

Fact, Fiction, and Knowledge of Finnish History in the novel *Niemi* by Juha Hurme

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Abstract

In this article I will analyse Juha Hurme's carnivalistic essay novel *Niemi*, that presents a cultural history of the current region of Finland at a time when nation states had not yet been formed. I will consider the novel as a project of knowledge that places the reader between fiction and non-fiction. My interest is to analyze what kind of relationship to intellectual knowledge the work represents, and how it participates in the negotiations about the position of a novel as a producer of knowledge about the past. My argument is that although *Niemi* utilizes propositional knowledge typical of conventional history writing, the new knowledge it produces is built from perceptions that are constituted from different narrative levels and require an interpretation and structuring of the whole. The knowledge presented in this novel therefore does not stem from facts, but more from a discussion in which truths are carnivalized and emerge more as subjective reviews. The theoretical tools of this article are based on studies of history, culture and popular history (De Groot 2016; Conroy 2015), as well as theories of literature as knowledge (Lamarque 2010; Felski 2008; Puolakka 2022).

Keywords

Juha Hurme, literary history, historiography, knowledge, fiction, non-fiction

DOI

10.54432/scand/OOOV6407



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When Juha Hurme's novel *Niemi* (2017, Headland, not translated) was selected as the winner of the Finlandia Prize in Fiction (the most prestigious literature prize in Finland), it provoked a lively social media debate about the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction (see Seppälä 2018; Sivumerkkejä 2019; Anton 2021; Suomi 2024). The Finlandia Prize for Fiction is awarded for the best Finnish novel of the year¹, but can a work that chronologically traces the cultural history of a nameless peninsula between the Gulf of Finland and the North Sea from the Big Bang to the late 1700s be called a novel? The professional criticism of the book was mostly positive (see Kantokorpi 2017). The critic for *Helsingin Sanomat* Jukka Petäjä (2018) ironically asked how much fact is allowed in a work to still make it a novel. Juha Hurme himself has called his work "an epic poem built on facts", and compared the decision to class the work as fiction to Marcel Duchamp's artwork *Fountain* (1917) which is perhaps the most famous gesture in art history that tests the boundaries between art and non-art (Vilhunen 9.2.2018). *Niemi* itself contains no mention of genre other than the characterization given on the back cover that describes the work as "a cultural history of the universe".

In Hurme's prose, crossing the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction is not an exception. His work *Nyljetyt ajatukset* (Fleeced thoughts, 2014) features two men, Aimo and Kōpi, who row 700 kilometers along the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia and discuss literature, art, and music. While the content of their conversations might make an excellent starting point for factual essays, the characters' rich dialogue and a plot that is based on the chronotope of the journey link the work to the genre of a novel. *Suomi* (Finland, 2021) is the sequel to *Niemi*, and represents the history of a region that already identifies as Finland, starting in the early nineteenth century. Hurme's last work of prose, *Tiu tau tilhi* (2023, Waxwing) reflects the cultural history of nineteenth-century Finland through a children's poem. Hurme's works can even be distinguished as having pedagogical aims, as they invite the reader to discover cultural history and consider the relationship between knowing and experiencing. However, Hurme's project to popularize Finnish history is not unique in the history of Finnish literature, and several prose writers have also written non-fiction about history. As an example, in his series *Suomen historia* 1–3 (The History of Finland, 1993–1996) Veijo Meri explores incidents of the past stretching from the Stone Age to the present in

¹ The Finnish Book Foundation also awards a prize for the best non-fiction book (FBF 2023).

a polished style. *Niemi* also follows in the footsteps of Topelius' *Boken om vårt land*, (The book of our country, 1875) and Jörn Donner's *Nya Boken om vårt land* (The new book of our country, 1967) in mixing the methods of fiction, essayist style and non-fiction when sketching an overview of Finland.² In addition, a fluidity between non-fiction and fiction has been typical of the early stages of Finnish historiography (Sulkunen 2013: 38).

Niemi is a good example of contemporary literature where referentiality and the exploitation of factual knowledge are central. In a large number of novels, contextual information such as information about society or a particular historical era plays an important role, and the inclusion of bibliographies has become a common practice. Referential genres that draw on real-world material such as autofiction and biofiction that pictures the lives of historical figures, have also been popular. These genres respond to the readers' need to imagine and gain knowledge about the lives of the public figures that they portray (Hiidenmaa 2020: 29). Markku Lehtimäki (2024) has suggested that the reason for the popularity of this didactic and fact-based style of presentation is that the representation of the complexity of current social problems often requires a lot of information and background. But the presence of factual knowledge, for example documents, can also have the function of deconstructing the integrity of the fictional world, which is typical of impure aesthetics. In a practical sense, it forces the reader to look for referential ways of reading (such as those oriented towards knowledge and learning) instead of absorbing the fictional world (Bürger 1984: 82–91). On the other hand, in non-fiction, narrative and experiential representation has also become a popular practice, and as Pirjo Hiidenmaa (2020: 49) has noted, the popularity of narrative non-fiction is based on the fact that nowadays, readers are not interested in encyclopedic representations but rather in personal narratives that can offer knowledge based on experience. So, when fiction and non-fiction strive towards aesthetic and entertaining aims, they will adopt means of representation from each other. However, when discussing the blurring of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction in contemporary culture, it is worth remembering that the distinction between these genres emerged relatively

² Zachris Topelius (1818–1898) was a Finland-Swedish author, historian, and journalist who is best known for his historical novels, but he also wrote textbooks, fairy tales and song lyrics. Veijo Meri (1928–2015) is a Finnish modernist writer whose later works represented non-fiction on the history of Finland. Jörn Donner (1933–2020), the Finland-Swedish author, film director, and politician wrote critical reportage prose on Finnish society on 19960s. His later autofictional novels also were concerned with social issues and economic life.

late, in the late eighteenth century, as Mikko Lehtonen emphasizes. The differentiation was a result of the autonomization of the art institution and the development of a romantic conception of art that emphasized the self-expression of the author. The growing importance of books and other printed products like commodities also contributed to the differentiation (Lehtonen 2023; 158, 163–164).

