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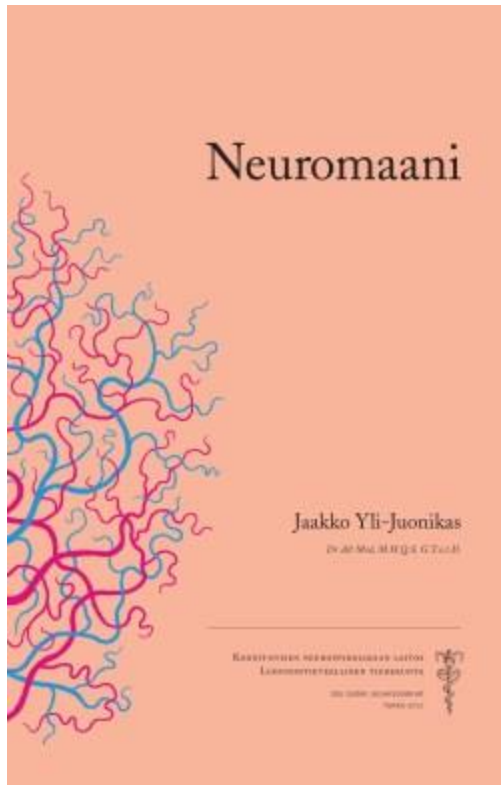
Neuromaani and the Poetics of Illness

Posted on 3 November 2021

Laura Piippo discusses the challenging poetics of illness in Jaakko Yli-Juonikas's experimental novel.

This essay was first presented as part of “Narratives of Illness”, the SELMA Medical Humanities Seminar Series at the University of Turku, Finland, convened by Marta-Laura Cenedese and Avril Tynan.

To an anglophone reader, *Neuromaani* (2012) is perhaps best known as an untranslated and allegedly untranslatable work of contemporary Finnish literary excess. It is the fourth literary work by Jaakko Yli-Juonikas, a prominent Finnish writer of experimental novels and short stories, and was published in 2012 to mixed reviews, often praised but at the same time described as ‘too much’ or ‘too difficult’. It is a vast and versatile book of over 650 pages with an exceptionally elaborate cover design by Markus Pyörälä that received the award for the most beautiful Finnish book of the year in 2012.



Neuromaani's strange and complex story begins here, as the cover announces that the book was published in the Department of Cognitive Neuropsychology in the Faculty of Natural Sciences at the University of Turku. While the University truly exists, the department and faculty are purely fictional. What follows is – like in any formal dissertation – an abstract, which in English describes the book as a study that “focuses on a series of crimes committed by a loose group of Finnish neuroscientists in 1999-2000”, and that “[o]n the course of research work, this study has gradually adopted a multilayered, novel-like form.” (*Neuromaani*, 7, all translations to English by Laura Piippo). It even lists some keywords: “neuroscience, forensic psychology, antisocial behavior, defalcation, scientific misconduct, bioethics, rationality of science, fMRI, Finnish cases”.

From here, the reader embarks upon the novel which begins—as so many (post)postmodernist classics—as a Nordic-noir-esque detective story or mystery. Two neuroscientists arrive at a hospital where a convict, a man named Silvo Näre, is placed under a mental examination. We do not know what crime he has committed (and we shall not learn that during the course of the novel) but in the presence of the scientists and medical staff, we find out that he hears voices, including one voice in particular that names itself as Gereg Bryggman. These voices intersect, overlap and merge with the voice(s) of the narrator(s) so that it is generally hard to distinguish them clearly from one other. Yet despite this seemingly conventional beginning, there is no main narrative, plot or storyline to be found; the novel constantly fragments and changes directions, not only thematically but textually, changing the

shape and meaning of the words on the page, breaking up and apart both the cohesion of the story and the reader's meaning-making processes and effort.

seinän kuvastinta ja muodostan loputtomiin jatkuvan wc-ketjun. Eihän se oikeasti ikinä onnistu, käsi vapisee väkisinkin ja ketju heilahtelee kuvan ulkopuolelle. Sitä paitsi seinäpeiliä täytyy katsoa sivusta jolloin tulokulma johdattaa katseen vinoon, ja silmänreikien poraaminen käsipeiliin tuskin olisi vai- van arvoista. Eikä näin lapsellinen imaginaarisen teleskooppikaukoputken tiirailu avaa muutenkaan järin – peilien kautta Gereg sen sijaan Silvo Näreen *aivokurkiaiseseen*.



huimaavia metafysisiä näköaloja saavuttaa hermostollisen reitin Tämä on aivojen keskiö, Pää-

arvausasema. Ei toki hallinnollinen keskus – hallinnollista kes- kusta ei ole olemassakaan – mutta tärkeä linkkiasema kumminkin.³⁶³

