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From the shadows to the light: paradoxes of queer literature in post-Soviet Estonia

Piret Viires

School of Humanities, Tallinn University, Talllinn, Estonia

ABSTRACT

This article provides a short overview of queer literature in Estonia, focusing primarily on representations of queer themes in post-Soviet Estonian literature in the 1990s. A brief historical context is given, outlining social and legislative attitudes toward homosexuality in Estonia from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Some examples of queer literature from the interwar Estonian Republic and Soviet Estonia are introduced. The central focus is Emil Tode's novel *Border State* (1993), exploring its portrayal of queer topics and the novel's controversial reception in transition-period Estonia in the 1990s. Additionally, the article introduces some examples of Estonian queer literature from the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS Queer literature; eastern European queer history; post-Soviet studies; Estonian literature; fiction

The transition period in Estonia from the late-1980s to the early 1990s introduced rapid changes, new freedoms, and various new phenomena. One topic that underwent many changes from the Soviet era and evoked public discussions was sexuality, including homosexuality. Outlets of the hitherto strongly repressed topic included the first significant manifestations of queer literature in post-Soviet Estonia in the 1990s.

The aim of the current article is to analyze some examples of queer literature, focusing on Emil Tode's novel *Piiririik* (Border State 1993), positioning the novel in the social and legislative context that determined homosexuality. Hence Estonian queer literature is also examined historically, introducing some of its early manifestations and looking at the position of homosexuality in Estonian society. The article thus provides a broader societal background to the publication of Emil Tode's innovative novel and tries to determine why its publication, as well as the whole reception of queer literature in Estonia, has been surrounded by paradoxes and ambiguity.

So far, Estonian queer literature has been poorly investigated, with no thorough and comprehensive overviews. In recent years, however, research on queer studies in Estonia has become more prominent in academia. Previous research was vague, but in 2023 the first in-depth academic thesis on queer studies was defended in ethnology at the University of Tartu (Põldsam 2023). Queer studies have, however,

CONTACT Piret Viires piret.viires@tlu.ee School of Humanities, Tallinn University, Narva Rd 25, Tallinn 10120, Estonia

appeared in art projects with thorough comments and additional materials (Samma 2011, 2013–2015; Samma et al. 2015), as well as in historical research (Põldsam et al. 2022). General collections on queer topics have previously been published by LGBT organizations (for example, *Kapiuksed valla* (Closet Doors Open); see Davidjants 2010). Queer theater has also recently been explored (Linder 2023). In addition, scholars have examined linguistic representations and perceptions of the words *queer* and *kväär* within the Estonian LGBT community (Kuusik 2024). One of the first comprehensive treatments about queer issues was the conference collection of 1991 edited by Udo Parikas and Teet Veispak (Parikas and Veispak 1991).

Queer literature has been somewhat neglected, although there have been a few articles, mainly analyses of individual works (Annuk 1999; Marling and Talviste 2022; Skerret 2006). The only fairly comprehensive article so far was by Kätlin Kaldmaa (2010), who mapped manifestations of queer literature from the early nineteenth century onwards, in the interwar Republic of Estonia, Soviet Estonia, and in re-independent Estonia. There have been some student theses and student projects on queer literature (Ajalooveeb 2024; Saksing 2013; Tamson 2018; Tomberg 2015), as well as some overviews on the internet and short literary reviews (for example, Helme 2012; Urmet 2009; Vikervaade website 2024). Although in her thesis Põldsam briefly looked at some examples of Estonian queer literature (Põldsam 2023, 49–50), she also noted that she had not examined literature specifically: 'While I have not analysed literary works in the dissertation, these have been part of my diffractive reading of non-normative sex-gender subjects in various eras' (50). In the Baltic countries, the contributions of Kārlis Vērdiņš and Jānis Ozoliņš stand out. They have mapped the situation of queer literature throughout eastern Europe (see especially Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2016) and examined examples of Latvian queer literature more thoroughly (for example, Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2014, 2024).

Many researchers have emphasized the differences between the development of queer literature and, more widely, queer studies, in eastern Europe and in the West. Buyantueva and Shevtsova have highlighted the need of hearing local, eastern European scholars and argued that some Western perspectives and approaches are often not suitable for the analysis of eastern European cases (Buyantueva and Shevtsova 2020, 1–19). Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš, for example, wrote:

> Nevertheless, the experience of LGBT activism or the presence of queer studies is still quite different to that of the West. While Western scholars have already produced an exhaustive amount of publications concerning the historical heritage of their countries, the Central and Eastern European region is a territory where such studies have been published only in the last few years. [. . .] No successful generalization can yet be made without deeper knowledge of East European queer history. (Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2016, 2–3)

The main reason consists of primarily different historical, social, political, and legal backgrounds. Therefore, to understand the role and depiction of homosexuality in Estonian literature, we need to explain the relevant background in Estonia in the relevant period, hence the following brief overview of the position of homosexuality in the czarist Russian empire, which Estonia was a part of until its independence in 1918, in the interwar independent Republic of Estonia, and in Soviet Estonia. The article briefly introduces the legislation, social attitudes, and actual practices. It must be noted,

however, that the focus here is on Estonia and Estonian queer literature, and its wider comparison with other post-Socialist and eastern European countries has yet to be made and will hopefully be the subject of further research.

Homosexuality in czarist and Soviet Russia

Several researchers have argued that, although homosexual behavior between men was a criminal offense in the Soviet Union for almost 60 years, prerevolutionary Russia was occasionally more tolerant to homosexuality (for example, Healey 2001, 21–49; Moss 2015, 45; 2016, 128). Dan Healey has written that foreign observers of pre-Petrine Muscovy reported the widespread practice and talk of sodomy (Healey 2001, 21) and he also has pointed out that the first laws against homosexual acts in the army were established by Peter the Great (22).

In 1835, Nicholas I extended strict regulations to Russian civilian men. This included a new criminal code that banned consensual sodomy, punishable by exile to Siberia (under what was later Article 995 of the penal code). Aggravated cases involving minors, force, or authority abuse resulted in harsher sentences, including exile with hard labor. These laws remained in force until 1917 and marked a shift toward governmental control over civilian morality and social behavior regarding same-sex relations (Healey 2001, 80–81).

Although male same-sex relations were outlawed in Russia, historians agree that enforcement was rare (Healey 2001, 78; Moss 2015, 46). There has been evidence that same-sex relationships between men flourished within certain social contexts (Healey 2001, 22). There were no specific laws against female homosexual acts, and, in general, same-sex relations between women were seen as insignificant or invisible. While a female homosexual subculture did exist, historical evidence of it is rare (50).

