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## The Finland of poetry revisited four snapshots

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### Abstract

A poem is a condensation of signs and a method characteristic of every human being for investigating a shared reality. Accordingly, a human being also lives and exists poetically in this common world. This being so, the primacy of the mother tongue refers to the lived language, which mediates the possibility for us of carving out our own unique imprint on existence. Similarly, the native land signifies a milieu where a human being takes on a reality amidst other objects, surrounded by them and as one of them. Poetry creates harmony between past and present.

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### 1. Motto

"Our home area, the place in this land which our being is tied to with unbreakable roots, the sphere of being for our childhood and youth, the eternal dwelling place of our heart, the most beautiful and precious on earth, beautiful even in its ruggedness, and all the more beautiful for its ruggedness, and the object of our longing if we have left it, – it is the natural circle of our life outside of which we always somehow feel cut adrift from life." (Hollo, 1931.)

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## 2. To Begin With

Poetry does not simply mean melodiousness and rhythm. If lyric poetry means that a person expresses their worldly pain through song accompanied on a lyre, then poetry denotes something entirely different. Poetry is every person's individual way of looking at a world that is communally shared. The aspect of uniqueness is also essential: moments do not return as such, and nobody experiences any situation twice in exactly the same way. In poetry a person carves out their own mark in the centre of a common reality with an outline already formed long ago. This is precisely why the landscape of one's home feels so precious. It is the archetype of all other landscapes, which are merely reflections of it. The home radiates its warm glow all the days of a human life. It puts the humanity into humanity.

## 3. Poem

### 3.1. *A glimpse from afar: Yrjö Kokko*

The same thing can be described in reality through several different narratives. To the tellers of these tales, each in their own age, the tales are equally true. The essential point here is the view of culture as a tallying of what has gone before. Perhaps it can be seen as the idea of some kind of collective settlement, a national reckoning. Yrjö Kokko pondered this same question in post-war Finland. His thoughts were published in a fine travel book, *The Islands of Good Will*, which appeared in 1953 during the period of reconstruction. Kokko takes a look at his native land from far away, the Canary Isles, and writes in the following touching way: "Is one's native land then a period when a person is born, where he has grown up, and which will die along with him? Perhaps your native land is just the earth and soil where you were born, the local area which, compared to infinity, is no bigger than the grave where you will be buried when you die. But isn't your native land the people who speak your language, the people you have shared joys and sorrows with, common destinies? But, as we know, the generations depart. New generations do not think or feel in the same way. Opinions change just as circumstances do. When our own generation dies, does our own nation also die then?" (Kokko, 1953.)

In addition to the nation's shared settling of accounts, there is also another individual and very personal view opening up on the past. A private person can also go to an existential confession and try to clothe his own yesteryears in some kind of self-comprehending linguistic garb.

### 3.2. *Aleksis Kivi: a full-length portrait*

At the end of Jari Halonen's film *The Life of Aleksis Kivi* (2001), the writer Kivi climbs up high onto a hill, almost a mountain, a kind of metaphysical point: from there it is possible to look into the far distance, into the remotest past and into the shimmering future, lying at the furthest extreme. The time has come to weigh up the old and the new, as well as that which is here and now.

From where he stands on high Kivi sees the sparkling waters and the forests glowing in their summer green. High above all this there stretches the vault of the eternal blue sky. The words of his poem "Suomenmaa" (1878) ring in our ears:

"A land of hills and valleys,  
What are you, my beauty?  
Your glow of summer days,  
Your lustre of northern fires,  
This delight of winter, summer,  
What is this lovely land? [...]"  
(SR 1, 1990.)

The full-length portrait is nearing completion. Why can a particular place or landscape feel so close that even the thought of losing it hurts? Is the place beautiful in itself or is it the feeling, the loving of it, that gives it beauty? One answer to this can be found in the work quoted in the motto above, *Self-education and the Skill of Living*. It was written by Juho Hollo, philosopher and professor of adult education. His ideas continue to stir the heart: "We like beauty, it pleases us, fills our being with a powerful sense of inner bliss. Is beauty perhaps created by love? Or is beauty the subject and cause of our love? Or is it mostly a matter of love creating beauty and beauty inspiring love?" (Hollo, 1931.)

In order to describe, we need our own mother tongue, its expressive power and resilience. Otherwise the words are mute – lacking the immediacy of lived truth.

