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The Joy of Narration. Mikael Niemi's Popular Music from Vittula

Thomas Mohnike

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Editorial Note

This special issue of the Journal of Northern Studies is published in view of Umeå having been appointed the European Capital of Culture 2014. The editors would like to thank editorial board-member professor Annegret Heitmann for acting as guest-editor for the issue.

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Cover picture

Detail from the work of art *Lev!* ['Live!'] created by the artists FA+, namely Ingrid Falk and Gustavo Aguerre. *Lev!* is a glass tunnel in the centre of Umeå with pictures from the writer Sara Lidman's home area in Northern Västerbotten and with quotations from her authorship. In translation the text reads:

‘– And have you heard that in the south
where they have
everything
and guzzle down
apples
and wheat
and **rose flowers**
they haven't got
cloudberries!
– It serves them right!’

The quotation is from Lidman's book *Hjortronlandet* ['Cloudberry country,' 1955].

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THOMAS MOHNIKE

The Joy of Narration

Mikael Niemi's *Popular Music from Vittula*

ABSTRACT *Le goût du baiser d'un garçon* (2000) de Mikael Niemi fut le plus grand succès littéraire en Suède après 1989. Souvent, le roman est décrit comme un témoignage d'une culture minoritaire dans la région suédoise frontalière de la Finlande, où l'on parle une langue particulière, le *meänkieli*. Dans mon article, j'explique que cette réception est moins due à l'intention implicite du roman qu'aux attentes de ses lecteurs dans une phase de restructuration identitaire en Suède après la fin de la guerre froide. En effet, la Suède est, depuis, souvent imaginée comme un pays multiculturel, et le témoignage littéraire supposé d'une culture minoritaire sur le territoire du pays répondait bien à ces attentes. Cependant, ce n'est pas la seule façon d'interpréter le roman. Il s'agit plutôt d'un texte ouvert, jouant avec des discours identitaires multiples pour ouvrir des pistes d'identification au lecteur, sans préférence pour l'une de ces pistes. Plus important que le contenu du roman est donc en effet la forme, ou plutôt la dynamique inhérente aux formes narratives utilisées. Une œuvre composée moins pour donner du sens que pour l'ouvrir, et pour suivre la joie de la narration.

KEYWORDS narrating identity, Tornedalen, Mikael Niemi, imagined ethnicity, joy of narration, Swedish multiculturalism

When I came to Gothenburg, Sweden, in August 2013 in order to write the present essay, I was astonished by the fact that basically everyone that I met and talked with—literary scholars, yes, but even neighbors

with very different social backgrounds—had not only apparently read Mikael Niemi's novel *Populärmusik från Vittula* ['Popular music from Vittula'] (2000), but often also held very pronounced views on it. Many could even quote passages spontaneously, albeit not always accurately—13 years after its first publication. Statistically, this may be less surprising, as with more than 800 000 copies sold in Sweden, almost one Swede out of ten owns a copy, making the novel one of the best distributed books in Sweden ever. It had apparently well appealed to the needs and expectations of the Swedish public at the beginning of the new millennium.

However, not all the interviewed readers uttered the same opinions, nor did they share favorite quotations, and some, especially those that came from Norrland even felt deceived: it was far too much like the stories that one knew from home. The book, it seemed to me, was not as static and clear cut as literary reviews and scholarly articles that I had read hitherto would suggest. In my, admittedly not very systematic interviews, the book emerged as a joyful game with reader expectations—and with the art of narration. It takes narrating forms from different literary and medial traditions and discourses, in order to sample, adapt, and rewrite them as a means of creating a literary universe that offers many possibilities to identify with, but refuses to give any stable and definitive meaning. In the present essay, I propose to analyze these interactions between reader expectations and Mikael Niemi's art of narrating more closely.

Looking for Swedish Multiculturalism. Literary and Political Contexts

Between 1990 and the beginning of the new millennium, Sweden was undergoing a period of particularly profound rewriting of national identity. During the Cold war period, Sweden was most often imagined as a utopian middle way between East and West, between socialism and capitalism. After the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the communist world, this form of self-definition was no longer possible. Moreover, this discursive identity crisis was coupled with a period of economic problems that questioned the Swedish welfare state in both practice and ideology. It was at this moment that the discourse of multiculturalism entered Swedish debate: after at least 40 years of immigration, Sweden now became aware of its immigrants as part of Swedish society. From being imagined as a neutral, cultural homogenous country situated between Eastern and Western Europe, it changed in self representation to become a part of the global village, a multicultural, creative spot in Europe—close to nature and technologically highly developed (cf. Mohnike 2007a; Mohnike 2007b; Mohnike in print).