After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, significant changes occurred. All pre-revolutionary laws were abolished in post-revolutionary Russia, including criminal convictions for homosexuality. Dan Healey points out that historians have sought to explain the abolition of the sodomy penalty with reference to contextual factors and that the decriminalization of homosexuality was the result of the elimination of all czarist law during the Bolshevik Revolution (Healey 2001, 115). One reason might also be that, when the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, this subject of homosexuality was apparently not a concern of the first order (101).

The Soviet penal code went into effect in 1922. According to the new law, homosexuality between consenting male adults was no longer illegal (Tornow 1991, 85). Sodomy and incest were not named at all in the new code (Healey 2001, 115). Healey notes that a person having achieved sexual maturity could consent to sexual intercourse or to 'perverted forms' of sexual behavior (122). Consequently, Soviet Russia became the first major power since revolutionary France to decriminalize same-sex relations, a development considered a notable political advancement (125).

During the Stalin regime, however, the Soviet Union returned to more traditional and patriarchal family ideals in the 1930s. Homosexuality was seen as a social evil, an anachronism of the bourgeois past that had no place in Soviet society, demoralized workers and soldiers, and was viewed as incompatible with the new Soviet moral order. During the Stalinist regime homosexuality was seen as 'a form of bourgeois degeneracy' (Healey 2001, 191). Male homosexual acts became illegal under Stalin in

1934 with the adoption of the anti-sodomy law (Article 154a of the USSR Criminal Code), which stipulated prison sentences for homosexuality, both consensual sodomy as well as so-called 'forced' sodomy. Female homosexuality was, however, never criminalized (Alexander 2021, 18). Rustam Alexander agrees with other researchers that political reasons played a significant role in adopting the anti-sodomy law, linking it to the Stalinist leadership's efforts to tighten control over the intimate lives of Soviet citizens and promote traditional family structures (18). Homosexuality was seen as a threat to healthy young people and as a 'mental infection.' The aim of the Stalinist regime was to purify society and eliminate homosexuals as 'bourgeois degenerates' (Healey 2001, 202–203).

One place where homosexuality existed most noticeably during the Soviet era was the Gulag prison system. There, homosexual acts expressed power relationships rather than the sexual orientation of the participants (Moss 2015, 51). In the Gulag, homosexuality was shaped by the brutal and violent hierarchies of the camp system (see also Alexander 2021, 23–50; Healey 2018, 27–50). This prison phenomenon and Gulag legacy had an impact on society's opinion of homosexuality and increased homophobia in Soviet society (see also Healey 2018, 49). As a result, the image of homosexuality was connected to brutal relations in the Soviet prison system and led to its broader social stigmatization in Soviet society. In addition, another place where young Soviet men were forced to experience violence-based homosexuality was in the Soviet army (Moss 2015, 52). Research about sexual culture in the Soviet Army has yet to be undertaken (Healey and Stella 2021, 247–248).

In summary, homosexuality in Russia saw varied treatment across different political eras. In pre-Revolutionary Russia homosexuality faced sporadic legal restrictions, but the Bolsheviks decriminalized it in 1922. Under Stalin, however, homosexuality was re-criminalized in 1934. It remained criminalized in the Soviet Union for the whole Soviet period until 1993. This also affected other Soviet republics, including Estonia after it was occupied by the Soviet Union after World War II.

Homosexuality in the independent Republic of Estonia

Estonia declared independence in 1918. On the basis of Dagmar Herzog's work (2011, 31–34), Rebekka Põldsam has pointed out that the end of World War I brought a wave of liberal and social democracy across Europe, including in Estonia, characterized by the women's right to vote, better working rights and broader access to higher education. They have also highlighted that the changed social environment increased the public visibility of homosexual and transgender subjects (Põldsam 2023, 18–19). The Republic of Estonia changed its penal code and Teet Veispak has emphasized that, according to the revised legislation of the Estonian Republic, homosexuality was a penal offense only in cases of violence or when one participant was a minor (Veispak 1991, 108). Andreas Kalkun, however, stated that, although the penal code in Estonia was forward-looking and did not criminalize homosexual acts between consenting adults, it was passed only on 26 March 1929, and came into force on 1 February 1935 (Kalkun 2018, 146). Before that, the czarist penal code was valid in the territory of Estonia, with paragraph 995 naming 'pederasty' as a crime (146). This means that during at least the first fifteen years of the Republic of Estonia, homosexuality was illegal.

Nevertheless, both Kalkun and Põldsam have pointed out that in the late 1920s and early 1930s the Estonian press published several articles on homosexuality and other

sexual manifestations outside the heterosexual norm. Although most such articles appeared in tabloid papers written for entertainment, the mere existence of these articles indicated that it was possible to discuss such topics in public (Kalkun 2018, 147; Põldsam 2023, 20). In the late 1920s, the topic of homosexuality was highlighted by Magnus Hirschfeld, who fought for homosexual rights and who also lectured in Tallinn in 1929, thus attracting attention to the topic in Estonian society (Kalkun 2018, 147–148). When the new penal code was passed in Estonia in 1929, there were no indications of any public dispute in the press regarding 'pederasty' no longer being a criminal offense (148). Therefore, after the first years of Estonia's independence, in 1935–1940 homosexuality was indeed not a crime (Põldsam 2023, 20). Teet Veispak examined this liberal attitude in connection with general democracy in Estonia and also linked it to other democratic freedoms (Veispak 1991, 108).

Homosexuality in Soviet Estonia

After World War II, the Soviet Union occupied and governed Estonia until 1991. The Soviet Union extended its laws to each Soviet republic (Põldsam 2023, 20). In his article, Kevin Moss also examined Soviet Estonia. According to Moss, it is likely that Soviet authorities saw the liberal attitude toward homosexuality as a bourgeois anachronism of a European country that only recently had been independent (Moss 2015, 59; see also Moss 2016, 137). From immediately after the war until 1961, the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation applied in Soviet Estonia as well, including paragraph 154a, valid from 1934, which stipulated up to five years of imprisonment for 'consensual sodomy,' and up to eight years in the case of rape or other aggravating circumstances. Thus, the laws on homosexuality after World War II in Soviet Estonia were the same as in Soviet Russia, and attitudes toward homosexuality were similar to those described in the section on homosexuality in Soviet Russia. Homosexuality was punishable by criminal law, was socially condemned, and, we can assume, attitudes toward it were negatively influenced by encounters with the Gulag system.

