

ARTICLES ARTIKKELIT

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Contradictory Lives: Miika Nousiainen's Novels as Postnational

Miika Nousiainen's three novels – *Vadelmavenepakolainen* (Gummy Boat Refugee,¹ 2007, = VVP), *Maaninkavaara* (The Danger of the Long Distance Runner, 2009, = MV), and *Metsäjätti* (Forest Giant, 2011, = MJ) – have received popular and critical attention for their combination of humor and for their thoughtful engagement with topical issues. In VVP, the Finn Mikko Virtanen goes to fantastic, obsessive lengths to pass as a Swede, assimilating what he views as a superior Swedish identity. In MV, a normal adolescent Heidi Huttunen seeks to become an elite middle-distance runner, to please her father and help him recuperate from the suicide of her brother. Finally, in MJ Pasi Kauppi becomes a businessman, seeking to leave his working-class childhood identity behind. In these novels, characters adopt new lives to become new people, and yet in doing so they encounter contradictions between identities that reflect on contemporary Finland and Europe. This article focuses on MV, but touches on VVP and MJ as well.

The themes relevant to my analysis of Nousiainen's novels are made evident in an episode in VVP when the archetypically named Mikko Virtanen, having transitioned into a new, Swedish identity as Mikael Andersson, marries his Swedish partner, Maria Gustafsson. After a sentimental wedding, Mikael gets a shock from a guest in the receiving line: "Ihmiset asettuvat onnittelujonoon. Silloin iskee sokki. Näen jonossa suomalaisen naapurini, puolitutun, mutta naapurin kuitenkin" (VVP: 205). [People step into the receiving line. Then I get a helluva' shock. Among them is an old neighbor, barely familiar, but nevertheless a neighbor from my old building.] In this scenario, Virtanen's years of effort to transform himself into a Swede are endangered, and at the same time the stage is a slapstick scene of contradictory identities. The wedding party sees "Mikael Andersson", while the Finnish neighbor – who happens to be the new boyfriend of one of the guests – sees "Mikko Virtanen". Mikko Virtanen's obsession is so deep that it has split him in two, creating two

¹ All translations of titles and passages are by the author.

lives, an old Finnish life, and a new Swedish life. As in Nousiainen's other novels, this scene is marked by humor that arises from exaggeration of stereotypes: the jealous and envious Finn, the intolerant Finn, the violent Finn, the heavy drinker, the boorish Finn, the bacchanalian celebration. One could use any of these stories to narrate the wedding reception. These Finnish stereotypes play against equally pervasive stereotypes of Swedishness: mannerist Sweden, repressed Sweden, polite Sweden, avoidant Sweden, dumb Sweden, intolerant Sweden, which could also be used to tell the story. Yet Nousiainen does two other things here, which are key to his project and relevant to this article's argument. First, his exaggeration and parody create an ironic depiction of the national narratives, from which the stereotypes arise. The contradictions he creates between stereotypes of identities are so exaggerated that the contradictions themselves become humorous. The humor is further accentuated by the first-person narrator's voice, shaped by the character's delusions and obsessions. Although national difference is the topos of this scene, nation is not associated with reassurance, stability, or goodness. The reader is encouraged to look down on Virtanen – not least by the scene's conclusion, in which Virtanen murders the Finnish interloper. Exaggeration and dark humor separate the national identities from the moral goodness that is typically associated with them. This is the second point in the passage. It narrates the collision of two lives, the life of Mikko Virtanen and Mikael Andersson. This is the larger narrative setup in VVP, as well as in Nousiainen's other novels. His protagonist is living one life, but is forced to leave that life, and begin a new one, adopting a new identity and engaging with a new worldview. As we see in this passage, Nousiainen's novels humorously juxtapose the dual lives of his protagonist, using the contradictions generated to engage topical issues critically.

