Considerable attention has been paid to the complexity of contemporary poetry in Finland.¹ One could even say that there is a poetry boom going on in Finland. The media (television, internet and press) is suddenly interested in poetry, a fact highlighted by recent conferences and several poetry recitals that have been organised. The Poetics Conference is a part of Helsinki Festival’s Poetry Moon, which is a prominent series of poetry events. The same is true of Poetry Week organised in Turku in November.

The third annual Helsinki Poetics Conference² presented views on poetics from the perspective of scholars and particularly contemporary Nordic poets (mostly Finnish). The title of the conference, “The Ir/responsibility of Poetry” (Runouden vastuu/tomuus) was an invitation to ethical considerations. Several interesting and topical issues were raised in each of the addresses. Thematically they all seemed to share the idea of poetics as interaction, which is essential to ethics.

The event was opened by poet and translator Leevi Lehto, who is known for his experimentalism in poem generator poetry.³ Search-engine poetry is a symptom of a conception of poetry that is (optimistically) democratic in its interactionality: the poem takes after its reader, albeit in the confines of a certain menu. Lehto’s address manifested the idea of poetics as a multitude of poetries instead of doctrines or formulae.

In the morning’s first address Danish poet and journalist, Martin Glaz Serup, presented his version of the independent nature of poetry. Serup emphasised, that belief in an artistic truth is of major importance to a poet. A poem’s voice, style, personality and imagery are the emblems of this artistic truth. Serup then revised his idea of truthfulness: poetry’s means eventually aim at reaching the other, the reader or the listener (and perhaps even the otherness in the author him/herself).⁴

The situationality of interpretation was exemplified by Serup’s use of the late Finnish writer Pentti Saarikoski’s lyrical prose citation (at the end of the novel Aika Prabhassa from the 1960s) of the stone inside the bread. It is possible to interpret the metaphor as a political comment, but in addition – as mentioned by audience members – the framework of interpretation can also be the Bible or the cornerstone of Finnish culture, the Kalevala.

The framework of interpretation has to do with interaction, which can be included in the concept of poetics. According to Tuula Hökkä (2001, 8), we arrive at the domain of poetics when we discuss how an enjoyable work of art is made and when we ponder on literary creation, its conditions and effects. Thus, the recipient of a work of art (such as a collection of poetry), or, one who enjoys it, also shares
in poetics. In addition, such an interac-
tional relationship between poems and
their recipients is always conditional.
Interaction takes place in a confined si-
tuation. In other words, the context of
interpretation as temporal, local, situa-
tional and communal is evident.

The Contexts of Interaction

Poet and scholar Pauliina Haasjoki ques-
tioned in her address whether poets are
responsible for the effect of their poems
on the reader. Ultimately her answer to
the question seemed to be no, they are
not. A poem can, in a sense, cause vi-
olence, or violate the reader if the domi-
nant context of interpretation is amiab-
le to violence or if the societal-cultural
circumstance supports that kind of be-
haviour. Interpretations thus have their
interactional consequences, and here the
reader has a responsibility for the choi-
ces s/he makes. There is always more
than one interpretation, but their in-
terconnections are worth consideration.
As Haasjoki emphasised, a poem always
contains contradiction and inscrutabili-
ty, and hence specifying a direct effect
and meaning is impossible.

Haasjoki, who has published three
collections of poetry, has also recent-
ly published an essay on poetics from
the perspective of reading and writing
(2007). Similarly, poet Panu Tuomi’s
collection of essays attests to the inter-
In his address, Tuomi was on a similar
track as Haasjoki. Responsibility and
freedom are inextricably linked, as they
should be, stated Tuomi, the author of six
collections of poetry. He does not believe
in a direct causal relation either. It then
follows according to Tuomi that language
is poetry’s area of responsibility, and it is
this responsibility for language that gene-
rates the communality of poetry and the
reader’s creative role. Poetry is then ma-
terial and concrete interaction between
texts and readers.

The ethical can broadly be under-
stood as dialogism, as the orientation of a
text towards an audience (see e.g., Pearce
2004, 20). This refers to interaction be-
tween different factors, which in turn me-
ans that the question of ethics in poetics
covers poems, readers, authors, situations
and time alike. At the moment, Finnish
contemporary poetry aims at a more con-
crete and active approach to people than
before. Concrete conditions –like cultu-
ral and financial atmosphere – also have
their active part in creating, reading and
hearing poetry.

In an impressive and indirect manner,
that is to say in a manner specific to poet-
ry, Panu Tuomi spoke about being inter-
ested in “futile issues like poetry”. This
can be regarded as a remark that is itself
responsible: futility can be counteractive
to a social order which uses the rapid ac-
cumulation of wealth and continuous in-
crease in consumption as markers of suc-
cess. For Tuomi, a poetics of form is one
of poetry’s crucial means. Such means for
him are euphony (melody and sound),
i.e., the expansion of meaning by virtue
of the materiality of language, and also references to numerology and the Middle Ages.