The Criminal Code of the Estonian SSR came into force on 1 April 1961. This, too, included punishments for homosexuality. §118 set the following punishments: (1) up to two years in prison for 'pederasty,' (2) 'pederasty' with violence or threatening with violence, or taking advantage of the victim's helpless state, or abusing a minor resulted in imprisonment of between two and six years, with possible exile up of to three years (Eesti NSV Ülemnõukogu Presiidium 1961). It is also interesting to remark that the punishments for homosexuality differed between the Baltic Republics, although the basis for them was the same (Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2020, 240). Punishment for male sodomy, for instance, in the Lithuanian SSR was imprisonment for up to three years and in the Latvian SSR for up to five years (Aripova 2020, 96). Feruza Aripova demonstrates, however, that the potential imprisonment for consensual sodomy did not prevent several homosexual men from establishing sexual contacts and living 'double' lives (100). At the same time, the diary of the Soviet Latvian film director Gunārs Piesis and its analysis by Jānis Ozoliņš is an example that for some homosexual men the fear of punishment, self-censorship, and hiding one's homosexuality prevailed (Ozoliņš 2024, 92–98).

Veispak was one of the first scholars who published statistics about the conviction of men for 'pederasty' in Soviet Estonia (Veispak 1991, 112). According to Uladzimir Valodzin's more detailed and later research, 212 men were convicted for 'pederasty' between 1946–1991 in Soviet Estonia (Valodzin 2020, 7–11). At the same time, Põldsam

reached a slightly different result and found that between 1957–1991 there were 204 convictions and one acquittal (Põldsam 2023, 45). As in Soviet Russia, lesbian relationships were never criminalized (Alexander 2021, 18), so also in Soviet Estonia lesbian relationships were not criminally punishable. Attitudes varied, however, in different Soviet republics (see Alexander 2021, 138–140). Lesbianism was instead treated as mental illness and fell into the field of psychiatry (Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2020, 239–240). There were also accounts of other types of sanctions (Healey and Stella 2021, 229). Kārlis Vērdiņš and Jānis Ozoliņš (2016, 1) claimed that the Soviet regime tried to erase homosexuals from public awareness both ideologically and physically. Homosexuality was seen as a bourgeois anachronism and a moral danger to the heterosexual Soviet workforce (Moss 2015, 49). This differs little from the Stalinist era view that homosexuality was incompatible with the Soviet moral order and was seen as 'a form of bourgeois degeneracy' (Healey 2001, 191).

Depictions of homosexuality in Estonian literature: early signs

Having reviewed the social and legal context, we will now explore the initial subtle indications of homosexuality in Estonian literature. There are very few examples of homosexuality in early Estonian literature, including folklore. As Andreas Kalkun has highlighted, the hundreds of sexual jokes in the Estonian Folklore Archives contain just a few references to homosexuality. Kalkun also mentioned that anything connected with homosexuality was not 'visible' in traditional folk culture (Kalkun 2010, 19).

Kätlin Kaldmaa (2010, 133–134) proposed a hypothesis that one of the first Estonian poets, Kristjan Jaak Peterson, could have been homosexual. His early nineteenth century poems, which mark the beginning of original Estonian literature, contain references to possible homosexuality, largely because the poems address a man named Alo. Although this hypothesis is not confirmed, the idea was supported by Estonian writer Maimu Berg in her novel *Seisab üksi mäe peal* (Stands Alone on the Hill), published in 1987 at the end of the Soviet era. The novel describes Kristjan Jaak Peterson, his homosexuality, and his relationships with compassion. Peterson's possible homosexuality was also discussed by Liina Saksing in her BA thesis (Saksing 2013, 16). Homosexual topics are present in Baltic German literature as well, as shown in an article by Liina Lukas on depictions of homosexuality in early twentieth-century Baltic German literature (see Lukas 2016).

Although homosexuality was still a criminal offense in the early years of independent Estonia, some works of fiction nevertheless included this topic. Among them is the short story collection *Ellinor* (1927) by Johannes Semper, which had a story about a lesbian, Madame Liibeon (see Kirikal 2021, 224–226). Andreas Kalkun has mentioned that the Estonian press of the 1920s–1930s occasionally published literary criticism discussing homosexuality, primarily regarding Valmar (Vilmar) Adams' collection of poetry *Suudlus lumme* (Kiss into Snow 1924). The reviewers wondered whether the 'carnality and perversity' in the collection could be associated with homosexuality. Kalkun also noted that the modern sensitive man in Friedebert Tuglas' *Felix Ormusson* (Tuglas 1915) led critics to argue about the psychology of homosexuals (Kalkun 2018, 150). These are just a few examples and the literature written in the interwar Republic of Estonia requires a more comprehensive analysis to determine if there are more examples of possible queer themes.

As mentioned above, homosexuality was a criminal offense during the Soviet era, but Kätlin Kaldmaa has pointed out some examples of homosexuality in Soviet Estonian literature. In Aadu Hint's *Tuuline rand* (*The Windy Shore* 1969, first published in 1966), for example, the son's homosexuality is such a blow to his mother that she dies (Hint 1969, 688–703; Kaldmaa 2010, 132). The events are set in the 1930s and as befitting the Soviet era homosexuality in Hint's novel is depicted as deplorable and despicable. In addition to Maimu Berg's aforementioned novel, Kaldmaa refers to another novel, published in the same book, *Kirjutajad (*Writers 1987). This novel contains a description of the boy-loving Jürgen von Tisenhusen, who lives in perpetual fear of secret assassins (Kaldmaa 2010, 132). Rebeka Põldsam has remarked that snippets of queerness in Soviet-era fiction were visible, for example, in Aino Pervik's novel *Kaetud lauad* (*Laid Tables* 1979), where the main character visits cohabiting women, one of whom is strong and masculine and the other fragile and feminine (Põldsam 2023, 50). Põldsam found no first-person representations of homosexuality in Soviet Estonian fiction (50).

In exile Estonian literature, homosexuality was briefly mentioned by Gert Helbemäe, whose novel *Pagejad* (Escapees), published in Lund in (1971), has a bachelor radio mechanic character with indications of homosexuality (Kaldmaa 2010, 131). Homosexuality is also depicted in Karl Ristikivi's 1970 novel *Õilsad südamed ehk kaks sõpra Firenzes* (Noble Hearts or Two Friends in Florence), where the author linked homosexuality with class struggle (135–136). Until the early 1990s, homosexuality in Estonian literature was depicted occasionally and briefly, via single scenes, characters, or hints. Especially in the Soviet period, homosexuality practically did not exist in published literature, or if it appeared it was shown as dangerous and shameful (for example, in Hint's *The Windy Shore*). It is not surprising, because homosexuality was unacceptable and criminally punishable by Soviet morality and ideological standards.