Nousiainen's combination of the popular comic novel with the more weighty identity concerns of literary fiction has attracted the attention of critics and scholars alike. The scholars have rightly placed emphasis on identity as the central theme in Nousiainen's writing. In a 2009 article on VVP, literary scholar Lena Gottelier argues that the novel is a parody of the "national self description" (*kansankuvaus*) tradition, as that tradition has been elaborated recently by such scholars as Pirjo Lyytikäinen and Leena Kirstinä. (Gottelier 2009: 47; Lyytikäinen 1999: 140; Kirstinä 2013). Lyytikäinen's argument shows the extent to which the neo-Hegelian origins of Finnish literary culture, in the philosophy of J.V. Snellman, continued to figure in literary representations of Finnishness into the late twentieth century. Through the national self-description tradition, literary culture exteriorizes a collective self-understanding, making it possible for the nation to recognize itself as itself. In this narrative of progress, the stages of literary history, each negating and transcending an earlier form of literary culture, bring out new facets of national and literary expression, allowing the nation to see itself more fully as a nation. Placing Nousiainen in relation to such an account, Leena Kirstinä also argues that his novels repeat and reimagine earlier notions of Finnishness, for example Adolf Ivar Arwidsson's 1819 edict, "Svenskar

äro vi icke längre, ryssar vilja vi icke bli, låt oss alltså bli finnar” [We are no longer Swedes; we do not wish to become Russians; Let us be Finns], by construing nation as “shaped and maintained consciously and unconsciously through images and narratives, which constitute nation and nationality”, the argument is that Nousiainen inserts his novels into those narratives by repeating them once again (Kirstinä 2013: 47). This is to suggest that Nousiainen’s novels give voice to a “reassuring sort of narrative in which [they] are seen as the appropriate next stage of the story” (Danto 1998a: 4). In contrast, this article’s contention is that Nousiainen’s novels’ conflicts show the afterlife of those stories, and the ways their fragments encumber his characters. Jussi Ojajärvi makes an analogous point in a discussion of *MJ*, Nousiainen’s third novel, as a representation of the “glocal” logic of capital under globalization, as the self-understanding of the classes on the national level is redirected against itself to serve the interests of globalized capital (forthcoming). In other words, the local workers and managers are encouraged to work harder to survive on the global playing field, only to make them more valuable to the machinations of investors and multinationals. Implicit in Ojajärvi’s analysis is the notion that the master narratives of nation and class that pertain on the local level no longer represent the actual conditions under which local lives are made meaningful.

It is possible to build on the arguments about Nousiainen’s novels put forward by scholars so far by analyzing the way Nousiainen constructs multiple, contradictory identities and lives for his protagonists, and uses them to engage topical issues. The central topical issue is the contradictions of identity in times of global capitalism. That is to say, Nousiainen’s novels represent a moment in which the story of a nation’s dialectical development—and the development of its component gender, class, and sexual identities—in collective moral terms no longer works effectively to narrate individual lives. In this sense, Nousiainen’s novels are productively read as postnational. This does not mean that there are no nations, or that the category no longer means anything. On the contrary, nation continues to leverage tremendous force, as the novels demonstrate. Yet it is one contingent identity among others. Postnational designates nation as an instance of Lyotard’s grand narrative, or analogous to art in Arthur Danto’s “after the end of art” argument. To adapt Danto, nation no longer constitutes a “reassuring sort of narrative in which [phases of national development are] seen as the appropriate next stage of the story. What [has] come to an end is the narrative but not the subject of the narrative” (Danto 1995: 4). The nation persists as a narrative that can be told and understood in reference to the nation and its subjects, but it is come to be a contested narrative, as other narratives and discourses about past, present, and the subjects of the narrative come to offer alternative accounts. Nation is one part of a variety of stories and fragments, sometimes contradictory, which may not unite groups and individuals in shared understanding (Danto 1998: 128). Nousiainen’s novels situate fragments of these national stories in relationship to one another, showing what happens when the persistent legacy of nation comes into conflict with individual stories and

experiences, in which nation has been emptied of its previous moral and cultural meaning.

The article's suggestion in relationship to previous scholarship is that we can see a new dimension in Nousiainen's texts, as well as some of his contemporaries, when we frame the texts and the characters in postnational terms. Yet, such a suggestion raises other questions for further research – such as how does one periodize the postnational? Ironic depictions of nation are nothing new, dating at least to the novels of Joel Lehtonen, and more recently present in the writing of such novelists as Arto Paasilinna, Kari Hotakainen, and Johanna Sinisalo, among others, but also in films as diverse as the Uuno Turhapuro films and those of Aki Kaurismäki (Nesting 2013). Such depictions are also strongly present in the media culture, not only in popular humor that range from television skits to Twitter feeds, but as themes in the work of such artists as Karoliina Korhonen, for instance her *Finnish Nightmares* (*Suomalaisten painajaiset*, 2016), to the television and authorial work of Roman Schatz.