### 3.3. Kersti Bergroth: memory and longing

Kersti Bergroth writes the following poem, *Beloved City*, in her collection of the same name<sup>1</sup>:

”Karelians! Hail to you,  
To you that have strayed westwards!  
In your hearts you carry an image  
That will be forgotten only in death.  
Perhaps a far-off lake,  
A cottage and close by a sauna.  
Perhaps the dark stripe of the Vuoksi river  
Bringing to mind that eternal yearning.  
Perhaps what is dearest to you  
Is a street in the old city,  
Perhaps the park of our Torkkeli,  
An aching memory of the castle.

How long in this world  
Will these pictures exist?  
The dear country of our memories  
Will disappear when we die.

But there are still some of us here  
A few who know,  
How everything looked then:  
The old ramparts on a spring evening,  
The colourful yawls in autumn,  
The annual market at Punalähde,  
The winter snows, the summer rains,  
Hundreds of places vanished.”  
(Bergroth, 1951.)

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<sup>1</sup>The Winter War was fought between Finland and the Soviet Union. It began on 30.11.1939 and ended 13.4.1940. For Finland, it was a defensive war. Finland lost the war and, in accordance with the terms of the Moscow Peace Treaty, had to surrender 12% of its surface area to the Soviet Union. This involved the loss of, for example, the Karelian isthmus and parts of Karelia surrounding Lake Ladoga, as well as the three largest cities in these areas: Vyborg, Sortavala and Käkisalmi.

With the surrender of territory, 12% of the population, i.e., over 400,000 people, lost their home. Accommodation was found for them elsewhere in Finland. The ceded areas were evacuated and the Karelians called evacuees. There was born a home-sickness, lasting across generations, for the Karelia that was lost.

Vyborg was granted municipal rights in 1403. Before the outbreak of the Winter War Vyborg was Finland’s second largest city, with a population of over 80,000 in 1939. Vyborg was also a cosmopolitan and multilingual city where Russian, Swedish and German were spoken alongside Finnish. Places of note in the city include Torkkeli Park, Torkkeli Street, Monrepos Park and Punalähde Square. The city’s important buildings are Vyborg Castle, the Round Tower and the functionalist library designed by Alvar Aalto.

Vuoksi is an outlet of the Vuoksi lake and river system running from Lake Saimaa into Lake Ladoga. Its total length is 156 kilometres. In its upper reaches there are huge rapids, for example, the Imatrankoski rapids.

The Karelia that was lost lives on in people's minds as a longing that crosses the generation gap. It will not disappear even though the number of those who remember has indeed diminished. The story, however, is not interrupted: the tale is told and passed on from one generation to another. And of course there are photographs and written fiction. Bergroth's use of language in her novel about the activities of the Lotta-Svärd organization, *The Diary of a Young Defence Volunteer*, moves us<sup>2</sup>: "These days we are all thinking about Vyborg. We've begun to understand that perhaps the time has come to leave Vyborg. [...] Vyborg, my home city. To me, you are almost like a living being. [...] Nobody who has lived in Vyborg can imagine anything so crushingly sweet as spring on the Vyborg ramparts. There I encounter all my wistful longings – longing for the sea, longing for my hopes, longing for Karelianness, longing for history. When you are young and walk on the Vyborg ramparts, the elation of the entire world fills your whole heart. [...] And Vyborg castle. It gives joy to the whole of Finland. Every heart holds the memory of its mysterious beauty. A thousand times, and a thousand times again, I have looked at it as if looking would give me strength. Are you to fall to strangers who cannot behold you properly because they have not loved you for such a long, long time. No love is truly moving at its very outset, only memories make love tender." (Bergroth, 1940.)

### 3.4. Arvi Kivimaa: a multidimensional perspective

As Arvi Kivimaa's song to Finland's beautiful young capital city rings out, we are hushed by his words and our hearts respond with tender feeling:

"You have the beauty of the sea,  
Its clarity, its freshness,  
You youthful Helsinki of ours!  
We, this tribe of this great Finland,  
We raised you through toil and deed  
Into our shield against Europe

Into the granite of your face  
We carved the yearning of this nation,  
Yet upon your open sea and in your trees  
Your murmuring song rings out,  
And across the centuries  
In them have rippled your memories.