Beginning of the transition era (the early 1990s)

The late 1980s and early 1990s constituted a transition period where, thanks to changes in the Soviet system, especially the official policy of perestroika and glasnost, homosexual themes gradually became more public. The process varied across different post-Soviet and Eastern European countries, yet there were also many similarities (see Healey 2018; Buyantueva and Shevtsova 2020; Healey and Stella 2021; Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2024). Sara Arumetsa and Rebeka Põldsam examined the first broad public discussion of homosexuality in connection with the AIDS epidemic, which spread in Estonia in 1987–1988 (Põldsam and Arumetsa 2023, 4). Homosexuals were regarded as a risk group; from 1987 on they were tested for AIDS and the mainstream media published awareness-raising articles that argued for a neutral attitude toward risk groups (4). Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš (2020, 242) also note that 1987 marked a turning point when the topic of sexuality began to enter public discourse through mass media across the Soviet Union, and that AIDS was one reason to discuss homosexuality publicly (244).

In 1989–1990, when liberal attitudes and freedom of speech were increasing, the mainstream media published various articles condemning homophobia and demanding the decriminalization of homosexuality. In 1989, prompted by readers' letters, the magazine *Noorus* (Youth) initiated a discussion of homosexuality (Põldsam and Arumetsa 2023, 5). In 1990 the recently established weekly paper *Eesti Ekspress* (Estonian Express) published Teet Veispak's interview with a gay man (Veispak 1990). They discussed AIDS, social intolerance, and the criminalization of

male homosexuality in Soviet Estonia, and expressed the hope that soon gays and lesbians would come out and organize (Põldsam and Arumetsa 2023, 5). Põldsam (2023, 42) pointed out that *Eesti Ekspress* continued to regularly cover gay and lesbian issues in subsequent years, when the general context had changed, and concluded that male homosexuality was considerably more widely discussed than other non-normative sex-gender subjects. The emergence of independent journalism increased communication within the queer community via the first gay and lesbian dating advertisements and enhanced the development of queer organizations (Talalaev 2010, 112). Põldsam and Arumetsa thus saw the turn of the 1980s–1990s as a significant time, where discussions of homosexuality began to increase; this also coincided with general aspirations for freedom in society, both politically and individually.

An important event that provoked open talk about homosexuality in society was the conference 'Sexual Minorities and Society: The Changing Attitudes toward Homosexuality in 20th Century Europe,' organized at the Institute of History of the Estonian Academy of Sciences on 28–30 May 1990. Materials from the conference were published a year later (Parikas and Veispak 1991). The conference, organized by the Estonian historians Teet Veispak and Lilian Kotter, was the first of its kind in the Soviet Union. It was remarkable that the official opening was presented by Arvo Haug, an Estonian deputy in the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union in Moscow, who said that homosexuality had not been punished in the Republic of Estonia and announced that it would become legal again once the country was independent (Krickler 1990). The conference participants included 150 gay and lesbian academics and activists from eastern and western Europe and the United States. In a later summary it was stated that 'the gathering was well received by local authorities and received extensive and mostly positive attention in the Estonian broadcast and print media' (Parikas and Wockner 1990). The first Estonian LGBT organization, *Eesti Lesbiliit* (Estonian Lesbian Union), was founded after the conference (Põldsam and Arumetsa 2023, 8).

In the early 1990s, discussions of queer topics became more animated and homosexuality was no longer totally a taboo topic. Estonia regained its independence in 1991 and in 1992 a new criminal code was established, which decriminalized 'pederasty,' although §118 remained. 'Pederasty' was now a criminal offense only if it involved violence (Supreme Council of Estonia 1992). In the same year consensual homosexuality was decriminalized in Latvia (Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2020, 245). In 1991, homosexuality was decriminalized in Ukraine. In 1993, homosexuality was decriminalized in Russia (Alexander 2021, 220–221; Moss 2016, 59). One of the reasons for decriminalization of homosexuality was the new republics' aim to become members of the Council of Europe (Alexander 2021, 221; Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2020, 245). As Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš note, however, this decriminalization of homosexuality did not raise any public discussions in Latvian society and was rather seen as a coincidence (245). There were no visible discussions about it in Estonian society either.

Society seemed open to anything new. Arumetsa and Põldsam quoted an interview with the first known transgender Estonian, Kristel: 'There was a period after liberation when Estonia was rather tolerant towards everything. Freedom had arrived, and we all felt great relief' (Põldsam and Arumetsa 2023, 10), and there was curiosity and excitement regarding gay issues. Decades-long homophobia had not disappeared, however, its roots reaching back primarily to the Soviet period. Disapproval also probably originated from the Soviet prison system (see Alexander 2021, 23–50; Healey 2018,

27–50; Moss 2015, 51). According to Põldsam and Arumetsa (2023, 8), the homophobic mentality was still felt in Estonia.

When Estonia regained independence, society became extremely liberal in all areas of life, Soviet restrictions were abandoned, all freedoms were tested, and all kinds of sexuality, including homosexuality, emerged boldly. Conversely, society was still ruled by caution, ostracism, contempt, fear, and homophobia, and only a few public figures 'came out.' Eva-Liisa Linder has described the era, relying on research by Veronika Kalmus and Triin Vihalemm, saying that the transition period in Estonia was characterized by a fragmented, contradictory, and mosaic-like culture, blending old and new norms, symbols, and values (Kalmus and Vihalemm 2017, 112; Linder 2023, 27).

Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš (2024, 2) described this post-Soviet era as one in which the issue of the LGBT community gradually entered the public discourse of the ex-Soviet republics. This process was gradual, as the very concepts of social activism, civic society, and sexual variety had yet to be introduced (see also Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2020). This was the social context in which the first Estonian queer novel appeared in 1993 – Emil Tode's *Border State*. As mentioned above, there have been no comprehensive analyses of Estonian queer literature. The pioneer in Estonian queer theater researcher is Eva-Liisa Linder. Examining the transition period, she saw the start of modern queer theater as occurring in 1990 at the Estonian Drama Theater, which staged the French authors Jean-Jacques Bricaire and Maurice Lasaygues's comedy *La Berlue* (Estonian title: *Silme ees läheb mustaks,* see also Bricaire and Lasaygues 1985). It tells the story of an upper-class family where various secrets are revealed, including lesbian relationships and transsexual transformations (Linder 2023, 28). The play was followed by other queer-themed translated productions. Linder pointed out that a wave of lesbian themes arrived in 1994, starting with a production at the Tallinn City Theater, based on Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (30). The novelty of the topic was reflected in the journalist Grete Naaber's article 'Lesbians – Disease or Love?' (Naaber 1996), and in the ironic title of a review by the writer Mihkel Mutt: 'We are now in Europe!' (Mutt 1994). Regarding queer theater, it was significant that translated plays were staged before originals.