Stories of Identity

As this article's argument is about the construction of identities in Nousiainen's novels, it is necessary to sketch a definition of identity with the help of some touchstone theorists, Charles Taylor and Stuart Hall being especially helpful. In writing about Danto's end-of-art argument as relevant to thinking about the concept of "postnational," the argument was that the nation is defined by the way its subjects, and others, tell their story as a national story. This notion of identity is called "dialogical" by Charles Taylor (1994: 32-3) and dates to Enlightenment thinking, as Stuart Hall notes (1996: 598). Taylor writes, "we become fully human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human language [...] People do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own. Rather, we are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us" (Taylor 1994: 32). By language here, he not only means a language, like Finnish or Swedish, but also cultures, "the way we do things here" (Taylor 1994: 63), that is, the differentiations by which we distinguish good and bad, valuable and indifferent in private and public institutions and practices. Hall describes Taylor's view in terms of the identity of the Enlightenment subject, which for Hall is a historical phase that has been displaced by what he calls postmodern identity. The Enlightenment subject is a "a fully centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness, and action, whose 'center' consist[s] of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same – continuous or 'identical' with itself – throughout the individual's existence" (Hall 1996: 597). Summarizing these views, identity means language that gives expression to oneself about how and who one is in relation to 'the way we do things', in which that 'we' also includes others using the same language to give voice to their notions of who they are and how they do things.

Language thus differentiates self from other, but always in dialogue with that other.

In Nousiainen's novels, as in the example from VVP, these languages of identity are often at odds with other languages: Mikko Virtanen seeks to impose his language of Swedishness upon the language of Finnishness, to use it to displace one identity with another. Virtanen adopts new points of reference, learns a new repertoire of social cues, adopts new expectations – humorously so, because Virtanen seeks to embody and bring to life a stereotype of the ordinary Swedish man. The humor also lies in the exclusivity Virtanen attributes to national identities. Finnish and Swedish are incompatible, in Mikko Virtanen's view. One must displace the other. In depicting identity in this way, Nousiainen stages comically what Taylor argues is a fundamental challenge of identities in late modernity. "All societies are becoming increasingly multicultural, while at the same time becoming more porous. Indeed, these two developments go together. Their porousness means they are more open to multinational migration; more of their members live the life of diaspora, whose center is elsewhere" (Taylor 1994: 63). Put another way, the language of 'who we are' and 'how we do things' changes, for as new subjects enter the nation, "who we are" begins to refer to different norms, different expectations, indeed diverse languages. Hall calls this the postmodern identity, writing that this subject is "formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities, which are not unified around a coherent 'self'" (Hall 1996: 598). This is where Nousiainen's novels' humor lies. They continually stage conflicts between the rigidity of the stereotypes held by some of his characters and the porousness and "postmodern identity" (to use Hall's terminology) the characters encounter in their dialogue with cultural systems. The resultant contrasts keep notions of 'who we are' and 'how we do things', as well as 'who they are' and 'how they do things' in the foreground. As Taylor writes, "in these circumstances, there is something awkward about [saying] simply, 'This is how we do things here'" (Taylor 1994: 63). Furthermore, changing notions and norms concerning gender identity, sexuality, and ethnicity, and their relevance to nation, are all raised in the novel. These combinations, their intersectionality, complicates the weave of 'how we do things here' and 'how they do things,' as the 'we', 'they' and 'how' come to mean many things, sometimes contradictory. Singularity, unity, and identity cannot be taken for granted, even as, to be sure, the 'taken for granted', the old norms and stereotypes, persist in both practices, expectations, and worldviews. We can call this situation postnational, for there is no "reassuring sort of narrative in which [phases of national development are] seen as the appropriate next stage of the story", on an individual or national basis, even as citizens and nations stick to the norms and stereotypes, as Mikko Virtanen does. "What [has] come to an end is the narrative but not the subject of the narrative" (Danto 1995: 4).