In this article I will consider Juha Hurme's *Niemi* as an experiment in literary knowledge that places the reader between fiction and non-fiction. I will understand *Niemi* as a genre hybrid, but my interest is not in the genre questions, but rather to analyze what kind of relationship to intellectual knowledge the work represents, and how it participates in the negotiations about the position of a novel as a producer of knowledge about the past. In the analysis, I will first examine the most central points of view that the work represents in the discussions about Finnish history and its interpretation. Secondly, I will analyze what kind of creative ways of producing knowledge and bridging the gap between the past and the present the novel presents. My argument is that although *Niemi* utilizes propositional knowledge typical of conventional history writing, the new knowledge it produces is built from perceptions that are constituted from different narrative levels, and require an interpretation and structuring of the whole. The knowledge presented in this novel therefore does not stem from facts, but more from a discussion in which truths are carnivalized and emerge more as subjective reviews. The theoretical tools of this article are based on studies of history culture and popular history (De Groot 2016; Conroy 2015), as well as theories of literature as knowledge (Lamarque 2010; Felski 2008; Puolakka 2022).

Fiction, non-fiction, and the knowledge of the past

Juha Hurme's *Niemi* presents a cultural history of the current region of Finland at a time when nation states had not yet been formed. It focuses on the struggles between religious and scientific worldviews, and examines the meanings of folklore, art and literature as expressions of human understanding. The novel employs strategies to produce information that require an understanding of both the board genre of historiography, and also the relation between literature and knowledge.

The interpretations of professional historians represent only one part of the formation of knowledge about the past (Salmi 2001: 134). However, their outputs may not have much significance for the formation of a general public understanding of the past, and the significance may be indirect (Jalava,

Kinnunen & Sulkunen 2013: 7). "History culture" or "popular history" mean all those everyday practices in which the past is represented, produced, and sustained. Historical novels, TV series, exhibitions organised by museums, non-fiction, and various historical hobbies from genealogy to live role-playing games, for example, shape the public understanding of history. According to Jerome De Groot (2009: 13), through such media, everyone can participate in the negotiation of what is understood as historiography, who can produce it, and who can assume positions of expertise on the past. History culture is a dynamic social process in which certain conceptions of the past are shaped and disseminated, but also rejected on the grounds of the changing social needs and constraints. So, while certain experiences of the past allow for the creation of certain conceptions of the future, on the other hand, expectations about the future influence the way we can organize memory and forgetting in our own mind (Jalava, Kinnunen & Sulkunen 2013: 9, 13–14).

Popular interpretations of the past play a variety of roles in debates on the past. Often, their significance is based on the experiential means to bridge the gap between past and present (Salmi 2001: 137–142). For example, historical fiction participates in imagining the past, and can illustrate history in a pedagogical sense (De Groot 2016). Historical fiction represents a context of "heightened experimentality", where factual knowledge coexists with aesthetic experience. This allows for an emotional appropriation of the past (Conroy 2015: 49–51). According to De Groot (2016: 1–2), historical fiction has the potential to challenge, carnivalize, and to criticize the normative way of representing history. Fictional representations of the past may open discursive spaces in which to discuss issues such as nationality, identities and legitimacy in the interpretations of history. In doing so, popular history can suggest new epistemological positions in relation to the past, as well as offering opportunities to consider alternative trajectories of history (De Groot 2016: 2). Creative non-fiction has similar functions (De Groot 2009, 13). Alternative approaches to historiography have also been offered by so called counterfactual historiography. It asks what the implications would have been if the key events in history had been resolved differently. The aim of counterfactual historiography is to help readers better understand the causes and consequences of actual events by considering alternative developments (Evans 2013, 31-40); *Niemi* does not represent such a speculative history. It seeks alternative interpretations from the margins of history and enlivens the details with various anecdotes with fictional elements. However, the work presents the main lines of historical events in accordance with established historiography.

As Wolfgang Huemer (2012) has argued, literature is a group of ritualized social practices aimed at communication between author and reader. The relationship of literature to knowledge is one such consideration, and in principle, the relationship of fiction and non-fiction to knowledge is defined by different conventions. The ethics of non-fiction are shaped by the accuracy of the information, wherein non-fiction ideally aims at careful background work and a reliability of information, including the provision of detail (Jablonka 2018: 199; Hiidenmaa 2020: 39-40; Keskiarja 2017: 79). The accuracy of background work can also be considered as a characteristic of good historical fiction, and by stepping outside the realms of 'fact', fiction offers the possibility of mixing and confusing, where there are things that have really happened and other things that have not. However, as Huemer (2012) emphasizes, literary practices are not uniform, and consequently, literature's relationship with knowledge is also more complex.

In philosophy, knowledge has traditionally been approached as being propositional, and be reduced to propositions which can be either true or false. In the case of scientific text and non-fiction, propositional knowledge forms the basis for the rational aims of those genres (Lamarque 2007: 15). In fiction, factual arguments are often an irrelevant consideration (Lamarque 2007; Huemer 2012). However, according to Rita Felski, literature also has epistemic functions, and the relation to knowledge is part of the pleasure of reading fiction. Literature can provide information about things such as human nature, actions, emotions, and also about more abstract concepts. But in general, fiction simply does not convey information in the same way as non-fiction (Felski 2008: 77–104).

