

THE NEVER-ENDING RIDE IN THE WHITE NIGHT

THE MATERIAL WORLD AND THE BODY IN WRITTEN BICYCLE MEMORIES

Tiina Männistö-Funk

"I remember arriving in Turku and sitting in the Per Brahe Park, enjoying the view of the Turku Cathedral, when my eyes caught my blue cheviot tweed suit and I noticed it had turned grey. Fine sand and dust had stuck to the suit that was damp with sweat and could not really be removed before it dried."¹

This is a memory written down by a farmer from southwest Finland, born in 1898, remembering a bicycle trip he made to the city of Turku as a young man during the First World War. He accounted the memory as part of the eighteenth annual folklore collection organized by the Finnish National Board of Antiquities. The questionnaire leaflet was circulated among a network of regular respondents and potentially interested public in 1971. It contained one large questionnaire on the history of photography and two smaller questionnaires, on medical plants and the history of the bicycle, respectively. The leaflet gave precise advice on how to answer and promised prizes, such as silver cutlery, typewriters and money, for the best answers. However, respondents could freely choose the questionnaires and questions they wished to answer. The farmer's son was one of the 656 respondents who sent in their bicycle memories, most of them from rural areas, born during the last decade of the 19th century or the first two decades of the 20th century and remembering the times of their youth

and young adult years from the 1910s to the 1930s.

These hundreds of written memory accounts offer a rare possibility to study the widespread utilitarian bicycle use of the 1920s and 1930s from the users' perspective. Unlike the organized, sporty bicycle use of the late 19th century, this utilitarian use often remains anonymous and flees from the grasp of a historian. Nonetheless, like the Finnish sociologist Helena Saarikoski has observed, the broad, heterogeneous written memory material can drown its examiner in a flow of abstract factual knowledge, which is not reliable enough to be used as a source of historical events, but also does not account personal views and experiences. She suggests that memories including the body and senses of the person that wrote them can offer the most useful source material among these memory texts, functioning as records of the social reality as experienced and narrated by the respondents.² However, finding the sensing body in the written memory material is not always easy.

It has been suggested that the way human memory works tends to steer the process of remembering to construct narratives of different phases of the lived life and its general events, rather than to preserve and renew precise details of bodily, sensory and emotional experiences.³ Nonetheless, looking at the written memory material we can argue that once an enduring bodily and sensory memory has been created, it can function as a centrepiece for more general memories and trigger reminiscence. For example the respondent with the memory of his dusty suit has otherwise told only rather generic bicycle memories, remembering older boys from his village cycling to town to buy spirits, and stories about the bicycle races a cycling club in Turku organised on a road nearby. After that he briefly describes his trip to Turku, but does not mention, for example, why he made this trip. Without

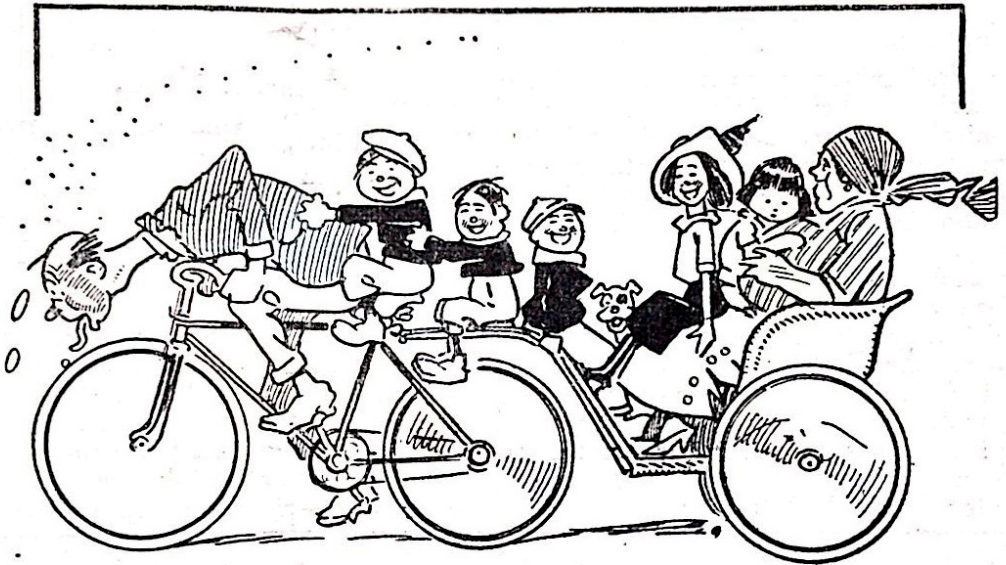
the one enduring memory of the moment in the park we would be left with no idea of the actual content of his trip. Without it he might not even have remembered the whole trip or would not have bothered to tell the story at all.