The situation in literature was somewhat different. In 1993, the same year as Tode's *Border State*, a translation of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* was published (Baldwin 1993, originally published in 1956), addressing issues of bisexuality and homosexuality. Baldwin's work, however, was an exception. Modern Estonian queer literature was not preceded by numerous publications of translated works – the two occurred in parallel. *Border State*, an original work by an Estonian author, managed to grab the public's attention first.

Emil Tode's *Border State*

The novel *Piiririik* (Border State) by Emil Tode (a pseudonym; the author was the well-known poet Tõnu Õnnepalu, born in 1962) was immediately distinguishable as something remarkable and significant in 1990s literature. The book stood out, attracting attention and controversy. Looking back at all the discussions around the novel, we can now confirm what was intuitively perceivable at the time: this was something new and crucial, which changed Estonian literature and public debate. The book is also the most translated Estonian novel of the 1990s: so far it has been translated into 20 languages (Estonian Literature Centre 2024). *Border State* deals with relations between eastern and

western Europe, and how people adapted to the changes that happened in the early 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The main character is an eastern European translating French poetry in Paris who witnesses and processes these rapid changes happening in Europe (see also Talivee and Viires 2024).

Border State is a multi-layered and rich work. On one level, it captures the atmosphere of the early 1990s, exploring the tensions and challenges of the meeting between eastern and western Europe. It can be read as a political novel that sensitively reflects on the era's political tensions and depicts the protagonist's adaptation to a newly transformed world. On another level, it is a psychological novel that discusses the issues of national, European, and gender identity. One central theme is the longing for freedom, embodied by the eastern European protagonist's yearning for the dream city of Paris, which symbolized Western culture and freedom to him. At the same time, this longing is viewed with irony, recognizing the inequality and humiliation that mark the divide between eastern and western Europe: 'All Eastern Europe has become a prostitute. From governments and university professors on, to the last paperboy, they are all ready to listen to wonderful speeches about democracy, equality, whatever you please, whatever the customer wishes! As long as he pays' (Õnnepalu 2000, 21).

The central motif of the novel, as highlighted in the title, is the concept of the *border*. The novel explores the limits of various borders – of political states, cultures, and nationalities, as well as of gender, sexuality, and, ultimately, of individual identity. *Border State* is notable for its aesthetic and stylistic qualities and is also among the first postmodernist novels in Estonian literature of the transition period. Beyond its exploration of political, psychological, and gender-related themes, the novel is also deeply philosophical, with certain religious connotations (for example, see Hellerma 2024; Veidemann 2023). *Border State* is a groundbreaking work of a pivotal era – innovative in both its themes and style – and marked a significant turning point in early 1990s Estonian literature.

One focal issue that *Border State* notably raised was that of gender identity. It was exceptional that in the novel the gender of the protagonist was vague and ambiguous. The Estonian language makes it possible to have a character who is gender neutral and thus a quick reading did not at once reveal whether the protagonist was a man or a woman. This kind of gender ambivalence caused lively discussions after publication in research by, for example, Delaney Michael Skerret (2006), who relied on the works of Judith Butler (for example, *Gender Trouble* 1990). As Skerret stated (2006, 733): 'It is not difficult then, if "geography is just a dream, a fantasy" (Õnnepalu 2000, 5; Tode 1993, 14) to extend the notion to categories of sexuality, which go similarly unnamed,' and he described the protagonist's identity: 'living between identities, refusing classification, blurring or queering the boundaries might provide some sort of liberation after all' (Skerret 2006, 734). Eneken Laanes (2009) also focused in her research on the uncertain gender and subjectivity of the protagonist, relying on Judith Butler (1990, 2005) work. Helle Ly Tomberg (2015) in her BA dissertation saw Tode's protagonist as an androgen. Researchers, including Raili Marling, have stated that the uncertain gender is among the most attractive aspects of the novel and that its central motif is an unwillingness to define oneself in the binary gender system (Marling 2022, 154).

To a more attentive reader, however, the gender of the protagonist is by no means unclear, as there are plenty of hints in the text that it is a man and, based on the context, a homosexual man. There is the grandmother's warning: 'keep away from women,' and the amazement of the main character about what business he would have with women

(Õnnepalu 2000, 47). Parisian gay bars are also mentioned (44). The most direct indication of the protagonist's gender is the hotel maid addressing him in French: 'Bonjour, Monsieur! Maintenant, ou tout à l'heure?' (Tode 1993, 120). There is no translation in the Estonian original, but there is a translation added in the English version: 'Good morning, sir! Now, or in a little while?' (Õnnepalu 2000, 64). So, although quite a few critics and researchers have been intrigued about the undetermined and ambiguous gender of the protagonist, upon closer reading we can determine that he is a homosexual man. Therefore, we can consider *Border State* the first Estonian queer novel, narrated as a confession in the first-person singular. Although *Border State* is a multilayered and rich work open to various interpretations, we will now in the following narrative analysis focus specifically on the protagonist and his homosexuality.

As mentioned earlier, the protagonist's gender is ambivalent, only hinted at through subtle clues or very careful reading. The narrative is written in the first person and takes the form of letters to a correspondent called Angelo. The novel is, therefore, fragmented and alternates between descriptions of life in Paris and memories of the protagonist's homeland, which is described as a nameless eastern European country far in the north, where it is cold and dark: 'I come from a country where the sun is as rare as a diamond, an incredible gold coin that is examined in the light and tested by biting before it's accepted as genuine' (Õnnepalu 2000, 4).

In the novel, fragmented memories from the protagonist's youth flow together in a stream of consciousness including descriptions of Soviet life, a domineering grandmother, and erotic feelings for a young pastor. At the same time, the protagonist is in a relationship in Paris with an older French philosophy professor, Franz, whom he both desires and despises, while also exploiting him financially: 'As a true East European I sat bright-eyed and listened to his outrageous ideas about freedom, about Foucault and Derrida. Why not? Especially for the promise of a delicious supper in the luxurious ambience of ancient Europe. I listened as a courtesan listens to her client, as a prostitute!' (Õnnepalu 2000, 20–21). The relationship with Franz is explicitly sexual: 'That seemed to excite him. I became a stinking primitive in his eyes, someone he had caught in the jungle and tamed. He wanted to drag me into bed and was much more callous than usual, and I found this sudden show of meanness arousing' (71–72). The novel includes scenes where the narrator visits gay bars in Paris, meeting various men, imagines a sexual encounter with a handsome young waiter, and indulges in veiled erotic reflections. The novel ends with the protagonist killing his lover Franz, though it remains unclear whether this murder really happened. The protagonist then travels restlessly to a small village on the western coast of France, near a seaside lighthouse. From there, having found peace, he turns back. The letters to Angelo come to an end.

