspapers, while nursing her elderly parents. Her first well-known short novel, *Kasuõde (Stepsister)*, appeared in 1887, and it was soon followed by the short novels *Ennosaare Ain (Ain From Ennosaare Farm, 1888)* and *Anna Dorothea (1891)*. After the death of her parents, in 1891–1892, she worked as a nurse in St Petersburg. As her sister's family was dying from tuberculosis, she was called back home. She got married, had three children, and the same disease later assailed her own family as well, depriving her of her husband and youngest son. She continued writing only sporadically, publishing short stories for children, and her last short novel, *Aastate pärast (After Many Years)*, appeared in 1910. Aspe died in 1927 in Pärnu.

Aspe was one of the first Estonian female writers. She often wrote about the city/town environment, and the vagueness of her attitude towards it is difficult to understand, but extremely interesting. Her novels, except for her last one, were written before her short visit to a big city. Aspe's first, short epistolary novel, *Kasuõde* (*Stepsister*, 1888), describes the fate of an orphan girl, and here the pure opposition between the town and the country is obvious. The townspeople are bad, frivolous and in poor health; the country peasants are honest, good and strong. And yet, in the novel one of the most beautiful descriptions, a kind of Bachelard-like poetic reverie (Bachelard, 1999), arises together with the city girl's unhappiness in the country: she likes to sit by the dam of the watermill and listen to the roar of water, which seems to remind her of the loud voices and bustle of her home environment. Aspe's next novel, *Ennosaare Ain* (*Ain From Ennosaare Farm*, 1888), a story based on a real prototype, in general deals with colonization and breaking free from it. It tells the story of an Estonian man who is sent to a German school by his landlord's brother, and is educated there. He becomes disconnected from his nation and language, but is also a stranger to the Germans. After staying for twenty years in Moscow in an observatory, he comes back to his homeland and gradually begins to understand the situation of his nation. Aspe's last novel, *After Many Years* (*Aastate pärast*, 1910), is about the life of an impoverished town merchant's daughter, who moves from a town to the country, and is at last able to find happiness through raising a foster child.

Many Estonian literary critics have remarked that Aspe's town descriptions are very interesting, without specifying why. In fact, the descriptions themselves are rather static, dealing with a quite dull and dusty little Baltic province town. And yet, the word *town/city* (in the Estonian language there is usually no difference between *town* and *city*, and henceforth mostly the word *city* is used) is somehow irritatingly very important while reading Aspe. It is sometimes repeated very often and in dissonant connections, as well as in a very influential way, as though an evocation of the city, for example: '*Ämarik oli juba kätte jõudmas, kui laew tasamalt linna alt mööda libises, ja kohkudes põgenesiwad pool unised lained kaldale, kust nad aga sedamaid jälle tagasi jooksiwad waatama, kuis linn külalised wastu wõttis. Linn ei ole nüüd, ega olnud sel ajal, peale Riia linna kellegi muuga korralises ühenduses; ja et Pärnu linnalased tänulise loomuga, siis tulewad nad, kui iial wõimalik, ikka „laeva” wastu wõtma, kes ainu üksi neile paar korda nädalas uudist toob.*' (Aspe, 1910: 8) ('It was already twilight when the ship skimmed quietly past the foot of the town and the sleepy waves fled, terrified, to the beach, from where they at once ran back to watch how the town welcomed its visitors. The town is not now and was not then in regular connection with any place except the town of Riga, and as the townsfolk of Pärnu are of a grateful nature, then they came, if at all possible, to welcome the ship, the only one to bring news a couple of times a week.')

Although Aspe usually described the city as a bad environment, she seemed to see it differently. My hypothesis is that the writer's attitude towards the city was complex, not the simply negative environment originating from the vigorous ideology of her time. This raises several

questions: is there a hidden landscape of language? What does it look like and what meaning does it have? This leads to a much broader question: is it possible to discover the author's discourses on the city? According to Michel Foucault, 'discourse is defined as practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972: 49). Man constructs discourses via language (Baker, 2008: 5). Then again, what does Aspe's city look like *in* language, within its closest context, on the level of words? Is it possible to see her townscape more clearly through a study of language? Would it clarify the author's attitude toward her world?