Before the 1980s, collectors of written memory material were looking for information about specific subjects, rather than being interested in the individuals sending in their memories.⁴ This is evident on the bicycle questionnaire, where questions mainly address respondents' memories of bicycles and bicycle use they had seen and heard about. Only one question was directly addressing respondents' own bicycle use, asking: "What kind of personal experiences do you have of bicycles? Did you ride long journeys? What was the route and time of your longest bicycle trip?"⁵ Even in this case, the respondents' main attention was directed to giving factual information about routes and lengths of their bicycle trips.

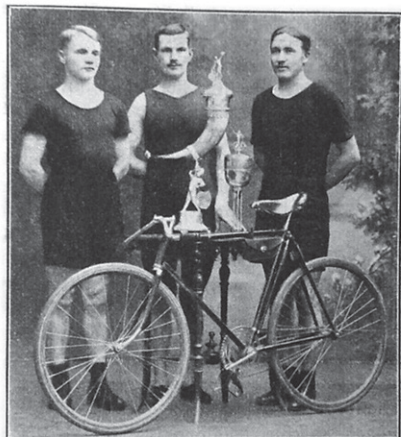
Nevertheless, some respondents included written narratives of very specific sensations connected to bicycles or cycling. The surprise of the young farmer's son by the changed colour of his suit turned the moment of sitting on a bench of the elaborately decorated city park watching the majestic cathedral of Turku into a story that could be returned to in thoughts and spoken or written words and that drew his memory text from a general narrative about bicycle use and his own trip to Turku to the level of an actual experience. Although quite short, the memory is richer in contextual information than the average memory material that delivers facts in an abstract and distanced way.

Minna Sarantola-Weiss, who has studied the history of the sofa, has urged researchers interested in material artefacts of the past to empathise in their analysis with the sensory reality of the people who used these artefacts, in order to understand their

An illustration from *Suomen Urheilulehti* magazine 8 Jan 1915, captioned "an image that needs no explanation".



Kuva, joka ei selitystä kaipaakaan.



Kuopion „Osmon“ voittoisa pyöräilijäkolmikko.

Vas. oik. K. Vepsäläinen (Pohjois-Savon mestari).
A. Huuskonen. M. Räsänen.

A victorious cycling team from Kuopio. Source: *Suomen Urheilulehti* magazine 8 Jan 1915.

meanings.⁶ A bicycle introduced its user to a very specific set of bodily movements that were necessary in controlling and riding it. Furthermore, a bicycle as an object and its diverse parts were connected to diverse mental and bodily feelings. The part of the bicycle most often mentioned in connection to the body and bodily sensations in the written memory material is the top tube. A top tube marked a bicycle visibly as a men's model. This marked difference could accommodate almost equal gender qualities to clothes, and especially for young men “cross-dressing” by riding a women's model easily became humiliating.⁷ According to respondents, men riding women's models often had to suffer jokes and ridicule.