The novel focuses on a state of in-betweenness, a continuous movement, a refusal to define oneself as anything fixed, but rather as something fluid. The narrator is situated between cultures and identities. In an important scene, the protagonist observes the statue The Sleeping Hermaphrodite at the Louvre, a figure that can be interpreted ambivalently as something that is in-between, without clear borders. It is evident that the protagonist is homosexual, and that the relationship with Franz is visible and sexual. The former passion for the young pastor, however, remained unresolved and Angelo was simply someone, perhaps even an imaginary person, to whom the protagonist could write.

Thus, it can be said that the novel is multilayered, with homosexuality being just one facet, yet a very significant one. The context, of course, is that before Tode's *Border State*,

no one had been able to depict homosexuality in Estonian literature in such a way. This novel opened a new world to readers and paved the way for future authors. In his article '(Homo)sexuality and naivety,' Eric Dickens states that *Border State* was indeed the first Estonian queer novel and that its publication played a crucial role in the Estonian queer community. The article, appearing ten years after the novel was published, concluded that Emil Tode helped to liberate Estonian gays (Dickens 2004).

As mentioned above, *Border State* was published at a time of literary change in the 1990s, with great excitement in literary life and a climate of playfulness and performances. Playing with the author's pseudonym was significant as well. Both the author, Tõnu Õnnepalu, and the publishing house Tuum managed to hide the real author behind the pseudonym Emil Tode for quite some time. The book launch, for example, took place on 7 December 1993 in the Pegasus Cafe. The novel was introduced by the critics Hasso Krull and Harry Liivrand. At the same time Õnnepalu was present and sat quietly at the back of the cafe, incognito (see also Viires 2024). Thus, Emil Tode as an author was at first surrounded by mystery and secrecy. The secret of the pseudonym and the whole air of mystification was also supported by the press. On 31 December 1993, for example, Krister Kivi in *Pühapäevaleht* (Sunday Newspaper) published the article 'Emil Tode spends the New Year in Paris,' which developed the mystification further, stating: 'The writer with a mysterious name undertakes, half incognito, a trip abroad' (Kivi 1993).

Border State captured the critics' attention after publication; at least 15–20 reviews appeared immediately. The reviewers included several significant authors and critics of Estonian literature, whose opinions were predominantly positive and favorable. Marin Laak, in her summary of literary criticism in 1994, wrote that negative comments were few and far between (Laak 1994). Some reviewers also raised the topic of homosexuality, such as Janika Kronberg (1994) and Rein Raud (1994), who saw it as the first Estonian gay novel. The novel captured the attention of various literary juries as well. In 1994 the Estonian Cultural Endowment was reestablished, and its first prose award went to *Border State*.

Before *Border State* received the Cultural Endowment Award, however, in 1994 it was awarded the most prestigious area literary prize at the time: the recently established Baltic Assembly Prize for Literature. The Baltic Assembly award attracted keen public interest. This caused lively discussions in the Estonian press, pushing *Border State* beyond the sphere of literature into newspaper editorials. *Border State* turned out to be quite an irritant, because its main theme, homosexuality, was still a fairly taboo topic.

The decision of the Baltic Assembly incensed the well-known older generation writer Teet Kallas, who on 3 November 1994 published a sarcastic article in the newspaper *Eesti Sõnumid* (Estonian Messages), 'To Europe, to Europe, but through which hole?,' and added,

> I summon up all my courage and ask: is Emil Tode's *Border State* really the best and most significant book that the three Baltic countries have to offer to the world at the moment? [. . .] In order to get to Europe, it is not necessary to try and find non-traditional openings in a fence or other type of holes.

He also expressed his annoyance that this respectable prize for literature was awarded to such a 'lavender-tinted' novel (Kallas 1994). This article and the subsequent media uproar raised people's interest in the novel. One reason for the special media attention was the rivalry between two big dailies, *Rahva Hääl* (Voice of the People) and *Eesti*

Sõnumid. One defended Emil Tode and the other attacked him (see also Viires 2000). Some members of the Estonian parliament attending the festive occasion in Vilnius when the Baltic Assembly Prize was awarded were also disturbed that a 'homosexual novel' had received the prize.

The dispute clearly reveals the paradox linked to the publication of *Border State*. On the one hand, it can indeed be seen as a novel that liberated Estonian gays, as Eric Dickens (2004) claimed. On the other hand, the ambivalence of the novel was connected with the position of homosexuality in the early 1990s during the transition period of Estonian society: gay curiosity, tolerance, and liberal attitudes were all combined with homophobia and contempt.

Raili Marling, describing the background of *Border State* later, stated that, although homosexuality evoked curiosity and excitement in Estonian society in the 1990s, there was no lack of homophobia (Marling 2022, 154). The previous sections of this article tried to explain this controversial mentality. It should not be forgotten that homosexuality had been decriminalized in Estonia in 1992, only one year before the publication of *Border State*. People's attitudes and general opinions could not change that fast. In the general public's opinion, homosexuality was still considered somewhat weird and shameful.

One significant topic that emerged in connection with queer-themed discussions was the role and meaning of Europe in the context of transition-period Estonia. Europe had a special significance in the reception of *Border State*. It was called the first Euro-novel in Estonia (Haug 1994) and its close connection with Europe was observed afterward (Marling 2022). Raili Marling also found that the novel reflected the ambivalence felt by Estonian society at the time – Europe was something both desirable and foreign simultaneously (155). Europe was a frequent topic in the reception of *Border State*. One reason was naturally the translated novel's success in western European countries in the 1990s.

The aforementioned critical article 'To Europe, to Europe, but through which hole?' by Teet Kallas and Mihkel Mutt's (1994) review of a theater production on lesbian issues ('Bitter Tears of Petra Kant') titled 'We are now in Europe!' demonstrate the ironic attitude toward Europe and its sexual liberalism. In the early 1990s, being a part of Europe was desirable, but it brought with it phenomena that caused uncertainty, and that were alien and opposed to existing values. This paradox – desiring something and at the same time being fearful of it and being ironic about it – was typical of the transition period. In *Border State* Tode brilliantly conveyed the same contradiction – desiring the Western world and simultaneously being wary of it and criticizing it – in a scene where the main character meets some compatriots in Paris, who are busy window-shopping, at once wanting and detesting what they see: 'They were standing in front of the window of Samaritaine and were criticizing the display, while secretly lusting for it, lusting for all the merchandise and wealth that their poor eyes were seeing for the first time' (Õnnepalu 2000, 68). Europe thus played a double role in transition-era Estonia: a wonderful world where people longed to be, a process that Marju Lauristin called the 'Return to the Western World' (Lauristin et al. 1997), and a place with unknown rules that caused alienation.