Allegories of Nation

Sitä harjoitellaan lapsena kunnallisesta päiväkodista saadussa vatsataudissa. Se on henkilökohtainen saavutus, mutta äänekkydessään sosiaalista. Parhaimmillaan se sitoo perheet yhteen. Se on alkoholikäytön ainoa positiivinen puoli [...] Varsinkin suomalaiset tekevät näin. Olemme kansa, joka osaa oksentaa (MV: 242).

We start practicing in municipal daycare as children, victims of stomach flu. It's a personal achievement, but social in its audibility. At its richest, it binds families together. It's the only positive aspect of drinking. Finns in particular do it. We're a nation that knows how to vomit.

In these words Martti Huttunen finds meaning in Finnish runners' competitive exertion to the point of vomiting as of a piece with a national story. Martti lines up a series of archetypal instances, which he interprets as national, because of their association with national institutions. 'This is the way we do it here', he implies, and 'the way we do it makes us who we are'. In this way, Huttunen equates nausea with nation and moral goodness. Huttunen is an obsessively allegorical thinker, finding meaning in quotidian events, such as getting sick at preschool, at a party, or after a running race, by understanding them as part of a story about the nation. He redescribes the stories of daily life as stories of nation.

Huttunen's national story is a tale of masochism and morality: the Finn must experience pain and suffering for the Finn to overcome. Through overcoming, he realizes his identity as an individual and as a national subject. In the overcoming, he recognizes what matters, and what is morally good. Huttunen is not alone, of course, for this masochistic allegory is a recurrent national trope, from Johan Ludvig Runeberg to Väinö Linna, and on (Nummi 1993). Huttunen is so convinced of this story that he becomes a sadist, seeking to impose physical suffering on his son and daughter through running, as a means of helping them develop self worth and moral goodness. The problem with Martti's masochistic allegory, however, is that his son Jarkko and daughter Heidi cannot use such thinking to make sense of their lives. Heidi, at least, seems to have what Hall called the postmodern identity.

MV has two protagonists, the father Martti and his daughter Heidi. The novel is narrated in alternating first-person chapters. Sirkka, Martti's wife and Heidi's mother, is a third character, present through dialogue recounted by Martti and Heidi. Martti works as the maintenance man (*vahtimestari*) at Heidi's school, and he has one friend, Risto. Martti, like Mikko Virtanen in VVP, builds his world view around a story: for Virtanen, it is the story of the Swedish welfare state, while for Martti it is the story of Finnish long-distance runners in their training and competition, and Olympic success. Martti emulates these runners' training methods, and trains his son Jarkko with their methods. Martti's worldview is challenged by Jarkko's apparent suicide. The implication, is that Martti drove his

son to his death. Allegory cannot give Jarkko's death meaning. Martti struggles. Heidi seeks to rescue her father by asking Martti to coach her. He reverts to his allegorical worldview, and Heidi must adopt a new life and identity. Down comes the poster of Britney Spears, up goes a painting of Kaarlo Maaninka. Soon Heidi finds herself split, living two lives, the life of an adolescent, and the life of an elite runner, narrowly focused on achieving top condition, which Martti explains with his allegorical interpretations. Martti's training methods become increasingly delusional, and also sadistic, forcing a reckoning with Heidi and Sirkka.