As Kalle Puolakka (2022: 56–59) suggests, the knowledge provided by fiction can sometimes be thought of as being structured like propositions, in the same way as the knowledge in non-fiction. However, the knowledge content of fiction does not necessarily emerge from the surface level of the text, but is more implicitly present in the form of propositions that can be interpreted from the themes, symbolism, and narrative point of view of the work. For example, a novel can be interpreted as an argument in a debate about the human condition, society, or relationships with nature or the past. Puolakka (2022: 60–65) further stresses that not all fictional knowledge can be reached by factual claims, and in this case, it is rather a matter of experiential knowledge. Fiction can provide information about how something feels, make things perceptible, and help to articulate worldviews, social relations, and relationships with others (Felski 2008: 77–80; Puolakka 2022: 59). In such knowledge, experientiality and affectivity are important, as they also enable the pleasure of reading. The knowledge and learning offered by fiction does not happen suddenly, but gradually, based on the

questions raised by the book. For this reason, the experience provided by literature is often more elaborate than our actual experiences (Puolakka 2022: 60–65).

Although there are differences in the ways non-fiction and fiction produce knowledge, many of the narrative devices and cognitive mechanisms that guide the reading process are similar (Lehtonen 2023, 162). Fiction is constructed in relation to a large volume of propositional knowledge, and for example, historical novels are based on information about past events, customs, environment, social hierarchies and beliefs. In this case, propositional knowledge plays a role in the construction of the fictional world, giving an illusion of the past. Facts, however, are not the core of fictional knowledge, but rather the experiences offered by the work and the way in which the work restructures the reality it represents.

Similarly, in non-fiction, different rhetorical devices, narrative points of view, and writing styles are as just important as in fiction novels. Hayden White (1992) argues that narrative always implies fictionality, because narrative constructs meanings, creates causal relations and assigns roles to actors. This is particularly true in so-called narrative or creative non-fiction, where the focus is on the personal experience. Here, the reader is invited to share the depicted situation, and any moral, ethical or aesthetic values attached to it. The affective experience of reading can take precedence over facts in terms of informational value (Mäkelä & Karttunen 2020: 276). The experiential knowledge of non-fiction can be constructed by telling individual stories in a fiction-like way, by relying on a personal narrator's voice, and by favoring mimetic narrative strategies such as dialogue, focalization, and dramatic scenes (Hiidenmaa 2020: 37). Apart from fiction, non-fiction also structures reality, and connects individual events to broader thematic or ethical issues. Indeed, the historian Ivan Jablonka (2018: 207–210) has argued that what makes history writing literature is the serious search for meaning, where the aim to construct a synthesis of reality and bring the past to life.

***Niemi* and the discussion of Finnish history and Finnishness**

Niemi is anchored in a debate on national identities and the conditions under which one can talk about a phenomenon such as Finnish history. Both fiction and historiography have played an important role in the nation-building process in Finland since the early nineteenth century, and in order to identify as Finns, people needed a narrative of the past as a nation (Jalava,

Kinnunen & Sulkunen 2013: 11). As Mikko Lehtonen, Olli Löytty and Petri Ruuska (2015) have pointed out, the discussion of Finnishness and other national identities was long dominated by an image of nationalities as 'containers'. In this context, different features can be attributed to nationalities in an attempt to explain their people's customs, culture, and national characteristics. In current cultural studies research, Finnishness is approached more as a set of relations that has no single articulable base, and is constantly changing. Its formation in various discourses, rituals and practices is an interesting object of study (Lehtonen, Löytty, & Ruuska 2015: 17–20), and when understood in this way, Finnishness is retold in each period, and each image of Finnishness tells us a great deal about the values, political power relations and social conflicts of the time. *Niemi* is one of the attempts to tell this story from the perspective of our own time, yet at the same time, it popularizes many of the perspectives favored in contemporary critical historiography.

One of *Niemi's* central aims is to deconstruct the notion of Finland and other nation-states as natural categories, and to show the methodological nationalism inherent in this assumption. Methodological nationalism refers to an unreflective assumption of the self-evidence of nation-states that guides images related to language, ethnicity, and different borders (Amelina et al. 2012: 2; Olsson 2015: 44–45). The older historiography typically spoke of the past of the present Finnish regions as if Finland as a state had existed on some level before the nineteenth century, just waiting to be awakened (Lehtonen, Löytty, & Ruuska 2015: 106). The strongest counter argument to methodological nationalism in Juha Hurme's novel is the title of the work *Niemi* ("Headland" in English), and the perspective that follows. As Mervi Kantokorpi (2017) has pointed out, *Niemi* is about the history of a place, not a nation. In the novel, the pictured area between the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Bothnia is systematically referred to as "Headland", underlining the fact that Finland did not exist in the modern sense of the term before the national awakening of the nineteenth century. As the narrator of the work points out, around the eleventh century there was a gradually forming Swedish Empire, the eastern parts of which were located somewhere beyond Åland. Still further east was the mighty province of Novgorod with its spheres of influence.

Löyhästä Sveariketistä hitsautui vähin erin Sverige
niminen valtakunta, ja Etelä-Niemi oli sen merkittävän
itäinen, Ahvenanmaan takainen ja merentakainen osa,
Österlanden, latinaksi partes orientalis. Niemeä, ”
itämantuja”, käytettiin ensin monikossa, kun viitattiin

epämääräisiin ja erilaisiin seutuihin Pohjanlahden itäpuolella. 1300-luvun puolivälissä alettiin puhua yksikössä Itämaasta, Österlandetista (132).