It is thus no coincidence that most of the scholars and journalists who commented on Niemi's works and especially his novel *Popular Music from Vittula* tend to stress questions of local identity and place making as main aspects of his writing, and yes, these themes are certainly important (cf. e.g. Gröndahl 2008; Jonsson 2012; Ridanpää 2011). In a situation in which multiculturalism became a discourse to define Swedish national identity, a novel that appeared to picture a cultural minority within Sweden was more than welcome. Before the year 2000, for many readers, the community of people living in the valley of Torne, the Tornedalen, far up in the North of Sweden was simply considered to be formed by some Swedes living in the border region to Finland. After the success of *Popular Music*, the people of Tornedalen appeared as an ethnic group of its own with a distinct language, the *meänkieli*, and a particular culture with, for example, astonishing drinking habits and sauna competitions, to quote only two of the many fascinating customs, and, last but not least, as a group of people that seems to suffer from a double identity in the Swedish nation state—being both Finnish and Swedish, or neither, appears to cause many problems, despite the humorous style; in the words of the narrator summarizing the school lessons: “Vi bröt på finska utan att vara finnar, vi bröt på svenska utan att vara svenskar. Vi var ingenting” (Niemi 2000: 50) [‘We spoke Finnish with an accent without being Finns, we spoke Swedish with an accent without being Swedes. We were nothing’]. Following this line of observation, a lot of readers—professional or amateur—would hence read the novel as a literary expression of an ethnic minority finding its own voice and speaking back to the majority society (cf. e.g. Gröndahl 2008: passim).

Interest in Tornedalian, *meänkieli*, culture was not the only result of this search for Swedish multiculturalism. Other than the revival of Sami and Jewish traditions, we might think here of the emergence of an “immigrant literature” that would represent and speak for the new “multicultural” Sweden. As Wolfgang Behschnitt and I have shown, this new Swedish migrant literature was more a discursive than an empirical product, that is a result of the acceptance of multiculturalism as the new frame for Swedish identity (cf. Behschnitt & Mohnike 2007; Mohnike 2007b; Nilsson 2010). Consequently, both migrants and minorities were often discussed together and described and imagined as cultures distinct from a Swedish majority culture—and their books were read through an “ethnic lens”, to speak with Trotzig (Trotzig 2004; cf. Mohnike 2007b). Similarly, *Popular Music* was read as an example of such ethnic literature.

As Magnus Nilsson has shown in his *Föreställd mångkultur* [‘Imagined multiculturalism’] (2010), social groups that had hitherto been described in terms of social class were now increasingly culturalized, or to put it blunt-

ly: before, people living in suburbs and in poor conditions were workers, unemployed or otherwise socially disfavored. Today, they are in the same economic situation, but are called immigrants. This is even true for the reception of Tornedalian culture. In their chapter on Tornedalian literature in the anthology *Litteraturens gränsland. Invandrar- och minoritetslitteratur i nordiskt perspektiv* ['Literature's borderland. Immigrant and minority literature in a Nordic perspective'] (2002), a book that is in itself an example for the new multicultural discourse, Satu Gröndahl, Matti Hellberg and Mika Ojanen observe that reviews of Niemi's *Popular Music from Vittula* tend to stress the category of the ethnic, whereas Tornedalian literature before was usually defined as either regional or proletarian literature (cf. Gröndahl, Hellberg & Ojanen 2002: 139–140).

It seems that Niemi's *Popular Music from Vittula* would then be one of the first novels that could be read as depicting Tornedalen as a distinct culture—perhaps because its readers would like to read it that way. Multiculturalism as a frame for Swedish identity caused readers to feel a need for a novel that showed that Sweden had been multicultural even before the arrival of immigrants. The success of the novel might thus be partly explained by this coincidence, and not by the fact that it was the first book that tried to put Tornedalen on the cultural map of Sweden.

In fact, *Popular Music from Vittula* was not the first novel to be written on the subject—neither by Niemi nor in general. Interested readers could have learned about language and culture in the Tornedalen from the books of Hilja Byström (1908–1993) as early as the 1930s and 1940s, and from the works of more recent authors such as Gunnar Kieri (*1928) and Olof Hederyd (*1923); and they had the possibility to discover it in the oeuvre of the great literary voice of Tornedalen before Niemi, Bengt Pohjanen (*1944), to name but some productive authors (cf. Gröndahl, Hellberg & Ojanen 2002: 147–156). What's more, Mikael Niemi (*1959) had himself written quite a number of books before *Popular Music*, most of which use the Tornedalen and local traditions and languages as a background and source of inspiration. One might cite here his report book from 1989 *Med rötter häruppe. En rapportbok om Tornedalen* ['With roots up here. A report book on the Torne valley'], his poems, such as *Näsblod under högmässan* ['Nosebleed during church service'] (1988) or *Änglar med mausergevär* ['Angels with Swedish Mauser'] (1989), and particularly his two young adult novels *Kyrkodjäveln* ['The church devil'] (1994) and *Blodsugarna* ['Bloodsuckers'] (1997). In all these books, *meänkieli* and the dominance of Swedish and the threat for local traditions as well as intergenerational conflicts concerning language use were discussed. The interest in *Popular Music from Vittula* was thus not due to the fact that it was the first novel to strive for a place for Tornedalen in Swedish literature. It was the right book at the right moment.

