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MY BODY AS A METAPHOR

Three Memories

It is an afternoon in early November in 1997. I am driving my car towards my old home town. I shall be speaking about Fatherhood and Maleness to a general audience. I enter the town driving through the scenes of my childhood, along my home street. It still carries the same name, but apart from a few fixed points that are part of the terrain it has changed drastically. The quarter where I lived as a child is gone; its wooden houses have been replaced with stone ones, its flowering yards with parking spaces. All the same, I know precisely when I am passing what was once my home yard.

I park my car in the centre of the town and walk, in a carefree mood, to a coffee shop to wait for a friend. There is lots of time. I am drinking my second cup of coffee when suddenly I am struck by a bad feeling. It comes as a surprise because on all previous occasions I have been happy to see the town again, with memories full of nostalgia. Why this sudden anguish, strange and even frightening?

Then I feel a jolt in my body. The gate! The gate of the yard of my childhood! That must be it. The outlines of the gate, physically long since gone, begin to take shape in my memory, growing sharper like a photograph floating in the developing fluid. There is a little boy standing by the gate. Waiting for his father to come home.

* * *

It is early autumn in 1979. I am lying beside my colleague Jorma on a nearly deserted beach in Constanta in Rumania. The tourist season is over but Ceausescu is still going strong. We are taking part in a conference, each giving a paper of his own. Stretched out on the warm sand we begin talking about this and that, until our thoughts turn to our own provincial university back in distant Finland. We start pondering the state of our university. As we go on, we begin to speak about our longing for the old *Bildungsuniversität*. In our opinion, the current higher education pedagogics, increasingly dominated by technological perspectives, seems to be more about paying attention to trivial detail than about ensuring deep learning. What will happen to understanding, wonder and doubt? At the same time we begin thinking about whether the university still has any teachers with charisma; teachers whose lectures might actually end in applause. Only a few candidates come to mind.

The sun is shining. It is wonderfully peaceful there on the beach. We go on to discuss our own achievements as researchers and teachers, finally coming to the question of how many publications we have managed to write that anyone could be bothered to read a second time. Jorma cannot come to a conclusion, but I burst out: Three! Some ‘profit responsibility’?

* * *

“The jumpers are in the hut warming up – a wooden shack with an iron stove painted red glowing in one corner. In the hut there’s a smell of felt socks and woollen mittens. It’s an exciting place. You can get close to the jumpers. Hear stories – amazing ones – of jumps, of falling, of trips to competitions, of boozing, of women too.

When the ciggies have been smoked, toes and fingers warmed sufficiently, stories told – then it’s time to go! Hearts start to jump. Now we’ll see who get to carry whose skis to the top of the tower? One ski each. These are real Norwegians, enormously long and heavy, and they all have Kandahar-bindings and varnished bottoms.

Those ‘eagles’ whose names appeared in the middle or towards the bottom of the result sheet – in other words our heroes – were those with whom we felt most familiar. Many of the jumpers lived in the

same part of town, some just a few doors away, had a swaggering way of talking and in the evenings headed off in their trendy ‘flat hats’ (Finnish equivalent of mods?), to hang around on street corners. These were no ‘gentleman gymnasts’, or fleet-footed sprinters, or slalom enthusiasts in designed gear as ‘textile-sportsmen’. This familiarity was largely due to the fact that the jumpers almost without exception did heavy jobs, just like our own fathers. It was not at all surprising that these men escaped the everyday grind by playing as hard as they worked.” (Silvennoinen 1994a)

Breaking Away

In 1987 I wrote the final words to the discussion section of my doctoral dissertation: “Today many researchers in the ‘body culture’ have put more emphasis on emotions, affective experiences, body image and individual identity, which means that a physical activity can also reflect something else than only a striving for healthy habits, motor skills and physical condition. These new points of view will then also be seen in this field of study.” (Silvennoinen 1987, 170)