From the loose constitution of Sveariket, the kingdom of Sverige was soon welded together, and the South Headland was its most important eastern and overseas part, Österlanden, in Latin partes orientalis. The Headlands, ‘the eastern lands’, was first used in the plural to refer to the vague and diverse regions east of the Gulf of Bothnia. In the middle of the fourteenth century, one began to speak in the singular of the Eastland, Österlandet (Translations of *Niemi*: Elina Arminen).

To the reader interested in history, *Niemi* makes visible how the national gaze has guided the conventional historical narrative. At the same time, the work enables a way of looking at the history of the region we now call Finland that allows us to break away from the myths of Finnishness, or at least to reflect on them. At this point, it is worth explaining that by the term “conventional historical narrative” I mean the narrative which *Niemi* disputes against and for which it presents alternatives. This narrative does not represent either the topical perspectives of contemporary Finnish historiography or cultural history. Rather, it is an often-repeated narrative of the past, unlocated in any particular text, and although it has been challenged many times, it still recognizable. It has been produced not only by academic historiography, but perhaps more importantly by a broader historical culture (Kinnunen, Jalava & Sulkunen 2013: 13-14). This story can be found, for example, in school literary histories and general introductions to Finnish history. Although *Niemi* refuses to call the area he describes Finland, the novel does not completely break away from the national narrative or the national gaze – in fact, this would be impossible, since the work is constructed in a dialogical relationship with the very texts that have been used to create the narrative of the national past. Furthermore, Hurme does not deny the nation-state as a highly influential conceptual category that guides our thinking. Rather, the work seeks to make visible the contingency of a process that, in retrospect, often seems like a coherent narrative. Although Hurme refuses to say Finland, the novel comments on the importance of history as a factor that is shaping national self-understanding.

In history writing, images of who and what shapes the history of an area and what is valuable about it are built up through a variety of solutions related to the materials used, the framing of the subject, and the narrative perspective that is taken (White 1992). *Niemi's* challenge to the conventional narrative of Finnish history is based on presenting Finnish history as part of European history, and understanding the history of natural sciences as part of cultural history. The narrative begins with a depiction of the Big Bang (9–13), which puts the past of the “Headland” into a cosmic perspective. To explain how *Niemi* was settled requires descriptions of the impact of the Ice Age on the human race in general (29–51). To describe the early stages of the Finnish written language requires a return to Macchiavelli and Copernicus (215). The wider perspective is justified by the statement: ‘All of this is the core history of the people living in the present state of Finland’ (21), and as such, there is nothing radical in the context of the twenty-first century about breaking the boundary between Finnish and general history. A national perspective carries the risk of making the events of the past appear more inherent than perhaps intended. However, Hurme’s dialogue between regional and international perspectives in *Niemi* concretizes the alternatives to national discourse.

In *Niemi*, the past is seen as a process of multiple actors and events, and the area depicted as a random intersection. The work depicts a diverse group of people with conflicting agendas. They represent a wide range of different religions, speak different languages, and through trade, wars, expeditions, study and curiosity, are part of a lively interaction.

Sekä Turussa että muissa Niemen
pikkuhansakaupungeissa solkattiin useilla kielillä.
Kaupunkien maallinen johto oli alasaksaa puhuvien
hansabisnesmiesten hallussa, jotka perheineen
tuottivat huomattavan osan taajamien väestöstä
organisoiden toimintaansa kiltojen, raatien ja
pormestarinvaalien keinoin. Suomen ja ruotsin lisäksi
kauppaa hierottiin tanskaksi, norjaksi, viroksi ja
venäjäksi. Ranskalaisia ja italialaisia merimiehiä ja
seikkailijoita piipahti satamassa (201).

Both in Turku and in the other small Hansa towns of
the Headland, there were several languages spoken.
The secular leadership of the towns was in the hands
of Low German-speaking Hansa businessmen who,

with their families, formed a substantial part of the population of the towns, organizing their activities by means of guilds, councils and mayoral elections. In addition to Finnish and Swedish, trade was conducted in Danish, Norwegian, Estonian and Russian. French and Italian sailors and adventurers visited the port.

The emphasis on heterogeneity deconstructs the notion of a unified culture, which is often mentioned in discourses on Finnishness. However, the issue of unity has always been quite relative (Lehtonen, Ruuska & Löytty 2015: 119–125). *Niemi* reveals how cultures are born from human activity, where many ideas and innovations arrive in Finland with people from elsewhere and change in encounters with local people. What is noteworthy, however, is that the novel primarily follows influences from the West, and the influence of Eastern culture (especially Russian culture) remains much less well known.

Also, an important single strategy that undermines monocultural images is the spelling of the names that appear in *Niemi*. For a long time, Finnish historiography had an assimilative tradition of Finnicizing the names of key figures such as kings, bishops, and warlords. The idea behind this was to improve readability, but at the same time the Finnicized names may have been associated with misconceptions about the Finnishness of their bearers. *Niemi* uses the original spellings of people's names, such as Lord Torkel Knutsson (Torkkeli Knuutinpoika), Bishop Magnus Särkilax (Maunu Särkilahti), and Bishop Hemming (Hemminki).