One way to find out is to use corpus-based analysis, an example being Michael Stubbs' study of Joseph Conrad (Stubbs, 2003). I chose to examine Elisabeth Aspe's idea of the townscape with the help of a computer-assisted corpus-based analysis in order to take a closer look at the language use of the author, using the software WordSmith Tools Version 5.0 (Scott, 2008). For this analysis, I built two corpora, one of Elisabeth Aspe's three novels, and the reference corpus of all the digitalized books of the 19th century from the Estonian Literary Museum.

I started with the normal last step of such research, defining the keywords, to derive proof of the feeling the reader already senses: that the word *city* plays an important role in Aspe's novels.

2. City *in* language

2.1. Defining the keywords

WordSmith Tools identifies positive keywords statistically: they are, according to Mike Scott, significantly more frequent in a sample text than would be expected, given their frequency in a large general reference corpus. Scott has divided the typical keywords into three categories: 1) proper nouns, 2) a list of a number of 'aboutness' keywords, and 3) more high frequency grammatical words which more clearly indicate the author's style (Scott, 2008).

The complete list of keywords includes around 150 words, but after removing the proper nouns and stylistically individual word usage, three important keywords remain among the top forty: *city*, *river* and *manor*. Besides the word *city*, *river* is, throughout Aspe's works, an important element, sometimes a symbol, even a fatal one, sometimes a familiar and homelike element. *Manor* had a very established meaning at that time in Estonia. These three words can all be described as defining kinds of landscape. According to Stubbs, the term 'keyword' is widely used to refer to words which are important in some way, either in individual texts or in a given culture; they are words with a special status (Stubbs, 2008: 1-2).

N Concordance

1 2 Ei ole ka enam ainult wähesed oma linna jõukamad elanikud, kes isekeskis
2 näitawad igalpool, kuhu silm waatab, linna kaswamist ja rahwuswahelisemaks
3 wanemate maja seisis eesküljega P. linna Riia alewi kõige käidawama uulitsa
4 üles kaswanud, aga niipea kui ta linna pääsenud, kõik maa olu ja elu
5 jõuka piimarentniku surma oliwad 4 nad linna tulnud, ta rahaga kauplema
6 Tihti löbustasime pääle kooliaja P. linna nõndanimetatud „suures pargis”,
7 „suures pargis”, õige kenas linna- ja alewiwahelises puiestikus, mis
8 kus kolm wõi neli korda nädalas õhtuti linna muusikakoor 5 mängis. Enamasti
9 ei saanud. Etenduse kohaks oli P. linna Saksa klubi saal, mille tõttu ka
10 oli ta hääde tuttawate kutse pääle P. linna külla tulnud. Ta oli seltskonnas
11 libedal jääwaljal wiibisime. P. linna jõukamal seltskonnal oli Tallinna
12 endises, nüüd ammugi kinniaetud linna wallikraawis. Kraaw oli sügawal
13 kui me ju nii kaugele olime jõudnud, et linna tornid wäiksed kui laste kannid
14 teame. Ja siis uisutasime waikselt linna poole tagasi. Minul aga näis, nagu
15 siin elada. Läheme ära kuhugile teise linna, ja lase mind teenima hatata.
16 Ainult kahju on, et ta mingi hinna eest linna elama ei taha tulla, esiti peame
17 nädalad, ja päew ligines, mil onu jälle linna pidi tulema kihlust pidama. 17
18 ja nüüd läks kõik, nagu waremalt meie linna pidudelgi. Mamma oli leinarided
19 heljunud. Kuna minu isa maapoisist linna kaupmeheks saades oma uue
20 sellel suwel risti ja põigiti läbi, kuid P. linna ei kandnud süda tulla. Ühe
21 seda kurbilusat sügisepäewa, mil me linna haigemajast ühte wõõrast meest
22 lootuseta olekus kauemat aega juba linna haigemajas linna kulul põdes. Ma
23 kauemat aega juba linna haigemajas linna kulul põdes. Ma läksin teda

Figure 3. The collocates of *city*.