The Art of Narrating

But *Popular Music from Vittula* was not only a book that answered to the needs of multicultural discourses. A closer reading shows that it interacted with quite a number of other discourses important for speaking of identity today in an often subversive manner. It thus became an amusing read for anyone questioning his or her identity at the turn of the millennium, independent of an interest in Northern Swedish sauna habits. It is, as I want to argue, especially its ‘literariness,’ its *Literarizität*, that becomes an instrument of seducing its readers and subverting essentialist readings.

The novel is composed of twenty chapters, framed by a prolog and an epilog. Prolog and epilog are narrated from an adult perspective, whereas the chapters depict scenes of the narrator’s childhood and youth in the 1960s and 1970s in the municipality of Pajala in Northern Sweden near the Finnish border. The chapters follow a loose chronological order, starting in the early childhood of the protagonist Matti and his friend Niila, and ending when the friends feel they have arrived at the happiest moment of their youth—before separating in all four corners of the world to become adults.

Several reviewers have characterized the style as “magic realism.” To them, the narrative suggests that it is being faithful to the historical, natural and social circumstances it relates to, but repeatedly turns surrealistic. Interestingly enough, a reader as learned as the *New York Times* journalist Hugo Lindgren explains this oscillation between realism and ecstatic flights of the imagination with the climate of Northern Sweden and the youth of the protagonists: Niemi tells his stories, Lindgren says, with “a dusting of magical realism, as if the extreme climate knocks the senses off kilter. (Or perhaps it’s the vodka.) His prose buzzes with wonder, fearlessness and ecstatic ignorance: the sensations of youth” (Lindgren 2003). For him, and for many others, the style thus asserts the authenticity of the tale, anchored both in the nature of Northern Sweden and of the protagonists—a rather essentialist, culturalistic reading.

Of course, authenticity is not to be equaled with truth: as the quotation shows, the *effect of authenticity* (cf. Schlich 2002: V) is created by referring to previous knowledge of the implied reader: first to an internationally known literary style—South American magic realism—, secondly to the reader’s memories of their own youth, and particularly to other narrations of youth in other media, and thirdly to international stereotypes of life at the polar circle, including snow, vodka and marginalization, paired with local interpretations of those themes. In this case, authenticity thus consists in reacting to reader expectations in a way that rather confirms than subverts existing literary models (magic realism) and stereotypes of North Scandinavian otherness.

However, it would be too easy to reduce the literary style to magic realism. Each of the twenty chapters “is an epic in miniature” (Lindgren 2003), that seems to look for its own form, adapting its style and content to the dynamics of narration needed at each moment of the book to ensure the flow of the story.

The first chapter, for example, takes the protagonists Matti and Niila from their quite realistic first encounter as little boys at a playground in Vittula to a more and more fictive journey almost to China—a true flight of the imagination. The second, however, changes tune entirely: it tells the story of the lack of language in the more or less secularized Laestadian family of Matti’s friend Niila. Whereas the first chapter is thus a playful introduction to the power of friendship and imagination, the second is an encounter with the brutality of social relationships without words and sounds, given in a naturalistic manner; accordingly, the chapter renounces all use of magical or surrealistic elements. This want is compensated in chapter three by an exuberant allegory on the formative and deformative aspects of school life, which consists in the protagonist being put into an old boiler until he has grown up sufficiently to crack his iron prison. Chapter four turns back to the naturalistic style, describing how school teaches a lack of history and identity to the people from Tornedalen and the greatness of Southern Swedish culture, and it finishes with Niila being beaten by his father for having partly destroyed their unused library with his friend, the narrator; and so on. Each chapter assembles a complex of themes, and adapts its style to it. The chapters are then put in an order that changes mood in an effective way. The book seems hence to be composed as a suite of pieces in a musical manner, each chapter being set in another tonality.