These concluding words were symptoms of my crisis as a researcher and a teacher. However, similar symptoms had appeared long before my public defense of my dissertation. The talk on the beach was another sign that the needle of the compass was far from steady. There was more ‘arrhythmia’ as a result of the summer meetings of the Nordic Summer University (NSU) in the early 1980s. For several years the NSU had a group for *krøppskultur* (physical culture) that stirred me again and again. Science began to become joyful. In the meetings of the NSU, sport and physical exercise were approached from stimulating viewpoints. *Sportens tekster* (‘Papers on sport’) (Henriksen & Olsen 1982) was a little collection of writings where the sports and corporeality were peeled open like an onion; in terms of aesthetics, sense perceptions, historical and political conceptions, myths, advertisements and fictions.

Women’s studies had begun to use the slogan personal is political (e.g. Jaggar 1989) or even – personal is scientific (Kosonen 1993). This contention could be seen as a conscious turning away from objectivity to subjectivity, to self-consciousness and self-determination. In wom-

en's own discussion groups, memory work, inspired by the German feminist researcher Frigga Haug (1983) was one way of making public, political, that which had been personally hidden or denied.

At first I was simultaneously fascinated by and suspicious of this emphasis on the personal. I was, after all, a man of huge sets of research materials, a real 'survey expert', accustomed to subjecting his questionnaires to all sorts of methods derived from statistical mathematics. Thus, the openness to corporeality, identity, the private, experiential perspectives, autobiographical approaches displayed in women's studies called into question the generalisability, replicability of research – in short, its objectivity.

Among the researchers working at the Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences at the University of Jyväskylä, Ulla Kosonen was the first to write, in 1986, an article about herself; as a sportswoman (Kosonen 1986). Around the same time Arto Tiihonen (e.g. Laitinen & Tiihonen 1990), an undergraduate majoring in sports studies, completed his Master's thesis in a way that differed radically from the discipline's traditional orientation towards the behavioural sciences. I, too, felt that after many uncertain stirrings it was time to strike out in a new direction. I wrote my first autobiographical text about the sporting experiences of my childhood and youth (Silvennoinen 1988) for a collection edited by Esa Sironen, *Uuteen liikuntakulttuuriin* (Towards a new sports culture). In the blurb of his book Sironen anticipated a transformation not only of sports culture but also of sports studies. "Something new is emerging in sport. Its grave face is relaxing and there are calls for more: new forms of sport, experiences, life style." Later, in 1994, the German-Danish social historian Henning Eichberg (1994) wrote about the then emerging 'Finnish school': "In the Finnish research the appearance of a young generation of scholars has caused more conflicts, has bred more psychological introspective inclinations and a more vigorous breaking of conventions in disciplinary discourses."

Methodical Gazes

In an interview (Denison 1998), Professor Norman K. Denzin from the University of Illinois calls for a radical conversion of ethnography and ethnographic writing practices. "He contends that as culture

becomes more global, postmodern and multinational, ethnography has the potential of becoming a form of radical democratic social practice. But this can only be achieved, he argues, by social scientists moving closer to the narrative structures found in literature. This could well be called a 'narrative turn' within the social sciences, obliging the scholars to break down the barriers that separate autobiographical writing from what passes as canonical scholarly research." It is nice to realise that this was something that we in Finland had already been doing for a long time.

The three memories recounted above belong to a period extending from the 1950s to the present. The fragments are not in a chronological order but in an arbitrary one. The last experience was recounted first. This is, after all, how memory works: it lives in what has just happened, returns farther and farther back in time, looking in the past for links with the present, even with the future.

In the last few years my mind has been increasingly occupied by reflections on what remains of my childhood and youth. What does my body remember? This is scarcely to be wondered at. Everyone with a reasonably long stretch of life behind them does the same. However, what interests me is the question whether I was, in the past, already the person that I am now. Or am I, in actual fact, using writing to reconstruct myself (Who am I?) into a shape of my own devising, without engaging in a dialogue (Who are you?)?

