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Editing as Contemporary *Ars Poetica*

I could basically add a subtitle declaring something like "against (un)creative writing". But I am not against, as the following shows. Actually I consider writing programs as the most important discipline in humanistic sciences.

In an era, when knowledge is in constant danger to degenerate into a mere information ("information society"), interpretational skills and abilities to perceive rhetorical devices have become more and more crucial. It is important not only to understand, but also to fathom the mechanics and possibilities of understanding. For example: 1) how something to be understood is first directed on subject via text and textual devices, and then 2) how and why it is accepted or challenged by the reading subject. (1) Creative writing, as a place where textual possibilities are discussed and explored systematically, has therefore taken the epistemological place philosophy formerly had.

But has it really? During the last ten years I have grown tired on how Finnish writing programs and Universities refuse at every turn to acknowledge contemporary literary horizons. Many a professional lecture and guidance is given on a presupposition that literature and authorships are something that are first of all singular, so that same principles apply to all cases, and that these principles have not changed practically at all since the 1950's. No postmodernism, no television, no computer games, no internet... (2)

Teachers seem to think that their means to understand and to talk about poetry still apply, that they don't have to undergo any transformations themselves, even though there are completely new mediums (digital poetry, visual poetry, sound and performative poetry) and ways of thinking about writing and literature. (3) I cannot solve all these problems, but I can offer one reasonable solution: *by taking editing as part of their curriculum, creative writing programs could update their conceptions and practices in most cases.* The main reason for this is that editing is based on interest – series of questions – not on something that is already known or mastered.

I cannot argue my every single point with sufficient depth. I therefore have to rely on the possible weight given to me by my background as a researcher, student in creative writing, poet, critic, chief editor of Finland's leading poetry magazine (*Tuli&Savu*) and artistic director of a small but

critically acclaimed publishing house (Poesia).

I read, due to my background, every month zounds of poetry books and manuscripts. As we all know, there is continuous flow of magnificent contemporary works. We also know that most of the manuscripts are not that interesting. What strikes alarming to me, however, is that quite a few of the more mediocre authors have studied creative writing. Actually, if "uncreative writing" would not be already taken as a concept to depict the activity of conceptualist authors like Karri Kokko or Kenneth Goldsmith (4), it would define my frustration perfectly.

But perhaps the most almost alarming thing is that these manuscripts are so poorly edited. In many occasions it seems as if there isn't any insight on why certain texts are offered a possibility to constitute a work, a literary *whole* (e.g. circle or insightfully crafted collection of poetry). There isn't any supporting literary idea, other than the urge of being published. From editor's point of view, there isn't any whole, just a *hole*. And then the question arises: why would someone want to make a book that is not work?

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At this point I would like to return to my actual topic, "Editing as Contemporary Ars Poetica", and define it more accurately. As I understand it, editing is the process of selecting and preparing writing through processes of correction, condensation, organization, and other modifications. It has traditionally been considered as a relationship between the author and the editor. The aim is usually to edit (to create) as good a literary text as possible. Even though there are also some notable contemporary exceptions to this aim, like creating a text that is rhetorically as convincing as possible or a text suitable for branding a writer, I focus on this side concerning aesthetic and artistic value. My other key-word, *ars poetica*, can be understood as both "the art of poetry" (how to do, how to read, how to understand) and general considerations on "what poetry is".

One of the basic notions of contemporary poetry and poetics is that they are not based on fixed syllabic structures or rime schemes. That means that nothing in poems form declares when it is ready. This is a phenomenon that creates a certain need to editors and editing, like one practiced by Ezra Pound upon T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). There has, however, lingered a strong structuring idea about what is poetic even in modernistic tradition.

For a shorter and even more interesting period, poetry has not been based on socially shaped and

accepted topos (love, nature, desire, sorrow) nor presumptions of condensed language, presence of the speaker ("I"), dominance of images, nor using certain form or "poetic" vocabulary that consists somewhat 4000 words recognised as "poetic". Minimalism, concretism, new Sentence, flarf, digital poetry, to name only a few forms, have transgressed and transformed notions of poetry once again. And this applies to both reading and writing.