As a result, content seems less important than the dynamics of narration; being true to a supposedly Tornedalian identity less significant than telling a good story. This becomes clear in the prolog that can be read as a programmatic overture. The narrator finds himself alone in a camp some meters below the Thorong La Pass in Nepal. As he is awakened by his alarm clock in the middle of the night, he has a near death experience:

Det var då, just i den stunden att jag insåg att jag var död.
 Upplevelsen är svår att beskriva. Det var som om kroppen tömdes. Jag blev en sten, en oändlig stor, gråkall meteorit. Och inbäddad djupt inne i ett hålrum låg något främmande, något avlångt och mjukt, organiskt. Ett manslik. Det tillhörde inte mig. Jag var sten, jag omslöt bara den svalnade gestalten som en kolossal, tätslutande granitsarkofag.
 Det varade i två, högst tre sekunder.
 Sedan tände jag ficklampan. Väckarklockans urtavla visade noll och

noll. Ett kusligt ögonblick fick jag för mig att tiden upphört, att den inte längre kunde mätas. (Niemi 2000: 5)

[‘It was then, at that very moment, that I realized that I was dead. That experience was difficult to describe. I had turned into a stone, an incredibly big, bleak meteorite. Embedded deep down in a cavity was something strange, something long, thin and soft, organic. A corpse. It wasn’t mine. I was stone, I was merely embracing the body as it grew colder, encompassing it like a colossal, tightly closed granite sarcophagus. This feeling lasted two seconds, three at most. Then I switched on my flashlight. The alarm clock display showed zero and zero. For one awful moment I had the feeling that time ceased to exist, that it could no longer be measured.’ (Niemi 2003: 7)]

Of course he discovers that he is neither dead nor that time has come to a halt, but that it was just terribly cold, and that he had accidentally set the clock to zero. But it is important to remember that this chilling reduction to an almost Cartesian subject that doesn’t know anything about itself other than that it is thinking—*cogito, ergo sum*—is what constitutes the opening chord of the prolog. As a reader who has just started to encounter the book, we don’t know the “I” that is talking, we don’t know what kind of realism we are to expect—is the fact that he is dead a literary convention?—in short: we have absolutely no idea what all this is about. And this confusion is apparently mirrored by the narrator—who is ‘I’? And why is ‘I’ here?

This ‘musical’ theme is further pursued when he gets up and continues his walking-tour through the Himalaya which is evidently the practical reason for his presence in this remote location. He climbs the pass, and there, high above the world, surrounded by a sea of mountains, he has an experience of sublimity, that is an experience of transgressing the limits of his own self, and of the greatness of the world he lives in. He has thus, like so many others since the romantic period, traveled to a place that is supposedly the opposite of culture, of humanity, in order to experience a radical Otherness or Alienation, to speak with the philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels. According to Waldenfels, this experience of Otherness (‘Fremde’) is not just an encounter with the other, with what is different, but with something that questions the very limits of a subject’s way of thinking—not because it poses questions, but because it is profoundly different, intangible, but present. It is the modern, secularized version of an encounter with God (cf. Waldenfels 1997; Mohnike 2007a). In a certain sense, the experience of the sublime therefore resembles the near death experience it follows in the narrative: it questions the experiencing subject in its fundamentals, but it has no answers. The answers have to be found by the narrating subject itself.

This passage is followed by another variation on the same theme. In

imitation of religious habits and overwhelmed by gratitude, the narrator bends down and kisses an iron plate

med ingjutna tibetanska bokstäver, en skrift som jag inte kan tyda men som utstrålar allvar, andlighet [...]. Det är i det ögonblicket som minnet öppnar sig. Ett svindlande schakt ner i min barndom. Ett rör genom tiden där någon ropar en varning, men det är för sent.

Jag sitter fast.

Mina fuktiga läppar sitter fastfrusna i en tibetansk böneplatta. (Niemi 2000:7)

[‘engraved with Tibetan writing, a text I am unable to understand but one that exudes solemnity, spirituality [...]. At that very moment a memory comes back to me. A vertiginous pit into my childhood. A tube through time down which someone is shouting out a warning, but it’s too late. I’m stuck fast. My damp lips are frozen onto a Tibetan prayer plaque.’ (Niemi 2003: 9).]

However, his flashback home to his childhood gives him enough hints to liberate himself: in Northern Sweden, his mother had used warm water to thaw off him. Here, he frees himself with his own warm urine. The chapter ends: “Äntligen kan jag börja berätta” [‘Finally, I can start to tell’]. The text thus plays with different variations on the experience of radical Otherness, referring to intertexts from various traditions—philosophical, theological, romantic and especially those of twentieth century travel writing—to create a text that opens up for a search for identity. It is noteworthy that this search for identity is marked as highly personal: it is not by chance that he doesn’t understand the Tibetan writing, on the contrary: What is important is that it “exudes solemnity, spirituality”—that it is an open text, that seems to refer to something divine, but doesn’t give a more precise meaning and is thus disputable, unstable.

