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What's the Shape of Your Paragraph?

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Panel: The Shape of Your Paragraph: Genre and Its Constraints

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Henriikka TAVI

What's the Shape of Your Paragraph?

Whose paragraph are we talking about? Who are you?

I need paragraphs. Without paragraphs, I wouldn't be able to write any prose. I need framing, the empty space that frames the text. I need pauses and stops, because a temporal and linear continuity is extremely difficult for me.

My paragraphs are quite short. They have the shape of a musical phrase, so that one musical thought continues through the paragraph. Of course there can be caesuras in the middle of the paragraph, too. Some of my paragraphs need to grow longer so that the text can run more freely. I tend to have an ending in each paragraph, as if I were writing a serial poem. The ending is sometimes a closure, it turns the whole content of the paragraph upside down. More often it is an open ending that expands the content of the paragraph. It can also be something that just occurs and carries you to a different place.

Do we think that there are two types of writers: the poet and the prose writer?

The poet would be interested in the present moment, in that the present subordinates all the other tenses. The past and future exist for her only insofar as they exist in the present. She needs pauses. She needs to have a new look. She starts from an empty table.

And the prose writer. When he begins his daily writing, he writes to continue. He is able to cope with time.

What is he interested in? Is he drawn to the past, does he want to explain how things became what they are? I mean, not things—the poet may also be interested in things. She may be interested in stones and wind and trees. Especially trees.

The prose writer is more interested in human beings. Does he want to understand how somebody became what he/she is? Is he interested in the future? Is he interested in what may happen if things go this or that way? Or, is he not at all interested in reality, because he is a fiction writer? Does he want to create a better world?

I don't understand the prose writer. My prose writing wangles its way in. I need to use tricks. I cannot think of a novel as a temporal unity; I think of it as a spatial unit. It's a container, a set of scales that has to be kept in balance.

But isn't all literature artificial? The sense of continuation always more or less constructed? Is the question of genre specialization a rather political and educational one? Is it interesting to talk about literary institutions? Is the whole question a First World problem?

In my country a large amount of artistically vivid literature takes place in the shadow areas between genres. Why do I use these vital metaphors when I'm speaking about the quality of a text? Is it because in my country literature has become a middle-class hobby written by middle-class writers for a middle-class audience?

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The need to avoid repetition raises moral feelings in me.

But at the same time, are we soon to be in a situation in which repetition is the least of our problems? Is the whole European culture in crisis? Is there a connection between the trend of “sincerity” in poetry and this feeling of crisis?

In Finland we don't have the trinity of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction: only poetry and prose. The need for distance from the Swedish-speaking cultural and economic elite has made Finnish culture somewhat anti-intellectual. The Finnish writer used to be, according to the stereotype, a man from the woods, an autodidact genius who did not need an education. He would write realistic fiction about everyday life surrounded by trees. For a long time our fiction mainly looked like this. Poetry was more difficult, but it also had trees.

Creative writing education is still poorly developed in Finland. We do have a high level of education in other art forms; it is only the writers who have to collect their knowledge here and there. That means that writers are in some sense more amateur than other artists.

The amateur in me thinks that writing is something deeply human and available to everyone. As I writer, I want to open up instead of closing and specializing. I think that regardless of the artistic or commercial value of a text, the act of writing in itself has value without measure.