A specially important part of this allegory is its gendered dimensions, for Martti in effect seeks to masculinize Heidi to make her fit the national allegory that obsesses him. Martti's pantheon of Finnish heroes are men, and the qualities he finds in their masochistic suffering correlates in his mind with a national identity coded male. By contrast, Heidi's interest in popular culture, romantic love, and other adolescent pursuits are repeatedly coded 'soft' and 'feminine' by Martti. As feminist scholars such as Anu Koivunen (2004) and Tuula Gordon, Kirsti Lempiäinen, and Katri Komulainen (2002) have shown in key studies, such gendered differentiation is part of a long history of equating nation with masculine identities. These gendered dimensions work to heighten the stereotypes in the text, but also make evident the extent to which the rigidity of the stereotypes Martti holds rules out a more fluid and inclusive identity dialogue. When Heidi takes up running, she and her mother see Martti's allegorical, obsessive view in a new light. It cannot accommodate alternatives. This was Martti and Jarkko's conflict, and it becomes Heidi and her father's. "Sen ainoa into oli Jarkon valmentamiseen. Ei sillä ole mitään mihin palata. Meillä on helpompaa. Usko pois. Meillä on muutakin elämää" (MV: 59). [His only passion was coaching Jarkko. He's got nothing to come back to. It's easier for you and me. Believe me. We've got another life. Well, at least a little.] Heidi contrasts her father's thinking with her mother's and her own. Sirkka thinks Martti's obsessive and exclusive way of thinking was what plagued Jarkko. He was having second thoughts about his running career. "Joskus tuntuu, että Jarkko olisi halunnut viettää normaalin nuoruuden" ["Sometimes it seemed like Jarkko just wanted to be a normal kid"] (MV: 60). Martti, too, recognizes his obsessive, sadomasochistic, view. When Heidi proposes taking up running, Martti replies, "Oletko nyt ihan varma? Se on aika raakaa hommaa" ["Are you sure? It's brutal work"]. The narration flips to Martti, who typically allegorize Heidi's request. "Tuttu tilanne tämä on. Samaa painia tämä on kuin Lasse Virénin ja Rolf Haikkolan tapauksessa. Lasse oli Heidi, se joka ehdotti valmennussuhdetta. Rolf minun paikalla, mieltii, onko poika tosissaan." ["A familiar situation, the same tension as between Lasse Virén and Rolf Haikkola. Lasse was Heidi, who suggested the coaching arrangement. Rolf was in my place, asking himself, was the boy serious"] (MV: 63).

Another way to see the wedge between Heidi's life as a teenager and her life as a track-and-field runner is to see it as a contest between competing moral frameworks and notions of happiness. Heidi's two lives represent contemporary Finland as split by competing notions of

pleasure and happiness, which are coded not only in gendered terms, but also in generational and historical terms. Martti and his sadomasochistic, allegorical worldview belong to the deprivation of Finland's interwar and postwar periods, which fostered a stoic notion equating happiness with the satisfaction of having endured and overcome suffering. In contrast, Heidi belongs to the consumerist age of globalization, in which happiness is consumerist, equated with pleasure attained through access and intimate relationships. In recalling Jarkko's wish for a normal life, Sirkka suggested he wanted a little pleasure, but all Martti gave him was physical suffering to overcome.

Martti and Heidi discuss this contrast during a training camp in northeastern Finland, at Maaninkavaara, the Olympic champion's home village.

-Sinulla on Heidi hyvin asiat kun saat juosta.

-Niin kai.

-Sinä saat tulla tänne juoksemaan. Olet etuoikeutettu likka, onnentyttö. Toista se oli Kaarlon aikaan. Harjoittelu tehtiin töiden jälkeen. Niin tekivät myös Nurmi, Kolehmainen, Ritola ja Vainio. Sinä olet onnentyttö [...]

Lähden juoksemaan takaisin. Olisin onnentyttö, jos istuisin kahvilassa käsi kädessä Saken kanssa. Nauttisin, jos olisin elokuvissa katsomassa jotain romanttista. Tai jos makaisin sohvalla ja lukisin lehteä. Mitään en halua niin paljon kuin olla kuten muut ikäiseni tytöt. (MV: 220).

"You've got it good when you get to run, Heidi."

"I guess."

"You got to come here to run. You're a privileged girl, a lucky lady. It was different in Kaarlo's day. They trained after work. That's what they all did: Nurmi, Kolehmainen, Ritola, and Vainio. You're a lucky lady [...]"

I start running home. Damn right I'd be a lucky lady, if I were sitting in a café, hand in hand with Sakke. I'd be enjoying myself, if I were at the movies, watching something romantic. Or even lying on the sofa, reading the paper. All I want is to be like other girls my age.

Heidi and her father are separated by different ideas of happiness: for Martti, it's a reflective state, dependent upon work. For Heidi, it is immediate, affective experience.

