

BACK TO IMPIVAARA

Rita Dahl

The struggle for parliamentary elections in Finland in Spring 2011 has started and electoral platforms have been launched. One of the most interesting platforms is the one by Perussuomalaiset, which is a populist, extreme-right party, very hostile toward immigrants and minorities, and in favor of restrictions for those applying for citizenship. The name of the platform – Suomalaiselle sopivin (Most suitable for a Finn)–tells everything about the content of the platform. It is an attempt to define what is valuable in Finnish culture. It is also an attempt to build up a hierarchy between what is considered national–“Finnish”--and foreign.

No policy field stays unprotected in this platform, which goes so far as cultural policy. According to Perussuomalaiset most of the Finnish art nowadays is “degenerate” avant-garde art, which doesn’t reflect national values and heritage. Instead, Perussuomalaiset openly idolize national romantic artists from 19th century, like composer Jean Sibelius and painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela. They fit into a certain mold of “Finnishness” which Perussuomalaiset appreciate. Paradoxally they also admire Swedish-speaking artists with slightly noble backgrounds, like Albert Edelfelt. This fact is at odds with their hostility toward immigrants.

The 19th century was a time of building the Finnish nation after long dominant periods under first Swedish and then Russian rule. Authors and painters were important nation-builders and defenders and creators of Finnish language, culture and formerly more hidden “Finnishness”. National romanticism was an important trait in art, which was sometimes covertly political and favored the importance of language and culture based on “nationally” considered values and attitudes. Intellectuals, who defended Finnish language and culture, were called “fennomans”, and among them were J.V.

Snellman, J. L. Runeberg, Agathon Meurman, many of them bi-lingual, just to name few of them.

Artists important function during the 19th century was to evoke interest in one's own native language and culture. Perussuomalaiset have adopted this role in the extreme to create a false kind of protectionism from foreign products and influences. They are returning our country to the dark ages of witch hunts just like some other extremist groups.

During the 1930s Finns got together to defend their own "integrity" against unknown enemies. Those "enemies" were also everything outside of Finnish borders-- be they people, customs, values, or whatever threatened "national integrity". These people believed of course in superiority of certain races. Perussuomalaiset do not announce this hierarchy openly, but it cannot be read from their platform in between the lines. During last polls Perussuomalaiset are about to gain almost 20 percentage of the votes in these elections. Their popularity is very sudden, and reflects at least the lack of trust in politics.

Aleksis Kivi's literary classic *Seitsemän veljestä* (Seven Brothers) offered a completely different view on Finland and nationalism than Perussuomalaiset do. The main characters in *Seven Brothers* are stubborn Finns, who are supposed to learn Finnish under the guidance of school master. They are very resistant, and escape to the forest of Impivaara. There they wait and resist the temptation of learning their mother tongue but finally even they give up and return to Jukola to fulfill their task as citizens of the new-born nation state by learning their mother tongue and basic facts about their culture. Even if they are at first resistant and rebellious, they realize the importance of knowing one's own language – but in a different sense than Perussuomalaiset who valorize mythical (and always questionable) "Finnishness".

Seven Brothers was published in 1870, and it was an exceptional novel during the time when nation-building was at its peak and every piece of art was supposed to

emphasize the importance of nationality and national culture. *Seven Brothers* does this too, but in its own political way, by showing seven brothers in rebellion towards authorities, living through a period of wild drinking and violent physical battles, and finally realizing the importance of being familiar with their native tongue.

While the seven brothers in Kivi's novel are reluctant to get to know their native tongue and culture, *Perussuomalaiset* aim at building a hierarchy between national and anything foreign, which is considered inferior. In Kivi's novel this distinction cannot be found, because at that time there was only a special need for creating self-esteem and valorization for Finnish culture and language. Hostility toward other cultures is a much later phenomena, which grew in unstable circumstances, under economical and cultural recession, when protecting one's own "heritage" seemed to fascinate certain groups/people? In the beginning of the 21st century that same protectionism has again become a useful tool to defend one's own integrity against foreign influences. It is only a question of time, when this ideology finds support of like-minded literature too, or when literature is re-interpreted in order to support national socialist thoughts.

Rita Dahl is a Finnish poet and writer, who holds MA in Comparative Literature (thesis dealt with Pessoa's heteronyms) and Master of Political Science at University of Helsinki. She has published 5 poetry collections and three books of non-fiction and blogs at <http://www.arjentola.blogspot.com>. You can contact her: ritdahl@gmail.com