Jotkut nykyajan mielenfilosofit väittä- vät, että paras inhimillistä tietoi-

suutta kuvaava metafora ei ole tietokone vaan tivolin peilitalo. Sanotaan, ettei tietoisuuden virtaa jäsennä



kielen rakenne vaan lukemattomat

eri kulmiin säädetyt kuperat, koverat ja

v*aturalleen prässätyt peilit. Kuvat kimpoilevat häi-

lyvinä ja monin kerroin vääristyneinä heijastavasta pin-

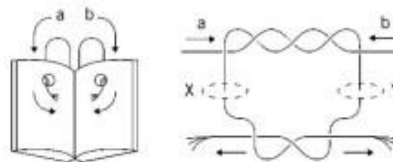
nasta toiseen – esikielellistä kuituoptiikkaa [---] paitsi että ei tämä

äkipäättä kovin uskottavalta kuulosta: mehän on löydetty vasta 2 peiliä, kun taas kieltä täällä piisaa senkin edestä. Jatkuva heikkomielininen polotus. Kukkuu Silvo oletko Hereillä ai Päänsärkyä no polkaise neula Peukalovarpaan kynnen alle ja jos se Sattuu niin revi Tippa irti lyö nyrkillä käytävän Peiliä riko Rysty- set ja jatka siitä omalla tyyllillä Tiesitkö että täällä mielisairaalassa Ne joutuvat

³⁶³ Yleisen harhалуulon mukaan ihmisen aivoissa on vain yksi aivokurkiaiainen. Muusikko-parapsykologi Erkki Ertaman tutkimukset osoittavat kiistatta toisenkin aivokurkiaisien olemassaolon. Mm. Parkinsonin taudin ensioireet näkyvät aluksi juuri toisessa aivokurkiaisessa. Ertama E. 2007, *Sattuma korjaa sataa. Momenlaista musiikista*. Edico Oy. Helsinki. S. 213.

³⁶⁴  Ø 10 mm

³⁶⁵ Watson R. A. 2012, "Computer-aided feedback of surgical knot tying using optical tracking." *Journal of Surgical Education* 69. S. 306–310.



The novel is loosely styled on the choose-your-own-adventure books that were made popular in the 1980s. This ergodic style—that is, literature in which the reader has to put in more than a trivial amount of work in order to proceed in the novel—is both cause and consequence of the poetics of illness that follows. The reader receives various instructions throughout the novel and must make choices, based on accumulated knowledge, on the next step to take and the next chapter to read. However, unlike traditional choose-your-own-adventure books that aim towards a teleological ending, *Neuromaani* leads the reader on a wild goose chase without any hope of ever reaching a conclusion:

I am a clueless slob; I need the help of a personal trainer, your help that is to say. Attention, wake up. It's morning; the interactive part begins. Now you have to decide whether I get up and start exercising or stay in bed. If you want Gereg to start the exercise, turn to chapter 146. If you prefer passivity, turn to chapter 122. If, on the other hand, you are a true brainiac like the neuroscientist Paavo Riekkinen Señor and you can handle large ensembles, you can go forth in a more traditional manner or jump from one chapter to another in a random order, completely disregarding the instructions. It is way too straining for the brains of a regular forgetful moron, the plot won't hold together, but you can always try [—] (17).

If you suspect the father, turn to chapter 57. Or (option c) the note includes a coded message appointed to someone else, which you are in fact not meant to understand. If you are interested in breaking the code, move to chapter 118. On the other hand, it is not completely ruled out, that (d) I have imagined the whole thing. Maybe these curious occurrences are born in my mind and only reflect my worst fears (or *hopes!*?!). Read more in chapter 103. And yet, in the last resort one might ask, (e) does it really matter? One might as well drop the whole schizoid business and move on to more exciting adventures. More exciting adventures available in chapter 202. (33).

There are multiple endings in which the protagonist dies and the reader must go back a few chapters or start over from the beginning, so that the reader is deprived of the final answer or interpretation of the story—if there even is (only) one. As the novel progresses, both the narrator(s) and the reader grow increasingly suspicious, even paranoid, about the events as they find themselves entangled in an unintelligible web of possible stories and literary clues.