**Turning toward and away from**

The afternoon’s shorter addresses served to both expand and support the views presented in the morning. Poetics scholar Karoliina Lummaa questioned whether poetry is responsible to nature or for it. Responsibility is often connected to communication and humanity, but what about the nonhuman, nature and animals? A poem should, for its part, according to Lummaa, take responsibility for nature. We ought to formulate sites for nature in language. Precisely the language of poetry would enable the non-objectification of nature, the delineation of its diversity, the re-creation of the subject-object relation and a humble awareness of the fact that a human perspective cannot know, understand or perceive everything, as Lummaa stated. A reader is a part of this process that could be seen as actual ethics, when the aforementioned critical aspects become activated by a way of reading. In this way, the “futility” of poetry can show its true critical force, that is to say its usefulness in a global frame, too.

The afternoon’s second commentator, poet Kimmo Kallio stated that poetry should above all be responsible for its own renewal. As an example, Kallio used Pekka Tarkka’s way of reading Paavo Haavikko, which was paradoxical as Haavikko is not so “new” anymore, since he debuted in the beginning of the 1950s.

Recently-debuted poet Miia Toivio’s comment from the audience pointed out that “newness” was, above all, the intrinsic value of the Modernist era (in Finnish poetry it occurred in the 50s), and it can easily become a categorical and exclusive imperative. Another comment from the audience, this time from an anthropological perspective, emphasised that even a ritualistic symbol is different in each given time and situation. “The New” is thus a contextual conception.

Poetry scholar Katja Seutu’s address suggested that a scholar of poetry, too, is responsible for forming poetics. What poets look for in poems, and why, is an important, but often neglected question according to her. Poetry has its relations to everyday life and the poetically political – that is, ethical questions – but this has not received enough attention. In particular, Seutu has found herself faced with fundamental questions when it comes to the role poem. What does it mean to take a role? What is the relationship to real life, when the poem’s speaker is a historical person? In Seutu’s opinion, there is a shortage of tools for this kind of examination as well as a lack of discussion between scholars.

Finding answers to Seutu’s questions would enable us to see the interactionality of poetics at large, in its sense of turning toward and away from. This is also how we approach the very core of poetics, questions of what poetry means. The question is also of the unresolved and complex relationship between poetry
and reality, which has to be renegotiated continuously with regard to each work of poetry, each poet’s oeuvre, and each era.

One of the final commentators in the afternoon, blogger Esa Mäkijärvi provoked the audience with his ambiguous statements. According to him, lyrical poetry ought to be brought to the new millennium with a bang, with poet Risto Ahti’s debut novel from forty years ago in the lead! Multiartist Räsänen-Rogers presented a text that emphasised, among other things, the importance of a woman’s identity. A more fictional tone served to highlight the significant difference in texts: a factual text is received and interpreted differently than its fictional sister. Translator and Classicist Sampo Vesterinen’s stream-of-consciousness culminated in guilt: many issues have been distorted, and we the people are responsible.

To end the day, Jukka Mallinen, PEN activist and critic, cited views by contemporary poets in St. Petersburg, according to whom it is still necessary to resist everything poetical, that is to say automatisation. Such responsible resistance can cut into structures and work as a critical counterforce (and as a way of perhaps repairing some misinterpretations).

**Toward an Ethical Study of Poetry**

Poetics could be defined according to the conference speakers as a simultaneous, multi-dimensional movement. Thus, it means an interactive process that demands several active subjects that are poets, poems, readers, critics and scholars, and the world. The most often heard plea, argument or wish in the conference had to do with the importance of interaction and participation: a poem does not exist separately from the world. On the contrary, a poem’s very contact zone could be empowering and truly ethical. It is interesting to note, that the significance of rhythm was brought up by many, implicitly or explicitly.

This trend can also be seen in contemporary Finnish poetry. In terms of scholarship, rhythm has been in the periphery, but it could serve to highlight the many affective effects of poetry. Previously, rhythm has been characterised as poetry’s impressive, enchanting and magical force, and it is often in a deliciously ambivalent way connected to femininity or poetry written by women. Rhythm is somehow connected to the material side of language, and yet it is, too, somehow hard to define by strict conceptions.

The study of poetry, as a part of poetics in the way it was defined above, does not have to be prescriptive, but rather something founded on the idea of interaction. A work of poetry under analysis is thus not just the “object”, but rather an active part of the research process which affects what is being studied and how. In addition, a group or a community involved in formulating poetics needs to be accounted for as an influential frame (Bal 2000, 481–485). Diversity and plurality enable the previously inconceivable interpretation to be written and articulated orally in an ethical sense. That is why
poetry readings are popular, because neither poetry nor its study is about reading silently, but about commonality and sharing, which does not mean homogeneity but differences, too.

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*Translated with Elina Valovirta*

### Notes

2. The conference was organised by the poetry society Nihil Interit, the journals *Tuli&Savu, niin & näin* and *Naori Voima*, the Departments of Finnish Literature and Comparative Literature at the University of Helsinki, Finnish Literary Research Society, Turkijaliitto (‘Scholars’ Alliance’) and the Scandinavian portal of The Electronic Poetry Center. The last in English at [http://www.leevilehto.net/epc/index.html](http://www.leevilehto.net/epc/index.html) (28 September 2007).

### Bibliography