In addition to breaking away from methodological nationalism, another of *Niemi's* key goals is to challenge the narrative of history as written from the perspective of powerful social institutions. Traditionally, historiography has relied on written sources produced by, for example, the administration, the judiciary, the church, and the educational system. This has emphasized the perspectives and interests of high-ranking actors, and the knowledge of the past has served the interests of the institutions behind them. *Niemi* repeats the story of how the Finnish region became attached to Western culture through the spread of Christianity, the Reformation, the development of literacy, and the development of the school system (Vahtola 2003, 41–125; Keränen 2003, 127–179). However, the work seeks alternative meanings for these key events. In particular, fiction and folklore are used alongside more traditional sources, and play an important role in providing these alternative interpretations. Of course, contemporary micro-history research makes extensive use of memories, folklore and fiction, which can provide insights

into the emotional experiences of people in past eras (see Pihlainen 2001: 303). In this sense, *Niemi* follows the approaches of new historical research.

Regarding institutional structures, *Niemi* is most critical of Christianity, and especially of Lutheran Christianity. In Finland, the early story of the nation has been written by priests and scholars. As early developers of education, they also had a decisive influence on the development of the value systems that have shaped Finnish culture. The influence of Christianity and the Lutheran Reformation also appears prominently in *Niemi*, but in a negative sense. Notably, while the work associates some positive images with Catholicism in the Middle Ages, Lutheranism is presented as a culturally impoverishing movement, as the following excerpt shows:

Suomenkielisen kansanrunouden monituhatuotinen,
Niemen etelä- ja itäpuolelta alkanut elävä kulttuuri saa
kuoliniskunsa Agricolasta ankaroituvassa luterilaisessa
Österlandetissa. Pappien vainoama runokulttuuri
häädetään rintamailta, ja sen rippeet säilyvät vain
siellä, mihin kirkon kuokat, kitkimet ja rikkaruohomyrkyt
eivät yllä (245).

Keskiaikaiset kirkot koristeltiin värikkäin maalauksin,
joissa esiintyy kaiken muun ohella musiikkiin liittyviä
aiheita. Reformaation hapannaamat tuhosivat suuren
osan näistä teoksista valkoisella kalkkimaalilla (218).

The thousand-year-old living culture of folk poetry in the Finnish language which began in the south and east of the Headland, is struck dead in the Lutheran Österlandet, which is becoming increasingly strict in the wake of Agricola. The poetic culture, persecuted by the priests, is driven from the front lands, and its remnants survive only where the church's hoes, rakes, and weedkillers cannot reach.

Medieval churches were decorated with colorful paintings, including, among other things, musical themes. The Reformation mopes destroyed most of these works with whitewash.

In this extract, Lutheranism is not seen primarily as a means of raising the cultural life and educational level of the people, as seen in conventional interpretations of history, but more as a suppressor of creativity.

Niemi's narrative highlights non-institutional actors – especially women and women's experiential knowledge. The marginalized role of women in history has been a subject of criticism in Finnish history and literature research since the 1990s (see for example Nevala 1989). In *Niemi's* index of persons, women make up less than 7% of all names (Kantokorpi 2017), but nevertheless, the novel talks a lot about women's roles, experiences, and agency. The perspective of women in *Niemi* is largely constructed from folk poetry sources, and the choices of perspective that this brings with it. As the narrator says:

Naisen osuus on vahva kalevalamittaisessa
runoudessa. Niin kertakaikkisen vahva, että suurin osa
runoutta on epäilemättä naisten luomaa ja laulamaa
(96).

The female element is strong in Kalevala poetry. So
strong, in fact, that most of the poetry is undoubtedly
created and sung by women.

By using these materials, *Niemi* ties the female experience into the story of Finnishness, but at the same time, the work emphasizes themes from the private sphere of life, such as emotions, family, and sexuality.

Niemi's narrative uses alternative sources of history, and seeks to highlight possibilities in culture which the current Finnish region did not consciously begin to develop. In addition, the work picks out the elements that have already influenced the culture as unarticulated undercurrents. Outlining such alternative trajectories can be seen as a task specific to fiction rather than historiography (see De Groot 2016). But while *Niemi* polemicalizes conventional interpretations of history, it also reiterates many established understandings of the shaping of Finland. For example, the plot of the work is guided by a teleological understanding of Finnish history as a fixation on Western cultural influences for good and bad.

From propositional knowledge to carnivalized knowledge

Niemi builds on previous propositional knowledge of history to negotiate the meanings of Finnishness. A key to the knowledge *Niemi* offers could be Hurme's characterization of the work as an "epic poem built on facts". Just as epics are constructed from oral folklore, *Niemi* is constructed from previous historical interpretations and documentary material. The work provides new perspectives on previous historical interpretations, but these are not constructed through rational arguments as is done in a scientific text or non-fiction work. Rather, the novel uses narrative devices to create a contradiction in how the reader should relate to what is presented as fact. This provides part of the pleasure of reading. *Niemi* exploits the potential of fiction to carnivalize the historical narrative in ways that Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) has argued are characteristic of dialogic texts. In this, the narrator of the work plays a significant role, engaging in a dialogue with the literary material while producing his own provocative interpretation of history.

According to Bakhtin, the dialogue of the novel is based on the idea that it places different voices from different social contexts in the same space. Different styles and registers are not only the means of representation but also the objects of representation. For Bakhtin, the dialogue that characterizes novel can be egalitarian, because different ideologies only acquire their meaning in dialogue, where they take shape in relation to each other (Bakhtin 1981, 259–275). The dialogue between styles and genres also allows for carnivalesque laughter. Parody, for example, is profaning and it often contests the positions of power (Bakhtin 1981, 312).