Satu Gröndahl and others have interpreted this scene as a symbolic liberation of the stuck tongues of minority language users after many years of oppression. For the narrator, coming into contact with his childhood in this painful situation means coming back to himself, finding an identity of one self and a language, a voice of one’s own. He is in this sense liberating his *meänkieli* soul from the discursive prison it had been locked up in (Gröndahl 2008: 63).

This is of course a permissible and possible interpretation, even if it isn’t the only one, as she herself admits. As my rendering of the prologue suggests, I would prefer to stress the quality of the dynamics of narrating that produces questions and open ends, and in fact contradicts every stable interpretation: The text seems to be constantly playing with itself in a

kind of romantic irony: the previously cited near death experience and the following sensation of cessation of time is emptied of meaning and pathos by the fact that the narrator admits that he had accidentally set his clock to zero. The later experience of transcendence and sublimity when facing the elements of nature at the pass is contradicted by the ridiculous situation he finds himself in. Every movement of longing, of looking for a glimpse of stable, fixed eternity, of a secularized encounter with God, is always subverted, without giving place to another, more stable answer. And at the end, the liberation of the narrative voice is assured by the narrator urinating on himself. The idea of finding his own *meänkieli* voice is thereby ridiculed: it is not even some nice cranberry soup or coffee brought from home, but the most impure liquid, produced by his own body that liberates his tongue and hence his capacity to tell a story. It seems difficult to me to accept this image as a simple symbolic rebirth of a minority identity. It might be a hopeful opening up, yes, but at the same time, it is its humorous contradiction. The meaning of the text is hence made unstable.

The prolog thus sets the narration in motion by posing questions and expressing a need for understanding. It is further suggested that the questions created by the confrontation with radical otherness are answered by the text. Interestingly enough, the prolog doesn't give any indicators as to what kind of story will follow other than that it is in some way related to the experience in Nepal. The last sentence in the Swedish original is: "Äntligen kan jag börja berätta" ['Finally, I can begin to tell']—he can narrate, but he doesn't tell us what. The prolog opens the book, invites the reader to enter into a literary universe, but also suggests that it is an unsteady one. As we will see, the text suggests a lot of answers, but none are definitive. And this, I would like to propose, is one of the qualities of the text: it offers a playground for interpretations, but has no preference for any one interpretation—only a disfavor for some of them, especially those that might turn essentialist.

Narrating Identities

As we have seen above, the narrator seems not to be sure what he is looking for when he is narrating and writing his story: "Äntligen kan jag börja berätta" ['Finally, I can begin to tell']. The prolog ends—he can narrate, but he doesn't tell us and probably doesn't know *what*. This will only become clear when we turn the page and come to understand that we are reading childhood memories, and that the book is meant to be a tale of the narrator's early, formative years. The text then becomes a humorous auto-biography, or better: auto-psychoanalysis, that engages in a sort of archeology of knowledge of oneself, picking up glimpses of memories that are not always

compatible, sometimes even contradictory, in order to construct a personal identity that will lead to and explain the narrator's coming to Nepal on the one hand, and his position as a grown up in modern Sweden on the other. In a small digression at the end of chapter four, we are told that the narrator is neither a professional traveler nor a writer at the time of writing, but a teacher in a suburb of the Swedish capital of Stockholm, a description that is confirmed in the epilog at the end of the book.

However, the genre of auto-biography is repeatedly subverted by the power of the narrative forms employed; the narrator often prefers to follow the paths opened up by the dynamics of telling than to obey the obligation to be faithful to the story of his actual childhood. An outstanding example is chapter one, where the two friends, the narrator Matti and his friend Niila, meet for the first time at a playground, and then take the opportunity to climb into a tourist bus to get out of Pajala and see the world. At this moment, the story might be realistic, but when the 5 year old boys follow the group of tourists into an airplane to Stockholm, and then join another group to Frankfurt without being noticed, the reader is probably meant to become more and more skeptical of his narrator's reliability, as he seems to be more interested in the joy of narrating a good story than sticking to reality. The reader is thus invited to question the book as a whole: yes, it gives an idea of childhood in the North, but it is not at all trustworthy in every detail. Don't take me only seriously, the text seems to exclaim.