2.2. The visible city

As the first division shows, the word *city* is very often accompanied by some kind of visible category: it is repetitively a city of churches, towers and walls. And although Aspe gives only a few realistic townscape descriptions, as collocates of *city* she has mentioned many names of existing cities (Fig.4). According to the semiotician Vladimir Toporov, proper names are intelligible in a society as a kind of unitary communication channel, existing both in time and space: they have memory, and they are in themselves texts with lots of information (Toporov, 2008: 278). The stones of a city do not talk, but man attributes words to the stones: Toporov believes that texts of fiction and underlying myths often determine the forming of the text of the city, and as an example he offers the *text of St. Petersburg*, which he has analysed (Mihkelev, 2002: 431). Town names, with their memories, incorporate all the texts written about them. So the writer just turns on the switch here: she names the city, and the reader, the recipient, uses his or her imagination and knowledge – the text of the mentioned city comes to life. In the same way, Aspe does not describe things or places much in detail, but she mentions many important things as collocates: some names and something essential to them:

the Kremlin and river of Moscow, the river gates of Pärnu, and the church spires on the horizon, all evoking some recognition.

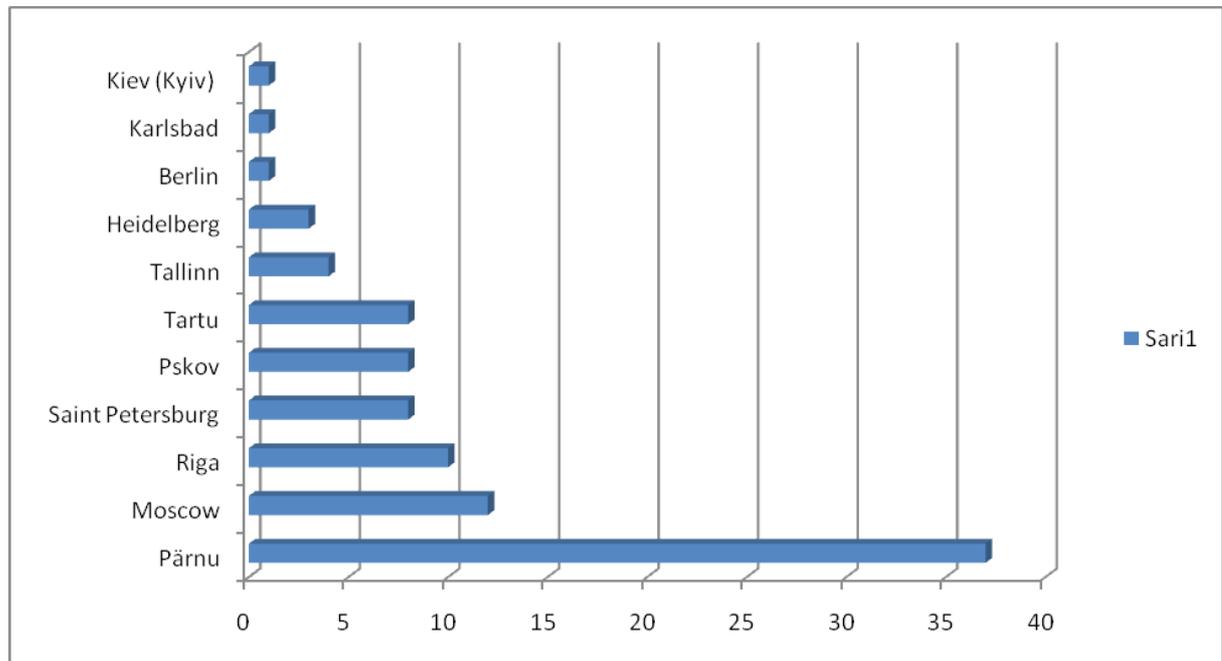


Figure 4. Place names: the names of the cities Elisabeth Aspe mentioned throughout her three novels.