Although *Niemi* is built on previous interpretations of history, it rarely refers to any particular source works, and history is a form of communal, overlapping knowledge rather than a product of individual studies. The work does not include bibliography, which is of course keeping with the old tradition of the novel. But instead, *Niemi* has an extensive index of historical persons which is typical for history research. As Pirjo Hiidenmaa (2020: 46–47) has pointed out, the relationship with real world in both fictive and non-fictive literature is a complex web in which the reader processes the informational material through various paratexts and evaluates its meaning. What distinguishes a non-fiction novel such as *Niemi* from conventional historiography is not so much what is true and what is not. More important is what referential knowledge based on propositional claims is used for. This is illustrated by the following passage from the history of Martin Luther and the Reformation:

Myös fantasian alalla tapahtui. Saksalainen munkki Martin Luther teki radikaalin uudelleenarvion todellisuuden luonteesta ja ihmisen ja jumalan suhteesta ja julkaisi sen vuonna 1571. Luther protestoi paavikulttia vastaan ja painotti jokaisen syntisen henkilökohtaista jumalasuhdetta. Niinpä pyhät tekstit oli käännettävä kansankielelle. Ahkera ja taitava Luther käytti hyväkseen kirjapainotekniikkaa levittäessään tehokkaasti synkkää ilosanomaansa, jota kutsutaan reformaatioksi tai uskonpuhdistukseksi. --

Oli Lutherilla kieltämättä hauskat ja inhimilliset puolensa. Hän oli kova ottamaan kaljaa ja rakasti rasvaista ruokaa. Lisäksi tämä kielinero viljeli saarnoissaan ja etenkin humalaisissa pöytäpuheissaan meheviä kansanviisauksia, sananlaskuja ja sutkauksia. Sana 'furz' eli pieru kuuluu olleen hänen erityinen suosikkinsa (222–223).

It also happened in the field of fantasy. The German monk Martin Luther made a radical reassessment of the nature of reality and the relationship between man and God, and published it in 1571. Luther protested against the papal cult and stressed the personal relationship of every sinner with God. Thus, the sacred texts had to be translated into the vernacular. The hard-working and skillful Luther used printing techniques to effectively spread his dark gospel, known as the Reformation. --

I must admit, Luther also did have a funny and human side. He was a hard drinker and loved greasy food. In addition, this linguistic genius cultivated juicy proverbs and quips in his sermons, and especially in his drunken table-talk. The word "furz" or 'fart' is said to have been a particular favorite of his.

Much of the argumentation is based on propositional claims, such as "Luther protested against the papal cult", and "used printing techniques". The veracity of these claims has become familiar from textbooks on religion and

history and can be verified from previous sources, and the grotesque anecdotes relating to the body of a churchman are part of the common knowledge of Luther (see Hendrix 2015).

However, these fragments of information are not the most essential content of the work, nor are simple propositions the most important form of communication. Such facts are references to a supposedly familiar narrative of the Reformation. If the fragments are viewed as a statement about the world, the most relevant statement summarizing the novel's knowledge content is probably that "it also happened in fantasy". In particular, it conveys an argument about religious narratives being comparable to fantasy, and this puts the claims discussed above in a new light. By equating religion with fantasy, the argument about whether or not the relationship with God is personal becomes irrelevant. According to Bakhtin (1984, 308–312), the anecdotes of grotesque corporeality are typical carnivalesque devices through which religious authorities have been profaned and ridiculed. In *Niemi*, this kind of anecdotes also underline the image of the triviality of religious disputes, and to understand the most essential information in the novel requires an active re-structuring of the detailed facts, linking them to previous knowledge, and interpreting them in relation to the work as a whole. In this context, rather than relying on factual statements, the knowledge *Niemi* provides is a dialogue into which the narrator leads the reader.

On the surface, *Niemi* could even be considered as a monologue. The work is dominated by the authoritative voice of the narrator, who chooses the perspective, interprets and explains, and evaluates the historical figures and their actions. The strong presence of the narrator is often thought to be a characteristic of fictional narrative. However, it need not imply a monologue in either fiction or non-fiction work. The tangible presence of the narrator can also imply reflexivity, which gives the reader room as an interpreter (Hiidenmaa 2020: 38–39; Bech-Karlsen 2013). *Niemi*'s narrator gives space to the voices from history, and he quotes from fiction, folklore, letters and other documents, and puts them into discussion with each other. Quotations are polyphonic, in that they have an evidential power that builds authenticity and a sense of originality, while also revealing values and attitudes alien to people of our time (Bakhtin 1981, 263; 275). The narrator processes his interpretations by merging different perspectives. He sometimes engages with his narrative and sometimes distances himself from it, thus guiding his presentation.

The dialogic characteristic of *Niemi* is evident, for example, in an extract that represents one of the early stages of the Finnish written language. Texts of the past speak in their own voice, but the narrator uses the power of an

expert by making judgements and parallels. He quotes the preface to Mikael Agricola's *Abckiria* (1543), the first Finnish-language religious textbook, that also teaches the basics of reading and writing.³ As the narrator states: "This is where it all started. The first words of the *Abckiria* launched Finnish-language printed literature" (320). In the same chapter, the narrator juxtaposes the *Abckiria* with Rabelais's *Pantagruel* (one of the greatest classics of the Renaissance) and domestic folk poetry. The narrator comments on his findings on the differences between the texts as follows:

Verratkaamme tätä esipuhetta erään toisen merkittävän humoristin, anteeksi humanistin Agricolan aikalaisen Francois Rabelais'n (n. 1494–1553) Pantagruel-teoksen esipuheen finaaliin, julkaistu 1533 eli 10 vuotta Agricolaa aikaisemmin. --Samalla kun syystä hurraamme Agricolalle, meidän on vaikkapa Rabelais'n kautta muistettava kuinka kaukana perässä me täällä Pohjantähden alla silloinkin rämmimme (230–231).