Similar paradoxical approaches can be seen in discussions about queer topics and in the acceptance of queers in transition-era Estonia. There was certainly gay curiosity in society: the first homosexuality conference in 1990 was supported by the Estonian Academy of Sciences. There was also excitement about new themes, in a way shown by

the popular parties organized by the Estonian Lesbian Society in the early 1990s and articles appearing in the new trendy newspaper *Eesti Ekspress* (see Põldsam and Arumetsa 2023). Conversely, there was uneasiness, distrust, and occasionally even hostility toward queers. The situation wherein the early 1990s curiosity and empathy was mixed with homophobic discourses was not unique to Estonia but was also typical of other post-Soviet countries (see Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2024, 1; 2020; for wider context see Buyantueva and Shevtsova 2020).

Thus, several literary analyses of *Border State* so far have emphasized the play with the protagonist's identity and gender ambiguity; the novel was regarded as an exciting and remarkable work of fiction. I argue, however, that the vagueness of gender and play with the protagonist's identity could be the results of the common mood in Estonian society in the early 1990s, where because of the Soviet legacy homosexuality was seen as suspicious or even criminal. It should not be forgotten that for post-Soviet people, homosexuality was often associated with the violent Soviet prison culture (see Moss 2015, 51; Healey 2018, 27–50; Alexander 2021, 23–50).

Thus, I argue that the author's decision to hide behind the pseudonym Emil Tode could also be a reaction against opinions prevailing in Estonian society and the fear of revealing his sexual orientation. It was difficult and courageous in the multi-layered value system typical of the transition period to come out as a gay author. Another significant fact was that Tõnu Õnnepalu worked at the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at that time and we can assume that, as a civil servant, he was extra cautious and avoided being associated with his scandalous novel. These could be the reasons why the protagonist's gender seems at first glance difficult to determine, the author preferred a pseudonym, and all the mystery about an unknown European gentleman named Emil Tode.

Such an interpretation coincides with the opinion of Kārlis Vērdiņš and Jānis Ozoliņš that *Border State* 'is a text that can be regarded as both an act of coming out and an attempt to mask its creator's identity' (Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2024, 2). They also claim, quite plausibly, that the transition-era Baltic authors preferred ambiguity and secrecy rather than straightforwardness in dealing with homosexual themes: 'The discourses on the sexuality of the time seemingly demanded discretion and indirect language rather than an in-your-face questioning of homophobia' (12).

Among other significant notions linked with transition-era queer discussions is *shame*. Analyzing the homosexual characters in works by the Latvian authors Andra Neiburga and Eva Rubene, Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš reached the conclusion: 'The precarious social situation of the protagonists makes them feel shame rather than pride' (Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2024, 13). Shame does not visibly seem to apply to the protagonist of *Border State*, but the theme powerfully emerges in Tõnu Õnnepalu's confessional autobiographical novel *Harjutused* (Exercises), published under the name Anton Nigov in Estonian in 2002, and Õnnepalu in English in 2019. Here, the main character read an article about homosexuality in an encyclopedia when he was 13 and learned that it was a criminal offense:

> It was the end. The end of innocence, because my guilt had finally acquired a name. So. But *that* shouldn't ever have to come out. And how could it, anyway? It wasn't as if it was going to … I could not even imagine what 'that' might be. I knew I needed to live alone, in the forest, far away from people. My whole life would have to consist of hiding my shame; of repentance; of cleansing myself of my guilt (because I was dirty, filthy!). (Õnnepalu 2019, 136)

It could be thus summarized that the beginning of Estonian post-Soviet queer literature was characterized by paradoxes and ambiguity. The reason for the paradoxes was the specific nature of transition-era Estonian society. As mentioned above (see Kalmus and Vihalemm 2017, 112; Linder 2023, 27), the transition era was characterized by a diversity of values and the blending of Soviet attitudes with new, Western ones, leading to confusion and the vagueness of rules and borders. Emil Tode's *Border State* is a fine example of this kind of ambivalence and vagueness of borders. This is brilliantly conveyed by Emil Tode's own words:

> A border state is nonexistent. There is something on one side and something on the other side of the border, but there is no border. There is a highway, and a field of grain with a farmhouse under tall, thirsty trees, but where is the border between them? It's invisible. And if you should happen to stand on the border, then you too are invisible, from either side. (Õnnepalu 2000, 97)

Being on the border, you are invisible, as a state or as an individual. Nevertheless, you know you exist, although others do not see you. The border state Tode wrote about lay between East and West and was, therefore, invisible. The homosexual protagonist finds himself on the border, in the shadows and invisible. Becoming visible, establishing your own identity – politically, individually, and sexually – can happen only when you leave the border and step to one side or the other, from the shadows to the light.

Beyond *Border State*: other examples of Estonian queer literature in the 1990s and in the twenty-first century

Although Eric Dickens said that Emil Tode helped to liberate Estonian gays, this might be an exaggeration. During the 1990s there were not many new queer authors who openly wrote about gay issues. In the 1990s, queer activity increased, events were organized, and clubs, bars, organizations, and information centers were established (such as the NGO Mea Culpa, the Gay Union, and the continuing Estonian Lesbian Union, later renamed the Association of Estonian Lesbians and Bisexual Women; see Talalaev 2010, 112). There were many parties in clubs and bars, such as in the X-Bar, opened in the late 1990s, in the Nightman Club, and in the Angel Club in 2004–2009 (see Drobot 2020). Similar developments could be seen in Latvia, when, in the 1990s, the first gay and lesbian clubs were opened in Riga and the first activist organizations were established (Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš 2020, 247).

LGBT associations and their activities increased in the early twenty-first century (Aavik 2020, 131). The Gay and Lesbian Information Center operated between 2004–2009; in 2007 the NGO Protection of Sexual Minorities was set up, followed by the NGO Estonian Gay Youth in 2008 (Talalaev 2010, 113). The latter developed into the Estonian LGBT Association in 2012, which still operates, aiming to educate society regarding, and to protect, the rights of sexual minorities. The association is also the organizer of Baltic Pride festivals (Eesti LGBT Ühing 2025). The first of the festivals, Baltic Pride Tallinn, was organized already in 2004 (Aavik 2020, 131).