The top tube also had a more practical role in the successful performance of gender by young male cyclists. Giving a girl a ride on the top tube after a dance appears in the memories as an integral part of young people's romantic and sexual life. It pro-

vided a possibility to show one's interest by offering or accepting a ride and to experience bodily intimacy, as the boy could have the girl very close, between his arms, almost hugging her, in a socially acceptable way. In this way rides on the top tube resemble the practice of dancing that was closely connected to them. However, the top tube had also painful effects. Many female respondents remember how their thighs hurt awfully and were stiff after long rides on the top tube. But it was for children that the top tube caused the greatest nuisance. In the almost total absence of children's bicycles, children often learned to ride with an adult bicycle, and if it happened to be a men's model they had to ride “from between the frame”, which often resulted in bruises and small accidents. In the light of these different connections of body and the top tube in memories of different groups of bicycle users the top tube appears as a socially constructed part of the bicycle with uses and meanings far beyond its stabilizing effect in the classical diamond frame structure.

While riding a bicycle, the roads, weather and other natural phenomena and the environment as a whole were acutely present for the cyclist through continuous and changing sensations. We do not easily find references to the most typical and usual material conditions of cycling in the written memories, but sometimes an unusual occurrence can reveal some of them to us. Frank Trentmann, who has studied the history of blackouts, argues that everyday technological disruptions reveal the constant instability of daily systems, but also their elasticity.⁸ The technological combination of bicycle, traffic and roads appears in the memories as a very elastic system, but also as one that made the rider of a bicycle lose part of his or her bodily self-control to the mercy of the machine that was the sum of bicycle and its infrastructure as well as the system of traffic. Although we can-

not talk about particularly busy traffic on the country roads of pre-war Finland, the number of bicycles was large enough to regularly cause accidents between two cyclists. Several respondents remembered being party to such incidents while riding at night or in the dark.

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, carbide lamps were available as bright and effective bicycle lighting. This was technology that required constant maintenance, and many of the bicycle survey respondents remember the lamps as rather cumbersome and unreliable sources of light. In the 1930s dynamo lights were gaining in popularity, but according to the written memories, they were by no means universal. A female farmer born in 1912 remembers an incident from the early 1930s: “*Once when I was riding a lightless bicycle, a boy with a similar vehicle came from the opposite direction and we rode so forcefully into each other that I was thrown near a cow pasture by the road, under barbed wire, and my bicycle landed on top of me. There I lay, quiet as a mouse. The boy was with another boy and they discussed the possibility that I may be dead. I was not injured, some small bruises and a tear in my skirt was the only damage.*”⁹ A male respondent born in 1901 returning from a dance in his youth, and, having failed to light his carbide lamp, colliding with another cyclist in the complete darkness. After the accident he remembers the other cyclist calmly remarking: “*The bottle seems to be ok. Take a sip.*”¹⁰

But how did the lightless cyclists manage to stay on the road without seeing it? On the one hand, people living in the countryside were used to finding their way in the dark, on the other hand the bumpiness of the roads could assist them by sending sensory information about curves and bends. A teacher born in 1903 in the eastern Finnish countryside remembers the road between the local youth association hall and her home: “*The road was a cart road winding*

through the forest. There were countless tree roots crawling over the road, not to mention stones. I also did not have a light in my bicycle, although I had a bell. Because of the darkness, I used to ride on the horse trail, as it was somewhat broader than the trails of the iron cartwheels. But oh, what a shaking and rattling it gave me when I rode home!”¹¹

Assembly halls and especially the dances organised in these halls are the most frequently mentioned destination of young people’s cycling in the memory material. The 1920s and the 1930s were the heyday of these halls and in the memories they appear as the material component that together with the bicycle strongly shaped and constructed the experience of social geography and cultural community. Anne-Katrin Ebert has shown how a system of bicycle routes, specifically presented landscapes and listed sights produced experiences and mental images of the country and the nation in the Netherlands.¹² We can argue that the assembly halls and cycling to them had similar unifying effects on the communal and local level.