Let us compare this foreword with the finale of the foreword to *Pantagruel* by another great humorist, sorry, humanist, Agricola's contemporary Francois Rabelais (c. 1494–1553), published in 1533, 10 years before Agricola. --While we cheer Agricola for good reason, we must remember, for example through Rabelais, how far behind we were then, here under the North Star.

Although *Niemī's* narrator recognizes the merits of Agricola's work, the comparison is still harsh for the early translator and textbook writer: "Rabelais tuntuu olevan ja onkin etäisyyksien päässä Mikael Olavinpojan ajattelumaailmasta, mutta löydämme hänelle vaivattomasti hengen ja ruumiinheimolaisia Niemen muiden runoilijoiden parista" (232) ["Rabelais seems to be and remains at a distance from the world of Mikael Olavinpoika's thought, but we can easily find for him a kindred spirit and a

³ Mikael Agricola (1510–1557) was the Bishop of Turku, whose translation of the Bible and several other spiritual texts laid the foundation for the written Finnish language.

kindred body among Headland's other poets"]. The narrator then quotes a selection of old fondness spells and love poems, among which is the following poem in praise of female sexuality: "Ei ole pillu pahoista tehty eikä aivan arvosista: tehty kuusta, tehty voista, silkasta sian lihasta, emä reikä Enkelistä, kieli Kiesuksen lihasta" (232). [The cunt is not made of anything evil, nor is it made of anything worthy: [it is] made of the moon, made of butter, made of pure pork, the hole is from an angel, the tongue [clitoris] of the flesh of the Christ.]

Comparing the pioneering work of Finnish-language to two texts representing joyful and erotic folk culture may seem unfair. However, the comparison of texts is a re-contextualization of early institutional literature such as Agricola's works and folklore. The narrator disconnects Agricola from his conventional interpretive context, the early stages of Finnish civilization and the development of the written Finnish language, and re-connects them to European literature and folklore. Folk poetry, on the other hand, is examined as art. This example challenges us to consider whether structures such as the church and the school system that have usually been interpreted as prerequisites for Finnish literature, have in fact been holding back its development. It seems that the spaces in which joy, creativity and intelligence have been allowed to emerge are what the narrator is looking for in grotesque folk culture, and the work also supports this view by way of irony: Both Rabelais and Agricola are called 'humorists', but as a humorist, Agricola is allowed to represent a mainly unintentional comedy.

The dialogue between past and present

As part of a broad historical culture, literature plays a key role in bridging the past and present. It can help the reader imagine past lives, discover connections between past human experiences and one's own life, and recognize traces of the past in the present (Jalava, Kinnunen & Sulkunen 2013: 9). In Hurme's *Niemi*, the narrator also plays a central role as a bridge builder between the past and the present, involving surprising and even disturbing collisions between different time periods. This challenges the reader to reflect on their relationship with the past and the narratives that relate to it.

Niemi's narrative is characterized by rapid temporal displacements from one level of time to another, and by analogies between events that take place in different periods. Temporal displacements also emphasize the narrator's power to control his own narrative (Hiidenmaa 2020: 37–38). For

example, when the narrator is talking about the competition between scientific and religious worldviews in the 1700s at the University of Turku, he harshly criticizes the scholars of the time for their reluctance to embrace new ideas. Suddenly, he jumps for a moment to the beginning of the twentieth century and impatiently states:

Koska meillä ei ole erityisen kiire enää yhtään minnekään eikä etenkään 1700-luvun puolivälin Turkuun, kerrotaan vielä yhdestä Albert Einsteinin kiinnostavasta suhteesta niemeläiseen yhteiskuntaan (396).

Since we are in no particular hurry to go anywhere now, and especially not to mid-seventeenth-century Turku, let us tell you about one more interesting relationship Albert Einstein had with the society of the Headland.

The narrator recognizes the same reluctance that prevented early scholars from adopting a solar-centric worldview also present in the early twentieth century when Finnish scientists found it difficult to accept Einstein's theory of relativity. This example underlines the cautious attitude of representatives of the established institutions towards anything new at different times. In *Niemi's* narrative, the events and phenomena of the past are often compared with those we are used to seeing as contemporary cultural phenomena. For example, the narrator draws a parallel between the Kalevala-meter folk poetry⁴ and the playing of computer games:

Runonlaulussa on jotain tutun oloista interaktiivisen systeemin tietokonepelaajalle. Kaikissa runon säkeissä käytettiin samaa runomittaa ja kaikki sävelmät ja sävelmätyypit olivat vaihdannaisia, niin että mikä tahansa runosäe voitiin vetäistä millä tahansa sävelmäsäkeellä tai toistappäin. Tästä syntyy peli,

⁴ Kalevala-meter is a poetic form used in the old Balto-Finnic oral folk poetry, and in Kalevala, the Finnish national epic (see Kallio & Sarv 2017).

josta voi pelata loputtomia, improvisoituja kehitelmiä
(85).

There is something familiar in the poem for the computer player of an interactive system. All of verses of the poem used the same poetic meter, and all notes and note types were interchangeable, so that any verse of the poem could be drawn in any note or repeated in any key. This creates a game that can be played with endless improvised elaborations.

The narrator uses the game metaphor to illustrate the similarities between the two rule-based genres. By doing this, he blurs the distinction between contemporary culture which is often seen as digitalized, commercial and spectacular, and the time of the epic poetry.