Estonia joined the European Union in 2004. People's tolerance and liberal attitudes had certainly increased by that time. A significant step in protecting the rights of same-sex couples was the Registered Partnership Act passed in Estonia in 2014, which entered into force in 2016 and enabled couples to legally register their cohabitation (Aavik 2020, 131). In 2023, Estonia legalized same-sex marriage, and the law came into force on 1 January 2024.

Against this background, the publishing of queer literature has not increased very much and there are few examples. No other author tackling queer themes appeared in the 1990s besides Emil Tode/Tõnu Õnnepalu, who continued introducing homosexuality-related topics in his novels *Hind* (Price 1995) and *Printsess* (Princess 1997), as well as more directly in his autobiographical novel *Harjutused* (Exercises 2002) and the novel *Raadio* (Radio 2002). With *Radio*, Õnnepalu again used the pseudonym Emil Tode, but unlike the gender ambivalence of the protagonist in *Border State*, here he is quite clearly gay. In 1999, Hiram (a pseudonym for Mari Laaniste) published the novel *Mõru maik* (Bitter Taste), with a bisexual female protagonist. A larger wave of queer literature emerged only toward the end of the 2000s. Relevant topics were discussed more openly, Estonia joined the EU, and LGBT organizations were founded and began taking part in general debates. Since then, queer literature in Estonia has become more visible.

In Ivar Sild's novel *Tantsiv linn* (A Dancing City 2007), the queer topic was quite prominent and sexual scenes quite explicit and natural. The novel authentically describes the life and relationships in the Tallinn gay community. Other works include Caspar Trees's *Sergo* (2004), Jan Beltrán's (a pseudonym for Priit Kivi) *La mala vida ehk neetud elu* (La mala vida or Cursed Life, Beltrán 2009), and Marek Kahro's *Päikseta paradiis* (Paradise without the Sun 2012). A good example in recent years is Eia Uus's novel *Tüdrukune* (What it Feels Like for a Girl 2019), which depicts lesbianism and bisexuality. Other authors who have actively dealt with homosexuality include Andrus Kasemaa (for example, in *Vanapoiss* [Bachelor], Kasemaa 2019). Queer themes have reached young adult literature as well, such as in Ketlin Priilinn's young adult novels *Sefiirist loss* (Castle of Zefir 2010) and *Ta ei teinud seda* (She Did Not Do It 2021), with homosexual characters, so young people can read about the diversity of sexual identities.

What recently attracted the most attention was the novel *Vareda* by the politician, several-time minister, and member of the European Parliament Sven Mikser published in 2023. The book won the novel competition of the Estonian Writers' Union. As in Emil Tode's *Border State*, it is set in the early 1990s and is a gentle love story between two boys. Mikser as an author does not play around with pseudonyms and mystifications, but is a public figure, a prominent politician who publishes his work without any hesitation and receives a lot of media attention. The homosexual love story between two young men is, however, described in the novel with moderation, discreetly and in a guarded manner.

Conclusion: from the shadows to the light

One can conclude that queer literature in Estonia is not voluminous or widespread. There are just a few examples of queer texts from the nineteenth century, the interwar Republic of Estonia, and the Soviet period. The main reasons for such modest representation are primarily the social and legislative situation of each historical era. Men's homosexuality was a criminal offense until 1992, except in the time of the Republic of Estonia, between 1935–1940, when homosexuality was decriminalized. Especially in Soviet Estonia, homosexuality was a taboo topic, only rarely mentioned in public. Therefore, it makes sense that there are only a few examples of queer themes in Soviet Estonian literature (an interesting example is a scene in Aadu Hint's novel *Windy Shore*). In the turbulent period of the late 1980s – early 1990s, social conditions changed. Queer themes appeared in the press and public debates, and in 1990 the first

queer organization was established. After the Republic of Estonia was restored, a new criminal law was passed which decriminalized homosexuality in 1992.

Freedoms in society and changes in legislation also encouraged the emergence of queer literature within Estonia's transition-era literature of the 1990s. The first breakthrough novel was Emil Tode's *Border State*, published in 1993. It was not, however, followed by a large wave of similar works in the 1990s. Tõnu Õnnepalu/Emil Tode himself continued writing novels where he tackled queer topics. Substantial activity can be detected only at the beginning of the twenty-first century, perhaps indirectly caused by Estonia joining the European Union, the strengthening of Estonian queer organizations, and the broader representation of queer themes in the press. Whether and to what extent queer literature will become more prominent after the legalization of same sex marriage in Estonia in 2023 remains to be seen.

During the last 30 years, great changes have occurred both in society and in literature, from decriminalizing homosexuality in 1992, to the new freedoms of the transition era, and with the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2023. Against the background of these changes, however, we should not forget that shifts in people's attitudes, world views, and values all happen more slowly than direct legal or political processes. This slow altering of attitudes clouds the position of queer literature in Estonia and generates paradoxes linked to its creation and reception.

We can nevertheless say that in the last 30 years great changes have taken place regarding the visibility of queer themes. As Emil Tode explored through his protagonist in *Border State*, so to the Estonian queer community in the early 1990s stood at the border and thus remained invisible in the shadows. As mentioned above, becoming visible and establishing your own identity can happen only when you step to one side of the border or the other, from shadows to the light. This has happened both for the protagonist of *Border State* as well as for the Estonian queer community. Thirty years after *Border State* was published, those who were hiding in the shadows have stepped into the light and the Estonian queer community and queer topics in Estonian literature have become visible.

The history of Estonian queer literature in its entirety still needs more comprehensive research. It should not be forgotten, however, that developments in queer literature, its creation, and its circulation are closely connected with its social and legal contexts, as well as public opinion. Queer literature researchers should thus cooperate with historians of relevant periods. The current article was just one of the first attempts in this field, offering an overview of the beginning of Estonian post-Soviet queer literature with all its paradoxes and ambivalence, which was inevitably closely connected with the social background and public attitudes of the transition period in Estonia.

To conclude, the aim of this article was to present one of the first academic explorations of Estonian queer literature. Hopefully, it will contribute to the field by providing some source material for broader comparative analyses of queer literature in other post-Soviet and eastern European countries. This general and comparative research has yet to be undertaken, and it is hoped that future eastern European scholars in queer studies will take up this aim.

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Notes on contributor

Piret Viires is a literary scholar and professor of Estonian literature and literary theory at Tallinn University. She defended her PhD (2006) in Estonian literature at the University of Tartu. Her main areas of research are Estonian literature of the transition period in the 1990s, as well as contemporary Estonian literature, postmodernism, and digital literature. She has published several articles on these topics as well as books on Estonian literature and postmodernism, such as *Postmodernism in Estonian Literary Culture* (2012). Piret Viires is a board member of the Estonian Writers' Union and has also published fiction.

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