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The eclipse, short circuit and hunt. Thought-images of the remembering the uncovered past

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Ene Mihkelson Society

Estonian writer and thinker Ene Mihkelson (1944–2017) has said that if one buries what has happened before and does not reflect on it, the buried past might start secretly moving itself and manipulating the person: “I believe that if a person wants to be the master of their own individual life, they have to review their dark chambers. Not because of the principle, but for freedom and self-respect. In order to be happy, one must be awake.”

Addressing the buried past in literature can take different forms. The aim of this talk is to open up and reflect on the variety of thought-images related to the uncovered past. Starting with Walter Benjamin’s archeology metaphors from “Excavating and remembering” and his angel of history from “Theses on the Philosophy of History” the talk will continue looking at other literary examples of thought-images for remembering. Accordingly, Christa Wolf’s elaborations on Benjamin’s angel of history and the image of falling through the layers of past will be discussed. Also, the paper will analyze Georgi Gospodinov’s image of a Minotaur and Ene Mihkelson’s image of Ahasver as metaphors for the one who remembers. Ene Mihkelson has also compared the one who remembers with the work of a paleontologist and a hunter. Remembering in her novels is often a result of ‘short circuit’.

After reflecting on the thought-images of remembering the talk will elaborate on the question of being ‘awake’, i.e. on being aware of the cruelties and injustice of the past and what kind of impact does it have on an individual, the one who remembers. This kind of ‘awareness’ has Ene Mihkelson described in different novels differently: in “Plague Grave” (2007) she draws on the image of eclipse, in “The Dream of Ahasver” (2001) she uses the figure of the eternal Jew Ahasver and in “The Burden of the Name” (1994) it is the image of being crucified.

Aija Sakova defended her doctoral thesis in German and Estonian literature at the University of Tartu in 2014. She has worked as a Senior Researcher at the Estonian Cultural History Archives of Estonian Literary Museum. Her research on the poetic of remembrance and on moral witnessing in the novels of German writer Christa Wolf and Estonian author Ene Mihkelson was published by V&R unipress Göttingen in 2016 (“Excavation and Remembering”) and by Tartu University Press in 2020 (“Poetics of Remembrance”). Her other books address the topics of pain and remembering (“Pain, Memory, Literature”, 2017) and the courage of living (“The Courage of Living. Letters to Kābi”, 2019).





Writing the multispecies city

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Which kind of cityscape is good for birds? Birds need water, shade, bushes, trees, and grasslands for food. They look for places to rest and prefer interesting architecture that enables them to build nests. They do not like busy traffic, as they must raise their voices to be heard, resulting in shorter birdsong in cities. Altogether, birds' needs are quite similar to what we desire for a liveable city (Kasima 2023). Therefore, we might learn from birds how to build better cities.

With the emergence of eco-literature addressing the climate crisis, the multispecies city has vividly appeared in poetry and prose. Literature is being recognized as a mode of coming to terms with the reality of this “time of emergency” (Cresswell 2022), and literary research can

help envision the cities of the future (Ameel 2021). In Estonian poetry, there are outstanding contemporary examples that survey the urban environment. My talk will be based on 1) research conducted in the Horizon 2020 project EnviroCitizen, and 2) a chapter written together with Ene-Reet Soovik, titled "Writing the Multispecies City: Urban Birds and Urban Poetry in the Era of Environmental Crisis" (2024).

We observed the emergence of the city as a multispecies space in the works of Estonian poets Jaan Kaplinski (1941–2021) and Maarja Pärtna (b. 1986). Both poets pay special attention to environmental concerns relevant to their respective generations. Their work reveals an avid interest in birdwatching, an activity that not only raises awareness of and respect for the non-human cohabitants of our living spaces but also enhances sensory engagement with the environment. Providing first an introduction to the Estonian eco-literature, I will focus on the prose poems of Maarja Pärtna, some of which have also been translated into Lithuanian.

Elle-Mari Talivee (b. 1974) defended her doctoral thesis in Estonian literature at Tallinn University in 2017. She is currently Senior Researcher of the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences and Research Fellow at Tallinn University. Elle-Mari Talivee's primary research areas have been literary urban studies, the reflections of environmental history, including industrial landscapes and Estonian mining areas in fiction, as well as literary criticism and the translation of Estonian literature into foreign languages under the auspices of the Estonian Literature Information Centre. In the recent years, she has been able to combine hobby and science, i.e. amateur bird watching and the study of the history of Estonian ornithology and amateur /citizen science.