Why only three memories? Why precisely these three memories? Have I picked them because despite belonging to different times and places they are all 'lucid memories', even if the first memory told above entered my mind as if from behind a curtain; late and from the margins. Might they offer metaphorical materials, a fixed point, of a kind that could be used in an endeavour to build a bridge from the past to the present? Will memory evade language?

My starting point is that my three memories are not copies of what really happened but reconstructions that include both imaginative and factual elements and symbols of social meaning structures (Berger & Luckmann 1967, 15; Brewer 1986, 43; Saarenheimo 1991). The way in which a memory is written into a text (from myself to another) is shaped by the situation of the time of writing, with the result that the act of narration is affected by many cultural and social conventions (Young 1990).

My present status is that of a middle-class, highly educated man with, in terms of years, a considerable career behind me. As a 'normal type' of the scientific community in Finland I should exemplify linear upward mobility symbolised by titles of offices, positions of trust, memberships, medals. I might be a man with my childhood behind me, a mature and settled-down adult whose passions have been replaced by cool rationality. But that is just what I am not!

Of course I know that it is futile to search fragmentary memories for a stable personality, even by resorting to 'language games'. Nevertheless, memories are an important element of an individual's 'identity work' (see Ziche 1991, 151), an entity where narration and self-reflection count for more than structured indicators of the self. In its talk and writings the self is narrating, in tests and questionnaires merely reacting. Dan McAdams (1985) argues that autobiographical memory is, in fact, what individual identity is all about. Thus, narrated identity involves both a differentiation from other people and the rest of the world, and a new merging into them.

I doubt there is any way of separating identity from corporeality, possibly the only piece of firm ground available to modern humans. Nevertheless, as is pointed out by Kimmo Jokinen (1993), "it is probably useless to offer any ready-made packages of theories of the body or embodiments of theory while – on the other hand – no amount of textual playfulness can sweep the body aside. There is always more involved than a game of mere textualised and thoroughly dispersed subjects, of total heterogeneity and pure attributors of meaning."

I have wanted to write about my corporeality using metaphors. What might embodied metaphors be like? According to George Lakoff (1993, 203), metaphors are a matter not only of language or figures of speech, but of restructurings of human thinking and action as a whole through what may be the most mundane of things. Time, space and change are always, in some way, metaphorically charged and interpreted. What may become interesting are the contrasts between metaphors, that is, how and why unknown things are made familiar and familiar things unknown, how some features of certain experiences are emphasised and others played down.

Might metaphors be thickenings carrying meanings that maintain and foster identity, that lie dormant in some 'body memory' and emerge or take shape through active memory work, with the result that experi-

ences that have been shunted to the margins may come out and take their place alongside well-remembered things?¹ I am particularly fascinated by the idea that bodily metaphors might have the very important function of opening the knots of childhood to serve as structures of the adult mind (Bardy 1996, 152); by giving the self a voice and by actualising the lived body (Helén 1993).

Reconstructions

The boy standing at the gate. What about it? Just before the visit to my home town I had finished, together with two colleagues, a book about young boys' and girls' relationships with their fathers linked with sport and physical exercise. The book included also my own story about my father; a story about myself as the son of my father and as the father to my sons (Silvennoinen, Tiihonen & Innanen 1997). At the same time, I was writing my father once more visible. As I was putting my memories down, the longed-for father of my childhood, who was often away, gained new characteristics, simultaneously providing support for features of my masculinity that had often been ignored – sensitivity and humility. The boy longing for his father has been etched deep under my 'skin'. It is my reverse side.

As an young adult I was anything but humble. Almost immediately after the mild conversation on the beach Jorma suddenly died. At the time he may have been the closest of my colleagues. As young graduate students and radical leftists in the early 1970s, we had written, in the local student newspaper, fairly critically about our own faculty, managing, in the process, to step on some big toes. Our pieces were so full of the most exquisite zeal and the fiercest of idealism that they may have been what made the professor of our major subject to shout to our face: "Either you two are leaving or I am!"