The contest between Martti and Heidi also concerns pedagogy. Martti's sadomasochistic approach to running is pedagogical. He is trying to teach Heidi a stoic worldview – idealistic, rule bound, masculine, concerned with harmony. As Martti pushes Heidi further, Heidi resists him by intensifying her teaching. Heidi is also trying to teach her parents, but she is teaching them to embrace an affective state, and a desire for commonplace, pleasurable experiences.

-Äiti. Katso nyt teidän liittoa.

-Mitä siitä?

-Ei näytä ihmisten elämältä.

-Millaista ilotulitusta sen sitten pitäisi olla?

-Ei nyt ilotulitusta, mutta edes normaalia.

-Ihan normaalihan tämä on.

-On, jos siihen suostuu. Sano rehellisesti äiti, oletko sinä onnellinen?

-Pitääkö sitä nyt onnellinen olla?

-Pitää.

-Ei nyt tässä iässä enää. Kun ei ole haaveitakaan. Kaikki on tässä. Mies, koti, perhe. Hyvä tässä on. Otatko vielä ruokaa? (MV: 191)

“Mom. Just think of your marriage.”

“What about it?”

“I mean, it doesn’t really look like a life, does it?”

“What kind of fireworks should it involve, then?”

“Well, I don’t mean fireworks, but at least something normal.”

“But this is a normal marriage.”

“It is, if you give in to it. But tell me, honestly, Mom, are you happy?”

“Do you have to be happy?”

“Yes.”

“Not at my age. No more dreaming. This is it. A husband, a home, a family. Not bad. Do you want anything more to eat?”

Heidi argues that the deprivation is sadomasochistic, because it imposes on Heidi and Sirkka a painful set of expectations, intended to make them suffer. Heidi’s argument seeks to teach her mother an alternative view. Heidi gives up her stoicism when Martti goes too far. Heidi almost dies of hypothermia in an extreme training session. Martti and Sirkka’s marriage ends in divorce. Heidi’s lessons change Sirkka’s mind.

One angle on this conflict is the affect theorist Sara Ahmed’s argument about the “imperative to be happy”, which she develops in her study *The Promise of Happiness* (2011). The problem is not that the characters want each other to be happy. Rather, it is that they are trying to make each other happy in ways that they themselves approve, allegorically and affectively – a contradiction in how we think of the accessibility of happiness, as the psychoanalyst and critic Adam Phillips has observed (2010: 88). Martti cannot tell Heidi she is not happy, only what should make her happy in his opinion. Neither can Heidi tell her father, or mother, he or she is not happy, only what should make them happy. There is not a narrative that can unify these emotional states and the affects that underpin them, but rather divergent lives, which belong to variant views of the world. The very staging of this conflict connects to the multiculturalism and postmodern identities discussed by Taylor and Hall above, for the notion that there are multiple sources of happiness, which are interchangeable, exemplifies the pluralism they find characteristic of late modernity. Moreover, the characters do not agree about what happiness is, advocating as they do for different notions of happiness, a state of reflection and an affective state. Ahmed argues that in this sense, happiness entails a notion of happiness in the eyes of others, making happiness depend on others’ recognition (2011: 38-45), which for her involves mixed feelings, which always haunt happiness.

The title of MV might be seen to sum up the conflict that emerges as the novel’s characters seek to teach each other to be happy. ‘Maaninka’ of the title refers to Martti’s idol Kaarlo Maaninka, who won silver and bronze in the 10000m and 5000m track events at the Moscow Olympics in 1980. The runner later confessed to having used blood doping to achieve the results. The religious Maaninka could not live with himself for his infraction. If we take Maaninka as a figuration of the elite runner, built through obsession like Martti’s, the ‘-vaara’ of the title might be seen to

refer to the danger of such obsession. One meaning of the word is danger – implying a cautionary tale lies in the novel, which also resonates in the name of the main character Martti, whose namesake is the disqualified Finnish 10000m medalist from the Los Angeles Olympics, Martti Vainio. So the title might be taken as a warning, about Martti's obsessions and worldview. 'Vaara' also refers to a geographical feature, typical of place names, and the combination of surname and the geographic feature designates a place in northeastern Finland, where Martti holds the family training camps. At the end of the novel, he also makes his retreat to Maaninkavaara, where he seeks to recover and start a new life.