The word *town/city (linn)* has in Estonian, and also in other Balto-Finnic languages, the etymology of *stronghold*, something like a castle (archaic: *earthen stronghold, citadel or burg*), or to *strengthen*. In the Middle Ages, the word began to designate the town. In Aspe's time, the change from a fortified military object to a city of people was taking place. Aspe does not mention the chimneys of the factories or plants: her city is still quite a monolithic body of towers and walls, often seen from afar. Considering the context, it is obvious how her characters sense the changing of their home town: the disappearing process of the walls and gates, like losing the borders of the previous world which divided the world in two: the (free) townspeople and the peasants, the wild and the civilised. The walls have the clear meaning of a border, and it broadens here to the world of characters: they can be divided into those who are inside the borders and those who belong to the outside, and the borders are not easy to cross. The borders are also vertical. For example, when the protagonist Ain travels to Moscow, he sees upon his arrival a strange, even slightly unbelievable landscape: up on the hills there is an old holy city with countless golden and colourful domes, the Kremlin, a river and a huge number of houses – *a holy town*. Later, the phrase *nestling town (pesalinn) of the emperors* is used – the word *pesalinn* in Estonia can also mean *a hotbed*. The landscape of an old city is probably a kind of symbol of power based on its visual value. According to the semiotician Yuri Lotman, values are organized spatially: the higher things are and closer to heaven they are located, the more valuable and better they are (Lotman, 2006: 367). And, in the post-colonial

framework of talking of this area, there always exist, a priori, the categories of superior and inferior (Ringvee 2000: 83). This brings forth the borders, very clear and strong ones, and the differences between the people inside the town and outside of it, as well as the differences in landscapes. This may have been the practice of the time when speaking of the capital or, perhaps, mirroring the belief of those days that the emperor himself was a generous man, living in his golden castle.

2.2.1. The inner characteristics of city

In terms of the inner characteristics of the city, the collocates show an ambiguous attitude: the city is, through context, described as a place of pleasure (*linna lõbud – city pleasures*), often with a kind of despising undertone: there is fun, there are parties and the theatre, the citizens dress differently, they are, as the context shows, strange, weird, arrogant and ill, there is a lot of traffic and a passionate rushing crowd and, yet, there is also the opportunity to learn and to work. This dichotomy is Aspe's most hesitant and most controversial point: her attitude remains indecisive. The pleasures of the city – which are still pleasures worth experiencing – are misleading.

2.2.2. City as destination

Perhaps the most interesting aspects are the verbs that are collocates of *city*. In the Estonian language, verbs often require objects, and *city* is here in the short illative case – as a point of destination – in two thirds of the instances, while a point of departure in the elative case turns up rarely. So it is, in contrast to the things mentioned previously, the place to go, to drive to, to be sent to, to visit, to see, and even to *escape to the city*: the last one is ironic, suggesting being saved from the pains of country life, but it somehow crowns all the reasons and ways to get into the city.