By not being a serious master of autobiography, the narrator stresses the literariness of his text: the text becomes less singular, specific, less a testimony of one particular subject, but more typical, representative—this is a difference between history and literature that already Aristotle had proposed as fundamental (cf. Aristoteles 1982: 54). If the narrator thus becomes a representative, we have to ask—of what?

Of course, the narrator's story of someone growing up in Tornedalen is rather unusual for the majority of his readers. In this sense, he might be understood as representative of somebody from Tornedalen, and this is an interpretation that is quite usual in research and reviews, as I have mentioned above. When Satu Gröndahl tells us that the narrator frees his *meänkieli* voice in order to tell the story of a minority group, she proposes to read the text as a literary testimony of a cultural group, expressed by specific traditions (as, in the text, competitive drinking, sauna, a local version of chase, fishing etc.) and by a language of its own.

This reading may be confirmed by the general narrative structure of the text: The reader is taken from outside, first from imagined Nepal, then, at least implicitly, from central Sweden to the North, and the landscape and habits are described as though intended for someone who doesn't

know them. Most of the phrases in *meänkieli* are translated either directly or implicitly (cf. Landqvist 2013), all odd habits are sufficiently explained. The narrator thus explains the world of his childhood to somebody that didn't necessarily share it—the position of the implied reader is thus that of an outsider to the world of Tornedalen. By that technique, he creates three worlds—the world of the reader, of which the narrator has become a part, the world of Tornedalen, and the limit of the world, the pass in Nepal. Whereas the pass could be described as the limit of being human, the place of radical otherness, the border between the centre, Swedish Stockholm, and Tornedalen is a contact zone that implies the structural otherness of two different cultures. Following this interpretation, the narrator becomes the guide and interpreter of the strange world of Tornedalen, he is the ethnographer of his own people. This interpretation fits well with the above mentioned reader expectations to discover a multicultural Sweden after the end of the cold war and during the crisis of the Swedish Welfare state, and thus seemed to go a long way toward explaining the book's success: *Popular Music from Vittula* looked like the literary expression of a cultural or ethnic minority.

However, this structure is equally appropriate to every other modern description of a rural periphery (cf. Langheiter-Tutschek 2004). International readers don't have any problem to connect it to their national geographies of periphery and centre. A US-American reviewer, for example, starts his review with the words: "If Vittula were in the US, it would probably be someplace in Alaska, Arkansas, or Idaho—somewhere very far off the beaten track." (Anonymous 2003: 1096). In a similar way, a German reviewer begins his reflection on the novel with the following words:

Eine Gegend im Nordosten des Landes, die allgemein als zurückgeblieben angesehen wird. Dort spricht man einen seltsamen Dialekt und profitiert ein wenig vom Grenzhandel mit dem ebenso armen östlichen Nachbarn. Die jungen Leute verlassen die Kleinstädte und Dörfer, um anderswo Arbeit und Zukunft zu finden. Das kommt uns bekannt vor? Um Himmelswillen: Nein, es geht hier nicht um Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (cited in Langheiter-Tutschek 2004: 209).

Other examples could be cited. It is obvious that for these professional readers outside Sweden, the interest of the book lies not in its ethnographical description of a largely unknown minority somewhere in the North of Sweden, but in the entertaining description of a youth lived in the cultural periphery. The book is thus inscribing itself in the genre of village and country life descriptions, well established since the advent of urbanization and modernity, as Matthias Langheiter-Tutschek has shown, just in a quite

contemporary interpretation. We find the importance of clans, the debated central position of the church, associations of men, such as the hunters around Matti's Grandfather, descriptions of weddings and birthdays as central social events etc. (cf. Langheiter-Tutschek 2004: 203–205). That this is a possible interpretation of the text is supported by a central episode in the book. One of the important persons for the narrator is his teacher Greger, hailing from rural Scania. He uses a Swedish dialect that is difficult to understand even for those that speak modern Swedish, let alone the old people who only speak *meänkieli*. However, he manages to engage in lengthy dialogs with the latter, because he knows the laws of communication in rural areas from home (Niemi 2000: 149–150). Moreover, Greger seems to be the only Southern Swedish person that is an integrated part of the Tornedalian society.

In this way, the childhood and youth of the narrator become representative of more than just the people from Tornedalen and may be read as a description of life in the backwater of modern urbanism: irrespective of the periphery you grew up in, you can find habits and problems in Tornedalen that you might know from home. And if you didn't grow up there, you know it from the stories and films you know about the countryside. In this view, the book would thus not be a book on Tornedalen, but a book on youth in the countryside. A strength of the book is that both readings are equally possible, depending on the choice of the reader.