You have the beauty of the sea  
And the love of winter, summer,  
Our youthful Helsinki!  
They are blissful who once enter  
Your sunlit life,  
Which we dream into greatness!"  
(Kivimaa, 1935.)

Kivimaa's splendid collection of poems "*Longing and Life*" reminds us of a multidimensional perspective, also examining the present moment through the eyes of the bygone. The observers change but the allure of Helsinki continues to captivate. It ceaselessly charms new generations of travellers. As long ago as 1914, V. A. Koskenniemi chose to include our capital city in his celebrated travel book *Cities of Poetry and Other Writings*<sup>3</sup>. The modern Finnish reader joyfully approves of the striking characterization of Helsinki made by this Turku poet and professor: "Is there any inhabitant of Helsinki who has not at some time experienced the stirring of poetic feelings towards his city, almost

<sup>2</sup>The Lotta Svärd was a voluntary national defence organization for women. It operated from 1920 until 1944. The volunteers initially worked in support of Civil Guard groups and later of all Finnish defence forces. The Finnish Lotta Heritage Association was founded in 1991.

<sup>3</sup>The Grand Duchy of Finland was an autonomous area of the Russian tsardom from 1809 to 1917. Finland became independent on 6.12.1917. Turku was Finland's first capital, although it retained this status for a rather short time: 1809–1812. In 1812 Helsinki became the capital of the Grand Duchy of Finland. In 1917 it then became the capital of independent Finland.

like an intimation of what is to come. Returning from overseas, standing on the ship's deck on a clear autumn morning, with Helsinki's familiar white silhouette rising from the waves, girdled by forest, the roofs gleaming in the first frost, he finds this view compares with the most beautiful in the world, and, setting foot on Helsinki's soil and seeing Engel's colonnades unfolding before him, he has called his city all those names that home-sickness has uttered to him. He has called it the Athens of the North where Apollo, god of light, could take up residence, fleeing the laurel groves for the lands of the Hyperboreans." (Koskenniemi, 1914.)

#### 4. Postscript: Never-Ending Sunday

The poet Lauri Pohjanpää published his novel *Song of a Summer's Night* before the war, in 1937 before Finland was divided. The book contains a description of a summer's evening, of a radiant sunset at the height of summer. The moment the sphere of life sinks below the horizon is a moment of magic. Within it there exists something ceaselessly transient and eternally enduring. Pohjanpää's text comes across powerfully: "Sunset. Its glow still lights up the southern sky and tinges the clouds with a dark purple. Beneath them the blaze of a yellow streak, the beautiful red-brown gleam of the pine trunks, the golden shimmering of a far-off beach. The area around the channel lies in deep-blue shade, the rock at its mouth flashes a blue redishness. In the west the sky is a creamy yellow band of cloud, and above the blue-green crowns of the forests there lingers a languid lustre, as if exhausted from the day's radiance, as the sun sets in the north-west as if into a fire. All of these tints and hues are reiterated as pastel colours in the calm waters, with light streaks here and there like silver threads. The nuances change with every blink of the eye – there is no more sensitive a mirror than a lake, it is like the human soul. Into the glow of the sunset a rowing boat appears, with red and white sides, and from the boat a song is heard, – in the middle it is golden and yellow like the boat of the blessed on its way to the island of the blessed." (Pohjanpää, 1937.)



Fig. 1. Never-ending Sunday.

In myself I dimly glimpse the summer sunsets of my grandparents and parents. It's as if inside me I can hear the ringing of those summer bells and their peals travelling across the open lakes. Then it was a summer Sunday, a never-ending Sunday. Bustle and anguish were nowhere near. Serenity and peacefulness prevailed. My mind drifted back to those tranquil waters. They were days of reverie, brimming with happiness. They were also a counter to daily routine: timeless and unchangingly everlasting. Let the poem that follows be a tribute to the summers lived by three generations: A man looks into a window pane,

His gaze is met by that of a boy.  
 One of them is the future that has gone  
 and the other a past yet to come.  
 The boy of summers, straw and copper,  
 still building away at his days.  
 The man of memories,  
 the bitter-sweetness of his moments.

The reflection begins to retreat,  
 melts into nothingness.  
 The boy fades away,  
 merges into the man.  
 He is alone  
 and full of the boy.  
 Like back then,  
 on the opening pages of being.

Translated by Glyn Hughes

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