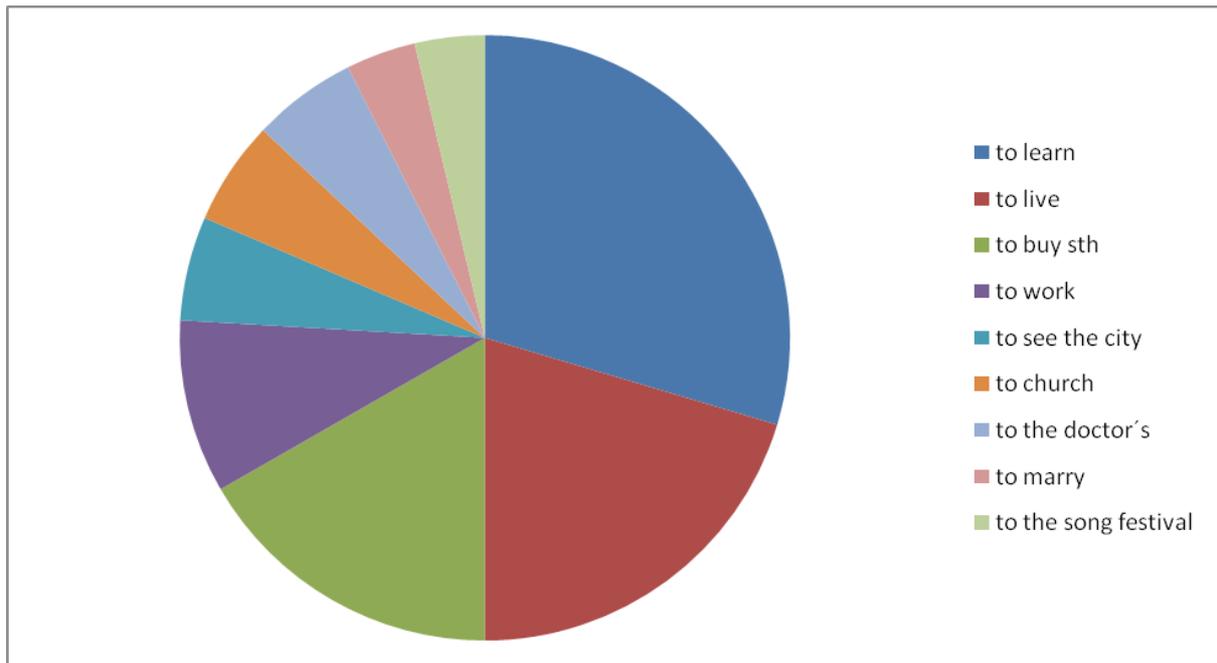


Figure 5. Reasons to go to the city.

3. Conclusions

What was the townscape for Aspe? In conclusion, I want to state what kind of townscape can be 'seen' while looking at the results of the study. First of all, collocates of the word show how the city is described on the language level, in its discourse: it is very visual, mostly a very concrete thing, a castle-like monolithic phenomenon seen from afar, as it would have been seen by the traveller of that time. The excerpts of the text paint the townscape as a vanishing old city, almost dating back to the Middle Ages. It is a safe and protected space, and here it has a controversial meaning, although this is not clear from the word correlations: the inner safety is protected from outsiders, but as the characters of Aspe's books come from the world beyond the walls and gates, they come from the wild part of the world and cross the border, the town wall. They seem to threaten the established world of the city, and change it. At the same time, *city* also visually embodies, with its church towers, and spiritual and higher values, a kind of holy ideal, combining the power of the earthly and heavenly spheres, something very worthy of achieving.

While the city is located so that it is somewhat sublime, and setting aside for the moment the fact that every character in the novels has his/her own attitude towards the city, the protagonists are mostly drawn to the city. The city turns out to be a very powerful magnet, especially on the language level, an object to be reached. This connects with the tensions of this time's ideological description of the world: the power, the importance of different values, for example connected with religion, but also with the National Awakening. Aspe was required by the attitude of the time to write about the country; she herself probably believed in the idealistic state of earthbound qualities. But, while writing, she

could not hide her perpetual fascination not only with the walls, but with the quickly growing and changing world inside the city borders. It is thus a townscape of new values as well: a different, strange and changing world, not clear enough to describe fully. Elisabeth Aspe's novels are love stories, but, besides this, she tells another, very interesting, controversial and partly self-denied love story of the attraction of the new world, illuminated by the glow of other cities the author mentions by name.

The first supposition, that the word *city* is one of the keywords of Aspe's novels, turned out to be true, but the city is more than that: it is a leitmotif, something around which the text is composed. *City* was one of the keywords of the era, a word of importance and, in Aspe's work, also something more, a future vision. This is sensed by the reader, but the use of computer linguistics brought it forth even more clearly. The use of the word is varied with synonyms and place names, each one lending something of its memory and echo to the word. Repeated in different contexts, the word alone is already very powerful: bringing to mind a little seaport town somewhere in the Baltic, then the big metropolis, and then something evil and sick, or, to the contrary, golden, bright and gay.

The final question, whether this kind of research enriches literary studies, can be answered: the word *city* brings with it the way the writer models her world piece by piece, showing the words constructing it, and provides the opportunity to have a closer look, to add meanings to the details; it reveals how the landscape of language emerges from a text, how the reader might sense it, and how the author may have seen the external world.

Texts

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