A third possible reading is quite simply an interpretation of the text as a description of a childhood and youth in Sweden in general. If it was not for the words in *meänkieli* and some other regional features, it is largely a description of typical problems and dreams of Swedish children and young adults living in a smaller town or suburbs in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century. It thus applies to almost every Swede except those growing up in central Stockholm. Matti's and Niila's problems finding friends, mobbing in schools, first sexual encounters, questions of how to survive in school when you are not the strongest in class, problems with radical religious traditions and, yes, even drinking contests are themes that are common to many Swedes and Europeans. The arrival of the welfare state was often somewhat earlier in Southern Sweden, but even wealth and modern facilities such as cars, record players and the encounter with US-American popular music were phenomena rather new, as Sweden became the wealthy country that we know today only after the Second World War. Dreams of founding a band were shared and realized almost all over the country, and going hunting with friends is an activity shared by many men of all social strata even today. Seen from that perspective, the Tornedalian setting is nothing but the most radical version of Swedish provincialism, and the

story of Matti is representative of the growing up of many Swedes in the 1960s and 1970s.

Popular Music from Vittula thus offers several possibilities to read and interpret the representativeness of the protagonists, and I probably didn't describe every possible reading relating to the narration of identity. The book interacts with a lot of shared discourses, medial representations and experiences of Swedish and European readers, but alienates them in a sympathetic way by being set in Tornedalen. All possible readings, I would like to claim, are present at the same time, creating a universe that allows the reader multiple identifications. It is an open text, powered by the joy of narration.

Crisis and Liberation

Some pages above, I sketched the cultural context of the book's publication as one of negotiating Swedish identity in a period of crisis. This experience of crisis is mirrored by the narrator at the end of the book. When the adult narrator of the epilog summarizes the events between the moment, when the four friends that formed the band at the end of the novel experienced their moment of perfect happiness in chapter twenty, and the moment of writing, his prose is saturated with nostalgia.

Någon gång per år när min längtan blir för stark reser jag upp till Pajala. Jag anländer i kvällningen och vandrar ut på den nya, cirkusliknande pylonbron som spänner över Torneälven. Mitt över djupfåran stannar jag och ser ut över byn med träkyrkans spetsiga torn. Vrider jag blicken ser jag skogshorisonten och Jupukkaberget med TV-mastens blinkande synål. Under mig strömmar älven i sin ständiga, breda rörelse mot havet. Det låga bruset sköljer bort stadens larm ur öronen. Min rastlöshet rinner av mig i den tilltagande skymningen.

Jag låter ögonen vandrar över byn. Minnena återvänder, människor som liksom jag flyttat, namn som glimtar till. [...] Och själv blev jag svensk-lärare i Sundbyberg med en saknad, ett vemod jag aldrig helt lyckats bemästra. (Niemi 2000: 237)

[‘Once or twice every year when I can't control my longing anymore, I travel up to Pajala. I get there as evening is drawing in, and wander out onto the new, circus-like pylon bridge that spans the River Torne. I stand in the middle and gaze out over the village and the pointed spire of the wooden church. If I look around I can see the forest on the horizon, and Jupukka Mountain with the blinking sewing needle that is the TV antenna. Way down beneath me the river flows wide and never-ending toward the sea. The low roaring sound rinses the din of the city out of my ears. My restlessness melts away as dusk gathers.

I let my eyes wander over the village. Memories come flooding back,

people who've moved away like me, names that flash past. [...] And me, who became a Swedish teacher in Sundbyberg with a sense of loss, a melancholy I have never managed to overcome completely.' (Niemi 2003: 236)]

He has come from his Stockholman suburb to Pajala, but everything has changed, even here. A new bridge is built, his old friends have moved elsewhere as he has done, they work in ordinary jobs as does he himself—except for Niila, who had forced a career in music in London, but died rather early, apparently from drug misuse. Only the river seems to be the same, and thus turns into a conventional, but still strong image for the passing of time. The story of his childhood and youth in Tornedalen has come to an end, but apparently, his project of connecting with the “I” that he had narrated has failed. He is no longer the young Matti, and the time of the welfare state, modernity, and popular music coming to Pajala is no more. The collective crisis of identity at the end of the 1990s has found a symbolic counterpart in the narrator's personal crisis of identity.

The book ends in this mood of nostalgia, but combines it with some signs of liberation: the narrator cannot solve the problem of nostalgia, but he can relive a memory that liberates him from the moment of solitude:

Den sista gången vi möttes var under Pajala marknad, [Niila] hade flugit från London och klöste tankspritt i små sår på sin handled. På natten for vi och fiskade vid Lappeakoski. Hans pupiller var små som knappålar, och han surrade maniskt:

– Islossningen, Matti, när vi stod där på bron och såg islossningen, fy fan, vilken islossning...