The dialogue between past and present is also present in *Niemi* on a linguistic level. The narrator filters the events and people he depicts through current colloquial language, and even through concepts used to describe the modern social system. He terms sixth-century Turku as “vauhdikas menomesta” (99, “a wild place to party”), and claims that “Opintotukijärjestelmää alettiin kehittää jo keskiajalla” (the system of student grants began to be developed as early as the Middle Ages).⁵ The emotional reactions to Birgitta Birgersdottir and King Magnus Eriksson’s failed military expedition to Novgorod are described as follows:

Magnus lähti atakkiin 1348, mutta tyhmät venäläiset
eivät arvostaneet Jeesuksen ja Birgitan
sotasuunnitelmaa, vaan liiskasivat ruotsalaisjoukot.
Myös musta surma pilasi hyvän sodan kun se iski
molempiin osapuoliin. Magnuksen ja Birgitan välit
menivät poikki; Birgitan mielestä Magnus ei ollut
osannut noudattaa ohjeita ja kuninkaan mielestä
Birgitan ohjeet olivat perseestä (150).

⁵ The Financial aid for students, including a study grant and a student loan guaranteed by the state, is a way for the Finnish welfare society to ensure that young people have access to post-compulsory education. The actual development of the state system for financial student aid began in the late 1960s (Ministry of Education and Culture 2024).

Magnus attacked in 1348, but the stupid Russians did not appreciate Jesus and Birgitta's war plan, and squashed the Swedish troops. The Black Death also ruined a good war when it hit both sides. Magnus and Birgitta broke up; Birgitta thought Magnus had failed to follow instructions and the king thought Birgitta's instructions were bullshit.

Linguistic expressions include ways of viewing the world from the perspective of different periods and social groups, but their collision creates a parodic effect (Bakhtin 1981). *Niemi* depicts the experience of God's guidance in a war situation (which is characteristic of the medieval world view) in a profane way as 'the war plan of Birgitta and Jesus'. In this way, the image of divine instructions for war becomes somewhat banal. Magnus' royal anguish, on the other hand, takes on a sub-stylistic expression. Overall, the narrative deprives the figures of the past the image of dignity. But at the same time, it creates a picture of the identity of people's emotional reactions, regardless of time and social status.

According to Jeremy De Groot (2016, 14–15, 20), writing about the past is a balancing act between domesticity and alienation. Non-fiction, and perhaps also fiction, must offer new and exciting knowledge about the past, but it must be understandable and emotionally appealing from the perspective of the contemporary reader. In *Niemi*, language carries with it a contemporary understanding of how society is organised and how people interact with each other. The analogy of linguistic choices projects contemporary assumptions about humanity onto the past, and creates a comic distance from the subject. This builds an affective relationship with history. When the narrator links emotions, such as ambition, envy, joy, and frustration, to the actions of people from the past, he opens the reader's own fascination and frustration with the incidents of the past. *Niemi* allows the reader to feel the history, not only to learn about it.

Conclusion

Juha Hurme's *Niemi* is part of the Finnish historical culture of the globalization era. It discusses Finnishness with an awareness of the long national traditions of Finnish literature and historiography, reflects on it, and

seeks alternatives or at least alternative ways of interpreting it. As with broad historical culture in general, *Niemi* not only builds a bridge to the past, but it also anchors itself in the value debates of its own time and in visions of the future. This makes it political in the same sense as the texts on which and from which it is built.

The relationship with the value debates of our time is particularly evident in the choices made in the novel about how to know the past. These include an aim to break away from methodological nationalism and the image of Finnishness as something that naturally exists. This choice manifests itself most strongly in the title of the novel – *Niemi*. The title concretizes the fact that Finland as a nation did not exist before it was narrativized as such, and deconstructs the image of a unified history of the region. In *Niemi*, the conventional national narrative is seen as being shaped especially by the church and its closely linked school system. A counter-narrative is sought by reading folk poetry, and in particular, the experiences and everyday lives and emotions of women are highlighted. It can be argued that *Niemi* is looking to propagate a more open and multicultural national identity, and is searching for a Finnishness that is not tied to ethnicity and certainly not to nationalism, but more to a Western cultural heritage.

Niemi's knowledge strategies are not the tools of non-fiction, but those of fiction. They are based on dialogue and a carnivalization of former knowledge. The work is built on a huge amount of documentary material and propositional knowledge generated by research, but this knowledge is not the core of the work. The work's subtext is a kind of conventionalized story of national history, unplaced in any single work, which is taken up for re-evaluation. The narrator enters into a dialogue with the historical documents, and gives the characters of the past roles in which they are rarely placed. In this way, the narrator challenges the reader to reflect on the nature of history. The intellectual contribution of the work lies above all in its reflexivity and in the deconstruction and retelling of historical narratives. The novel highlights alternative trajectories and disrupts the prestige that historiography has constructed for its great men. However, it does this more through experiential knowledge than through the claims and propositions that the narrator throws at the reader.

Juha Hurme is a part of a continuum of Finnish authors who write their own version of Finnish history, and consciously present alternatives to academic interpretations of history. When Hurme chooses representation modes that switch between fiction and non-fiction, he shows the borders of these genres to be porous. As a consequence, the work not only expands the notion of what historical knowledge can be and who can produce it – it also expands the notion of the ways in which fiction can be used and seen.

Historical fiction can be more than just a historical novel. Hurme's own formulation of *Niemi* as an "epic poem built on facts" sums up something essential about the nature of the work. In the past, poetic epics were proposals for the history of peoples and explanations of the origin of life phenomena. In the same way, *Niemi* is a proposal for history. But like the epics, it is constructed from the elements of previous narratives, in this case history.

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