I think that our 'Rumanian picnic' symbolises a turning point, a rite of passage, that Jorma never had time to complete. The future lay far ahead, but what had already been lived through required its own symbols. The 1970s was for me very much a time of a rebellion against my father, against everything that his ideas represented. Even though my father belonged, by the yardstick of his then economic and social position, to the working class, he hated Russians and communists. He

had left his own home in the part of Finland handed over to the Soviet Union after the country's two wars with it, and there were scars.

If the boy standing at the gate and the moment on the beach were flashes of memory, the ski jumpers are as if a long unbroken thread running through my body. I believe that my identification with them and with their masculinity is linked with a shared social context and local mentality: with the 'mimetic stage' (e.g. Stallybrass & White 1986) of a working-class, sweaty, unsublime, rebellious and grotesque corporeality.

Post-war life in my home town in the 1940s was characterised, as was the rest of Finland, by want, diligence, dominance of work, men as the absent breadwinners of their families, mothers as the source of security who exerted a nearly hegemonic emotional dominance over their children.

"What might our boy-culture mean? There was always someone among us boys who had to be outdone or something which had to be performed better than the others. We held our breath, shoved buns into our mouths, vied to see who could piss the furthest, compared willies and bicepses, buried ourselves in a snow drift, stubbed cigarettes out on the back of a hand, made bets about just everything. In Caillois' terms (Caillois 1961, 36) it was more a question of rough and vulgar 'paidia' than 'ludus' – in a wider sense more a question of the pre-modern than the modern" (Silvennoinen 1994b).

"It was an 'ethos of getting by' among small boys, a struggle between an yearning for tenderness on the one hand and a masculinity witnessed with our own eyes on the other. I think that a world experienced in this way could not but guide me and my friends towards a psychoculture of a kind that could be characterised as a culture of *uncertainty* – a culture of *heterogeneous sameness* – a culture of *mutual alliance of lone children*." (Silvennoinen 1993, 1994b, 1996)

In the 1950s Kuopio, a small town in Inner Finland, whose vulgar dialect was despised particularly in Southern Finland, could nevertheless pride itself on the biggest jumping hill in the Nordic countries! The enormous and marvellously vast jumping hill was a spatial experience that filled us with powerful pleasure. But it was not just a space. It was a place with a name – Puijo, familiar to all Finns.

The building of the primary school was its nearly direct opposite. "Although I looked forward eagerly to going to school – an important

rite of initiation for us all -the school itself overwhelmed me for some considerable way. It felt as if the massive stone building sucked me inside it each morning, held me in its grip for a moment only to finally spit me out again in the afternoon. In the cold and dark of winter mornings the illuminated windows of the school seemed to jeer at each timorous figure that approached: Looking forward to seeing you again, just make sure you're not late! (...) And the gymnasium of the primary school dispelled the last remnants of the previous evening's Tarzans, Indians and daredevils flying through the air on skis." (Silvennoinen 1995).

Heikki Peltonen (1996, 196) writes about ski jumpers in Lahti in the 1950s:² "A ski jumper is not only a sportsman but also a circus performer. It is thus obvious that he must not be judged by everyday standards. In the mythology of Lahti, ski jumpers are not characterised by or expected to possess such virtues as good manners, moderate drinking habits or trustworthiness."

Markku Koski (1997), a student of popular culture, describes the same sportsmen in this way: "Compared to ski jumpers a skier is a plodder of the old school, no fabulous being, no eagle of jumping hills. He is rarely described by means of poetic animal metaphors, he is just a prosaically strong man or woman. In the 1960s the ski jumpers were the rockers of the time (...) They saw the club as their bunch, an extension of the street gang, other jumpers as members of the band (...) Skiing was tenacious work, ski jumping a continuation, stretching-out, of the daring of childhood and youth – a youth culture – as much as were the James Deans and Marlon Brando."