Credit: Sakari Ylimaunu, née Kursula. "Tekstikoneen aivotoiminta: Ergodisuus ja sen mallintaminen Jaakko Yli-Juonikkaan romaanissa *Neuromaani*." MA thesis. University of Jyväskylä, 2013). <http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:jyu-201401201084>

All these traits form the unhinged style and feel of the novel. Many of these literary devices are related or comparable to the linguistic features of madness, or more precisely to those associated with schizophrenia, such as recurring sentence structures, neologisms, mixed metaphors and uncontrolled associations, as well as the banal and vulgar vocabulary which is also associated with social stigma. Moreover, the novel mixes different textual material, mimicking an academic style of writing with an excessive amount of footnotes, references and citations—many of which turn out to be fictional or misleading amalgamations of factual material with parody. These numerous subtexts, characters, references, pseudo-references, sources, thoughts and red herrings entangle the reader in the deteriorating language and structure, lost amongst different interpretational threads, (un)comfortably numb and strikingly aware of their role as reader both inside and outside the text:

Shocking images and flashes from the lowest levels of the consciousness—a city in ruins, a pillar of fire in the h*riz*n, black j*nipers in front of the housing cooperative, which turn into a pack of wolves during the night [—] unstable state of mind leaves only 2 options: ex*t st*ge l*ft and dem*i***on of th* f*** h*se—move to chapter 25, or rising in the atmosphere—move to chapter 180. This is admittedly a hard choice, and requires an ability to emphasize with a deviant individual's psyche. Have courage, friend—one must only throw oneself into the stream of expression, seek the seekers path, c*nnect with the *umanit**s *i***** (77)

I wish we had had the sense to settle our 'differences' a little earlier [—] when it wasn't too late yet [—] so much important is left unsaid [—] on child spies [—] on irradiation of the brain [—] don't blame your father, he can't help the ruthlessness of his life instinct [—] white grass, the fleeting with respiration [—] 'lanterna magica' [—] father's white ear [—]. (530)

All of these different aspects of the novel, no matter how hilarious or intriguing, fold into a bundle of frustration or exhaustion and call for reconfiguring our ways of reading, interpreting and contextualising the text. It would be too easy to claim that reading *Neuromaani* gives the reader an insight into an experience of mental excess, whether it be schizophrenia or some other diagnosable disorder. In reading the chaotic narrative that may or may not be the illness experience of Silvio Näre, the reader confronts a distortion of reality that could be pathologized as schizophrenia. Yet the novel precisely highlights the difference between an experience of illness and the *poetics* of illness, that is, the *representation* of an experience of illness.

This is most profoundly enacted in the many metafictional addresses to the reader—you—and through the materiality of the novel itself. In the very centre of *Neuromaani* the reader finds a series of diagrams that serve as instructions for the final assembly of the novel: ‘drill through the pages, loop the two attached bookmarks through the holes and tie them together in a somewhat complicated manner’.



Credit: Antti Arnkil,

“Kallonporaajan iltapäivä”, 2013



Credit: Antti Arnkil,

“Kallonporaajan iltapäivä”, 2013

Now sealed shut, the narrative of Silvo’s symptoms no longer interferes with reality; but the book, of course, is unreadable. The reader, an outsider to the text and to the experience of Silvo’s illness, possesses an agency that Silvo (or the novel) will never have: the reader can close the book, turn away from the poetics of illness and put it down, but the experience of illness cannot be overcome in this same way, it cannot be isolated and detached, or sealed away within the pages of a novel. *Neuromaani* invites the reader to empathize with the chaotic and excessive mental disorder of the narrator(s) and to marvel at the intriguing and impressive poetics, but it is careful to demonstrate—compassionately—that there is a significant difference between the experience of reading (or writing) illness and the experience of illness itself.

This blog post is based on the author’s previously published articles [“The brain in our hands: The materiality of reading *Neuromaani*.”](#) In *Reading Today*. Ed. by Heta Pyrhönen, & Janna Kantola. London: UCL Press, 2018 (45–56), and “Dissident Poetics, Experimental Excess: Jaakko Yli-Juonikas’ Finnish Novel *Neuromaani*.” In Brinda Bose (ed.), *Humanities, Provocateur: Towards a Contemporary Political Aesthetics* (111–125). New Delhi: Bloomsbury India, 2021.

Dr. Laura Piippo works as a University Teacher (Lecturer) in Literature at the Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. The

topic of Piippo's doctoral thesis (2020) was the experimental poetics of the contemporary Finnish novel Neuromaani (2012) by Jaakko Yli-Juonikas, especially the materiality and affects of the book. Her post-doctoral research project focuses on the places, forms, and value of a book (codex) in digital environments, and seeks to analyze the ways in which printed books, especially novels and their poetics and affects, are both affected by and represented in the digital environments, and the role that they play in related value creation. Her peer-reviewed articles, edited volumes, and special issues on these topics have been published (or are forthcoming) both in English and in Finnish.

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