What this means, is that all productive borders and limitations that formerly gave some guidance and heuristic ideas to writers, have become either fantastically leaky or ceased to exist at all. So practically nothing in its form, content or practice declares when a contemporary poem is finished. Don't bother to count the syllables, or see if all the five senses are covered, or every image has relation to poems theme(s).

Writer therefore needs a good editor – or good editing skills – to affirm that poem actually is ready, or "ready to be abandoned" as the famous formulation by Paul Valéry goes. Surprisingly many writers need this confirmation.

But even if poet is certain that she can tell, or that she knows when the poem is accomplished, it is still based on other factors than structural or social ones (e. g. intuition). It should be stressed that this certainty does not guarantee that poem actually is finished, that it does not need editing. And this is actually one of the most bizarre effects of the writing programs: instead of relying on ones writerly skills, one tends to rely on intuition, if not pure genius, and other notions that lead straight to the mental labyrinths of bad faith: "if they don't understand me, it's because they don't understand me 'cause I'm so unlike others". How can you stress in a case like that, that the offered manuscript is just prose with linebreaks.

If we combine this tendency to the one mentioned earlier (that poem does not send any signals on its completion), we get a glimpse into a world where Finnish editor needs to do her best. So what we basically have here, is a writer, who does not know why she is making a book, has not read enough poetry to understand how language works, what has been done, what she has been doing, nor has she any understanding on what can be found interesting or worth reading. Therefore she does not have any insight if the manuscript is actually any good, but for some reason she is certain that it is the most exceptional one, and that it needs to be printed because how come she could be genius if she remains unpublished.

Perhaps the teaching, at least in Finland, is a little bit too charismatic.

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Back to editing. At this point I would like to remind, that editing is not something that is done only in finishing phases, in a dialog with someone else. It happens constantly and in many forms. For example when writing is based on poet's own notes, when writing is based on search-engines, procedural- or collage-techniques, or writing is based on ones previous manuscript versions, they are all as much acts of editing (5) as they are acts of writing.

So unless one wants to stress the role of heroic creator, intuition, genius or some other superhuman concept of writing, *writing is based on writing*, writing meaning here both an actual act of writing and a wider concept covering any written material – be it one's own or cultural e.g. intertextual material – that one uses.

This can be put in a principle: editing is done on different *lexias*. This concept by Roland Barthes (*S/Z*) means the smallest amount of text that seems to bear significance to reader, to actual reading. It can be anything from white space and punctuation mark to whole paragraphs or even pages, or how text looks or sounds like. According this principle, editing creates connections, delays and brakes on the lexemes since editing fathoms actively and systematically different possibilities that these lexias have. And if there aren't enough, it tells to create more, different or better ones.

But while editing has unmarkedly become one of the most valuable skills a contemporary writer needs and procedure writing needs to be subjected to, writing programs conceptions on editing seem to be stunningly outdated and dismissive. Most of the teaching concentrates on questions about more or less romantic writer- or authorship. Creative writing keeps focusing on practices based on theories of “flow” – liberating ones creative potentiality.

Aim seems to be in creating humane, good and insightful artistic persons, “how to be creative, how to create writing”, not in creating good writers. I find this quite disconcerting. Classrooms would be ideal places to practice editing and finding vocabulary and hence understanding on commenting texts as texts, since there are other interested participants and material par excellence: unpublished texts. That is: because the texts are unpublished, different readings can be made upon them, different forms can still be suggested and tested: ”what if you made it into a prose poem, since there seems to be a constant need to use conjunctives and other modes of narrative discourse”.

If the possibilities of the texts at hand are reduced to means to perform their writers authorial or psychological growth, the whole interplay of different poetics and poetic means are not only lost, but their relevance starts to fade from the class. This leads to a peculiar problem witnessed by many of my friends and colleagues. By the end of semester, the students in creative writing programs start to write to a class, to other students, whose reactions and tastes they know and can play with. This creates expectations and roles that any serious literature doesn't include (e.g. X makes warm scifi-parodies on Y's coming-of-age poetry). This is fun, I have to admit. But the possibilities of learning are more or less lost. And in addition: literature's actual horizon is not friends, but literature, unknown.