Jo, Niila, jag minns islossningen. Två småglin och en hemsnickrad gitarr.

Rock 'n' roll music.

Smaken av en pojkes kyss. (Niemi 2000: 238)

[‘The last time we met was during the Pajala fair, he'd flown in from London and was scratching absent-mindedly at little sores on his wrist. That night we went fishing at Lappeakoski. His pupils were small as drawing pins, and he was buzzing away manically:

“The breaking up of the ice, Matti, that tome we stood on the bridge and watched the ice breaking up, by God, it was awesome...”

Oh, yes, Niila, I remember the ice breaking up. Two little boys and a homemade guitar.

Rock 'n' roll music.

The taste of a boy's kiss.' (Niemi 2003: 237)]

“Islossningen,” the breaking up of the ice, can of course be read as an image of the period of adolescence, the centre of the book. At the same time, it is an image for liberation from being stuck, from being locked into a form that comes from the outside with a force that develops from the inside. In his memory, it was the music that was freeing them, helping them find their way, as well as their friendship in an environment not always too friendly.

Looking back from that moment at the novel, the reader might discover that this form of resistance against forces that try to form or lock in the narrator and his friend is a leitmotif of the book—beginning in the prolog, when the narrator is stuck at the Tibetan prayer plate, continuing in chapter one in the great imagined flight to China, that finds its end already in Frankfurt, followed in chapter two by finding a language of security, the esperanto, in the case of stalemate between Swedish and *meänkieli* in the family of Niila, that permits him to communicate with the world. Chapter three describes school time as being locked into an old iron boiler until the end of school time, when he breaks the iron by the force his own growing body. Later on, they experience the breaking up of the ice referenced at the end; Niila kills his father together with his brother to liberate his family from tyrannical oppression, and, in another hilarious scene, they symbolically kill Niila’s already dead grandmother, who was starting to haunt him. And then, they discover music as a way to free themselves from the constrictions of the valley, to find their way into the world, to connect with the big world—a way that is not necessarily restricted to words, but extends to rhythm and self-expression. It is not by chance that most of the songs are sung in an English that proves their ignorance of that language. Language is here mere sound.

Interestingly enough, *meänkieli* and Tornedalian culture are not mentioned as either instruments or targets of those flights of liberation. When the narrator is standing in Pajala at the end of the book, no word of regret for the possible loss of language and cultural traditions is uttered. He suffers from nostalgia, yes, but one that is informed by a longing for those moments of liberty and friendship that only youth had given him. The link between the valley, its culture and the youth of the narrator are thus, if not arbitrary, so at least entirely coincidental: His attachment is not due to the valley, but to the fact that he grew up here.

Open Ends

In 2007, the comic artist Anders Annikas made a report book in which he recounts his visit to Pajala in order to see the ‘real’ setting of the novel and interview the people as to how the success of *Popular Music* had influenced the people there, given that they were suddenly known all over Sweden. Of

course, he doesn't find what he was looking for, the town is not like the one in the book. Some of the local people like the book, others dislike it, and most of them say that the book didn't change much for them in the long run. Annikas was looking for the reality behind the book, for its link to life. One of his interview partners, Regina Veräjä, journalist at the *Haparandabladet*, indirectly criticizes him for his naivety:

Det som är komiskt tycker jag är att alla inte tar den som fiktiv. 'Jaha, den där och den där är med' och 'ja, det vet man ju vem den där tvåkönade personen ska föreställa'. Det finns folk som inte ens tänkt tanken att det var en roman... Jag tror att folk utanför Pajala har förstått bättre än Pajalaborna själva att den är fiktiv. (Annikas 2007: 25)

[‘What I think is funny that most of the people don't take it as fiction. “He is in the book, and he as well” and “yes, of course one knows who the two sex person is supposed to be.” There are people who haven't even had the idea that it was a novel... I believe that people outside Pajala understood that it is fiction better than people from Pajala.’]

I am not sure whether Regina Veräjä is right in her optimism that people outside Pajala were always better at grasping the fictiveness, the literariness of the book than those from the town, but her general opinion seems valid: *Popular Music from Vittula* is a novel, and as a novel, it seeks to free itself from the constrictions of reality. This principle, I hope to have shown, Niemi has pushed to extremes in a joyful manner. His book provides an opportunity to find a way to a hitherto largely unknown community in Northern Sweden, it opens the reader's eyes for problems of power, oppression and language loss, but it does not dwell on it, or rather, it is not its main interest. What the novel searches for, is liberation from the force of expectations of others, it is a manifesto for the individual, and for the joy of narrating.

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