Conclusion: Christmas in Thailand

Martti is able to house-sit for a friend in Maaninkavaara, because the friend and property owner is in Phuket with his Thai wife. His absence provides Martti the peace he needs for his contemplation. For her part, Sirkka has sought happiness with a new companion, and they are on Christmas holiday in Thailand. Heidi and Sakke are on a downhill skiing holiday, albeit at the Finnish resort not far from Maaninkavaara. Martti, Heidi, and Sirkka are thus united by a "Christmas in Thailand," each touched by such a connection, which summons multiple points of reference, the "postmodern identities" to again recall Hall's terms, which figure so prominently in MV and Nousiainen's other novels. This article's argument has suggested that the novels each construct their protagonists as subjects of multiple lives. As they orient themselves within these lives, find them to be contradictory, and seek to reconcile the contradictions with other identity discourses, from stereotypes to pluralist views, contrasts emerge which can well be understood in terms of theories of multicultural or postmodern identity and postnationalism. In so doing, the novels humorously show the rigidity and incapacity of national allegories to make sense of the characters' multiple lives, as the "Christmas in Thailand" at the end of MV suggests.

The characters in each of the novels also seek happiness in their notions of happiness (obsessive as they often are) and in other characters' efforts to teach them how to be happy. Identities and associations with identities are supposed to make them happy. Can they make them happy? "Well, no," as Adam Philips writes, "but only because nothing and no one can make us happy, as in do something to us that will create this wonderful thing. What [they] can do is create the conditions in which [we] might be happy, and an environment in which [we] can begin to get a sense of the conflicts that happiness" entails (2010: 93). What Nousiainen's novels perhaps do best is leave us with a fuller sense of the conflicts identities entail today, and how these conflicts are tied up in the happiness identities seem to offer. In this, they leave us with many questions.

How do we situate the pluralization of identities and the aspirations of these contradictory lives depicted in these novels? As suggested in the introduction, ironic depictions of national identity can be traced

back to the early twentieth century, and not least to the years around Finland's Civil War, with its fraught cultural politics. Rigidly normative, stereotyped identities can also be dated to that time, and much earlier – the Bonden Paavo archetype of J.L. Runeberg. In recent years, ironic depictions have flourished. Influential theorists like the late Stuart Hall argue a fragmentation of identities has been brought about by global capitalism, and that the fragmentation has loosened the hold of identities, making it possible to ironize them for fun but also for critical purposes (1996: 618-22). Yet at this late date it is clear that while fragmentation may be a seminal dimension of the culture of global capitalism, as Hall argued, an even more pervasive and influential dimension is the reassertion of serious, robust, convention-bound identities, including movements and identities that build upon particular nationalist and class identities, and assertions about the betrayal and victimization of such identities. Yet even so, the reassertion of these identities resonates with Nousiainen's novels, in which such stereotyped identities are represented as at once durable, commonsensical, and resonant, at the same time as they are fragile, brittle, and easily co-opted with humor. This nexus of contradictions around identities, the vacillation of identities, and the continuing importance of identities within the cultural politics of late modern Finland and northern Europe, call for more research, which uses cultural texts and theoretical interventions to better account for the periodization of identity discourses in the context of the reassertion of conservative identity politics.

Another way to see this call for more investigation is to position Nousiainen's novels as a response to a problem faced by Finland and the Nordics, as well as other Western polities: the emancipatory narratives of nation and class, which motivated the establishment of the social-democratic welfare state (chronicled obsessively by Mikko Virtanen in VVP) have become obstacles to the welfare state's reinvention. It does not work anymore to say, "that is the way we do it here." As the political theorist Etienne Balibar writes, "the difficulty for democratic politics is to avoid becoming enclosed in representations that have historically been associated with emancipatory projects and struggles for citizenship and have now become obstacles to their revival, to their permanent reinvention" (2004: 10). Nousiainen's novels stage a conflict between characters whose worldviews are shaped by narratives of such emancipatory projects and characters who come after their exhaustion, and who are drawn by a utopian notion of a more pluralistic community. In this, Nousiainen's modest and slender comic novels raise key questions for our late-modern world of global capitalism.

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