I have never liked tea, coffee all the more. I have seen a single obligatory opera in Berlin, in the GDR that was, as a member of a delegation from our department. I fell asleep. Ballet I have sometimes glanced at on TV, never stopping for a closer look. I perceive both art forms as alien on a corporeal level. I still feel a 'rocker bloke', who even in his manner of speaking has, after the political liturgy of his youth, returned to his roots; the language of the street and the yard. No, it does not mean an endless string of curses, but questioning academic vocabulary and rhetoric, particularly when they seem to float on thin air.

Why did I, at university, almost never find a link between reading, the personal, and learning? How could a stint lasting years, correctly carried out but without results worth mentioning, be 'good research'?

In this sense my dissertation is a good subject for self-reflection.

I see my present researcher self as a social scientist who likes his work among people. I am interested in voices and stories of all kinds – endless individual truths – which surprisingly often turn out to be collectively perceived truths. Another thing important to me personally are the ways in which my texts are read and received. Do they arouse in the reader self-perceptions of a kind that might teach them something?

This episodic life story is a written montage where remembering links up with the actual self. The text contains rhetorical and metaphorical links that I have used in an attempt to suggest why my life has gone as it has gone. But has it gone the way I have recounted it? Is there even the minimum of truth required to make the tale hang together? I am not, after all, recalling localisable facts: my record in our home-built jumping hill, the infectious diseases I came down with, the number of children in our quarter in 1952, the floor space of my home and so on. Instead, I present my reader with consciously nuanced emotional states, human portraits, words and possibly even smells.

The memories that I have chosen for presentation are part of an argument to justify grasping the present by means of the past. Understood literally this would be hindsight: my childhood and surroundings have simply made me into what I am now. By contrast, seen in terms of metaphors this approach acquires more subtle, even mysterious meanings – something old is still alive in me.

If I had, exerting my adult will, decided otherwise, would I also have become, irreversibly, an ‘other’; a mature and coolly matter-of-fact male researcher? In that case I would certainly have replaced the memories recounted here with others. I do not know what kind of narrative that would have been – or maybe I do know after all: I remember that even as a child I was a prudent, unathletic boy who valued good manners, and who in adulthood broke his ties with the past; with childhood fantasies and with the volatility and bumbling of a few rebellious years in youth. But – had the ski jumpers even then left me in peace?

Now when I am, in conclusion, going to turn really emotional, I can sketch a metaphorical pastoral representing myself:

“An eagle of jumping hills!” A bit of a bohemian. Hides under his exterior a good deal of sensibility. Tends to be shy. And a man who

at times recklessly attempts to get out of all that on his own terms. As he takes off, at full pelt, at the end of the ski jump, he is keeping in mind that style is important, too. Falling on his own two feet after a jump fills his body with a warm feeling of well-being. Sometimes his feet do give out, and then he goes down so that the snow swirls up. Nevertheless, despite all such unsteadiness, what is important is not thumping down, year after year, at the line marking the same safe number of metres.

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Notes

- ¹ At its simplest memory work may mean setting aside intellectual time and space of a kind that will not emerge at formal meetings, or conferences, but which will, instead, turn into a new kind of dialogue over a cup of coffee, on the veranda of a sauna – or, say, on a beach.
- ² In the 1950s Lahti and its jumping hill were considered ‘the Mecca of ski jumping in Finland’. As a perception of locality Lahti meant to the boys of Lahti what Puijo meant to us, with the important difference that the two parties, being ‘enemies’, utterly refused to see any such similarity.
- ³ “We Finns have Matti (Matti Nykänen) – the king of all the jumpers, who was and still is constantly hounded by the media. He has done the same as our own idols a few decades ago – flown through the air on his skis and then disappeared every so often on trips of his own design. Matti has tested and broken the limits of the strict, disciplined sports system. Matti’s occasional departures from national responsibility for success have attracted angry criticism, but also motherly sympathy” (Silvennoinen 1994a).

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