Respondents remember hundreds of bicycles standing around assembly halls when there was an evening party: so many that it was difficult to find space for one’s own bicycle. Riding to the dances brought together the youth from a village and loaded the bicycle with experiences and possibilities. A farmwoman born in 1899 remembers the bicycle trips of her youth: “*When the evening milking was done, we left around five o’clock for the evening party in Säkyli. The distance was around 30 kilometres and the destination was the youth association assembly hall, Honkala. We were there around half past six. The brass band was already playing the first tunes. During the program we could rest. [...] There were two to three hours of dancing at the end. Then the journey home started, we rode towards Eura, and we were often as many as twenty girls and boys. [...] The white and mild summer night made the mood jolly and we did not feel tired. The cuckoo was calling*

from the birches at the lake side and a merry group of youngsters pedalled steadily homewards.”¹³

This narrated memory gives us an idea of the multisensory experiences its author had as a young woman riding her bicycle in the countryside. Saara Tuomaala has suggested talking about the “sensescape” of the past as an extension of the soundscape concept that studies the way people experience and make sense of the sounds surrounding them.¹⁴ Here, the sounds of the brass band and the cuckoo are seamlessly connected to the other pleasant sensory experiences provided by the light and the mild temperature of the summer night, as well as to the young and fit cycling body that got its rest during the program and tirelessly covered the familiar, but at the same time especially meaningful, route along the large lake that separated the home village of the respondent from the youth association hall.

The period the respondents reminisced about was not only the time of the bicycle’s dominance over motorised transport, but also a period when an especially large generation of young people lived in the Finnish countryside. At the time of the bicycle survey, Finland had brought into young adulthood another similarly large generation, that of the post-war baby-boomers. However, this generation had largely left the countryside, and the bicycle also appeared as a vehicle now pushed aside by motorisation. The countryside no longer existed in the social and cultural form that the respondents had known. But through bodily memories they could travel back in time to that place and sense it once again, or, rather, in these memories the past was living on. Geoffrey Cubitt has argued that remembering does not simply mean producing a weak reflection of past experiences. It is much more a process in which the experienced is made sense of and becomes a part of the long flow of experiences. In this sense, memories are not reconstructions of the past,

but “temporal extensions of experience”.¹⁵ Thus, while producing accounts of their memories, the respondents were both writing the memories when old, and at the same time cycling when they were young. With them, the bicycle kept moving through an endless, white summer night, never having stopped, and the cuckoo at the lakeside was counting years to come, or years that had passed.

Tiina Männistö-Funk is a doctoral student at the University of Turku, researching the Finnish history of the bicycle.

¹ MV:K18/528.

² Helena Saarikoski, “Menneisyyden ruumiinkokemusten tutkiminen kirjoitetuissa aineistoissa.” In Sami Lakomäki, Pauliina Latvala and Kirsi Laurén (eds.), *Tekstien rajoilla: Monitieteisiä näkökulmia kirjoitettuihin aineistoihin*. SKS. Helsinki 2011, 117–136: 133.

³ Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory*. Manchester University Press. Manchester and New York 2007, 88–89.

⁴ Hanna Snellman, “Pieni ihminen ja kansatie.” *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 4/2012. 438–442: 439.

⁵ Seurasaaari: Seurasaaarisäätiön julkaisu. Seurasaaarisäätiö, Helsinki 1971, 31.

⁶ Minna Sarantola-Weiss, *Sohvaryhmän läpimurto: Kulutuskulttuurin tulo suomalaisiin olohuoneisiin 1960- ja 1970-lukujen vaihteessa*. SKS. Helsinki 2003, 31.

⁷ See: Nicholas Oddy, “Bicycles.” In: Pat Kirkham (ed.), *The gendered object*. Manchester University Press. Manchester and New York 1996, 60–69.

⁸ Frank Trentmann, “Disruption is Normal: Blackouts, Breakdowns and the Elasticity of Everyday Life.” In Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann ja Richard Wilk (eds.): *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*. Berg, Oxford and New York 2009, 67–84.

⁹ MV:K18/269.

¹⁰ MV:K18/64.

¹¹ MV:K18/140.

¹² Anne-Katrin Ebert, *Radelnde Nationen: Die Geschichte des Fahrrads in Deutschland und der Niederlanden bis 1940*. Campus Verlag. Frankfurt am Main 2010, 243–264.

¹³ MV:K18/667.

¹⁴ Saara Tuomaala: “Äänellisyyys ja muistitieto: Haastattelut äänikulttuurin tuottamisaikkana.” *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 3/2010, 290–303: 296.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory*. Manchester University Press. Manchester and New York 2007, 89.