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I return to editing as a concept. I would like to stress, that my basic point of view is not on general principles or skills (how to edit faster, better or easier), but on deeper level: what kind of textual information and heuristic points of departure editing can reveal. And this leads to my final part, the vast interplay between reading, writing, editing, talking and criticism.

Within the aforementioned interrelations I consider editing as the most rewarding mode of reading and most important writerly skill, for following reasons:

- a) It reveals constantly new aspects about literary forms and reading itself. This is important for critics and teachers as well, because it prevents their tendency to “already” know what is good literature and how to read out this goodness.
- b) Editing should not be considered old-fashionedly as “a mean to reveal ‘the idea’ of a given text”, but as negotiation between textual/poetic potential and different reading positions.

That is actually my main point. Because it is so short and there is a possibility that it goes unnoticed, I will repeat it: *editing should be considered as negotiation between textual/poetic potential and different reading positions*, not something that directs manuscripts toward notions of good literature (4000 words with seal of approval, collections formed around travel, seasons and four ages of man).

Good literature is usually not so good.

c) Since unaccomplished texts lack typical reading-instructions and frames, the editor has to enhance her reading skills and literary expertise in order to avoid usual or too automatized reactions. This could be something like an updated version of “*jouissance*” by Roland Barthes. That is: active and creative reading that includes both form and content, content and form, not form as content or vice versa.

d) I continue on Barthes, who proposed now widely accepted ideas on how various reading strategies, including playfulness and even purposeful misreadings, can be performed. It is interesting how they cover only semantics in his writings, leaving textual forms – poetics – out. As if the published texts are fixed once and for all, and for some almost metaphysical principle (e.g. “the Work” by Maurice Blanchot) their form is considered as organism, something that is to be left alone while performing even the most audacious acts of interpretation.

Editing, unlike regular reading, is however practiced in a state where a text (manuscript) has not yet been fixed. I therefore postulate that because alterations are still possible, this liberates reader/editor/writer to perform critical questions and new suggestions also on chosen poetics. Thus texts are subjected on considerations like ‘how this writing could function otherwise’. Not just semantically or stylistically, but also structurally/formalistically. This increases textual competence for anyone involved in such a dialogue and this should be considered more widely.

Actually, and happily, this shouldn't be a very difficult or radical change to make, because all the principles already exist in the very nature of creative writing. There are numerous occasions for texts to be read, discussed, scrutinized by different peoples in different constellations – and from more than one point of view.

So, if creative writing -programs aspire to fulfill their potential, they should focus on more versatile curriculums and recognize contemporary horizons (including the effects that internet has on reading and writing). I propose this for two reasons. First of all, it is the only way to give wide enough range of different literary styles and conceptions that good writer, editor, writer as editor needs in her formation. This dual skill is important also because publishing houses focus less and less on editing. If this skill is lost, something similar happens to literature that has already happened to knowledge. Literature is in danger to become writing, messages, where form cannot anymore create meanings or aesthetic pleasure.

Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, including editing in curriculums would create more

democratic discussions about literature and poetics since conceptions of literature would not be defined and narrowed by old fashioned teaching. Many students move on to be actors in literary field and they reproduce attitudes acquired while studying.

And this should not be a bad thing.

(1) cf. Paul de Man's essay "Rhetoric of Persuasion (Nietzsche)" in *Allegories of Reading*. (1982)

(2) See magnificent essay on the subject by David Foster Wallace: "E Unibus Pluram. Television and U.S. Fiction" (1990). In *A supposedly fun thing I'll never do again.* London: Abacus. (2007)

(3) See dissertations by Markku Eskelinen: *Travels in Cybertextuality. The Challenge of Ergodic Literature and Ludology to Literary Theory*. Helsinki. (2009)

(4) p. xliii. *Against Expression. An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Eds. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Northwestern UP. (2011)

(5) I stress this point by using the word "editing" to refer to both sides: editing made by editor and editing made by writer herself.