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How to Become an Author: The Poet Isa Asp and Her Childhood Fascination with Writing for Magazines

Kaip tapti autore: poetė Isa Asp ir jos vaikystės susižavėjimas
rašymu žurnalams Summary Santrauka.

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Abstract: In this article the author explores the early development of the identity as a writer of a Finnish-speaking poet Lovisa (or Isa) Asp (1853–1872). She wrote her lyrics in the Finnish language in the 1870s, and she is regarded as the first 19th-century female Finnish poet (whose works were published in Finnish). She began writing poetry (initially in Swedish) as a teenager and started her literary career as a contributor to children's magazines. Asp began her studies at the Teacher Training College in Jyväskylä in autumn 1871 with the aim of working as an elementary school teacher, but she also dreamt of becoming an established writer someday. Unfortunately, her early death meant that most of her poetry remained unpublished until the 21st century.

The author investigates what kind of literature Asp read and why she was able to read extensively as a child in the remote Finnish-speaking countryside at a time when Finnish-language literature for children was scarce and still only nascent and being developed for nationalistic reasons; in those decades, most of the books and publications were still written in Swedish. The author analyses in particular the gendered experiences of reading (and writing) in the life of a young girl and woman from the countryside, because in those days most of the authors were men living in towns. A special focus of the article is on the texts that she wrote and edited for children's magazines. The author studies her autobiographical sources using a biographical method and considers what kind of literature and libraries inspired her career as an early female poet.

National poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg and poet and historian Zacharias Topelius, the major Fennoman authors, were the literary models for the young Isa Asp. Their works inspired her to write and to aspire for a career as a poet and author, an occupation that was then still rare for a woman. Writing for children's magazines was a crucial stage in her career, and her identity as a writer was strengthened by the opportunity to have her poems and short tales published. Also, writing for these handwritten as well as published magazines made her dreams visible and encouraged her to pursue them with effort. All this shows that her development as a writer was a deliberate, goal-oriented process. The publication of her poems and obtaining the community's approval of them were important for the young poet. The encouragement to pursue a career in writing that Isa with her literary gifts received as a child from her immediate surroundings helped her to achieve her dreams, which in the end turned out not to be impossible to realise.

Keywords: Isa Asp, biographical method, children's magazines, children's reading, gender, identity as a writer, multilingualism, poets, professions, Johan Ludvig Runeberg, writing, Zacharias Topelius.

Summary: Šiame straipsnyje autorė nagrinėja ankstyvą suomių kalba kalbančios poetės Lovisos (arba Isos) Asp (1853–1872) rašytojos tapatybės raidą. XIX a. 8-ajame dešimtmetyje ji kūrė dainų tekstus suomių kalba ir yra laikoma pirmąja suomių poete moterimi (kurios darbai buvo išleisti). Poeziją (iš pradžių švedų kalba) ji ėmė rašyti paauglystėje, o savo literatūrinę karjerą pradėjo būdama vaikų žurnalų bendradarbe. Siekdama tapti pradinį klasių mokytoja, 1871 m. rudenį Asp pradėjo studijuoti

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Juveskiulės mokytojų kolegijoje, tačiau ji taip pat svajojo kada nors tapti žinoma autore. Deja, dėl ankstyvos poetės mirties didžioji jos poezijos dalis buvo išleista tik XXI a. Straipsnyje tyrinėjama, kokią literatūrą ji skaitė ir kodėl vaikystėje ji gebėjo skaityti ekstensyviai atokiame suomių kalba kalbančiame kaime tuo metu, kai vaikams skirtos literatūros suomių kalba buvo nedaug, ji buvo tik beatsirandanti ir buvo kuriama dėl nacionalistinių priežasčių; tais dešimtmečiais dauguma knygų ir leidinių vis dar buvo rašoma švedų kalba. Analizuodama autorę ypatingą dėmesį skiria skaitymo (ir rašymo) patirčiai lyčių požiūriu jaunos mergaitės ir moters iš kaimo gyvenime, nes tais laikais dauguma autorių buvo miestuose gyvenantys vyrai. Ypač daug dėmesio skiriama tekstams, kuriuos ji parašė ir redagavo vaikams skirtiems žurnalams. Autorė tiria jos autobiografinius šaltinius pasitelkdama biografinį metodą ir analizuoja, kokia literatūra ir bibliotekos įkvėpė ją tapti jaunąja poete.

Nacionalinis poetas Johanas Liudvikas Runebergas ir poetas bei istorikas Zacharias Topelius, pagrindiniai fenomenų judėjimo pradininkai, buvo jaunosios Isos Asp literatūriniai modeliai. Jų darbai įkvėpė ją rašyti ir siekti poetės ir autorės karjeros – užsiėmimo, kuris anuomet dar buvo retas tarp moterų. Rašymas vaikų žurnalams buvo lemiamas jos karjeros etapas, o jos rašytojos tapatybę sustiprino jai pasiūlyta galimybė išleisti savo eilėraščius ir apsakymus. Be to, kuriant šioms ranka rašytiems bei spausdinamiems žurnalams, jos svajonės tapo matomos bei paskatino tęsti savo pastangas. Visa tai rodo, kad jos kaip rašytojos augimas buvo iš anksto apgalvotas, į tikslą orientuotas procesas. Jaunajai poetei buvo svarbu publikuoti savo eilėraščius ir sulaukti bendruomenės pritarimo. Skatinimas siekti poetės karjeros bei literatūrinis talentas, su kuriais Isa susidūrė vaikystėje savo artimiausioje aplinkoje, padėjo jai sėkmingai įgyvendinti svajones.

Keywords: Isa Asp, biografinis metodas, vaikų žurnalai, vaikų skaitymas, lytis, rašytojo tapatybė, daugiakalbystė, poetai, profesijos, Johanas Liudvikas Runebergas, rašymas, Zacharias Topelius.

Analysing a nineteenth century female poet's identity as a writer

In this article, I study the early development of the identity as a writer of a Finnish-speaking poet, Lovisa (or Isa) Asp (1853–1872) ¹. She wrote her lyrics in the Finnish language in the 1870s, and she is regarded as the first female Finnish poet of the 19th century (whose works were published in Finnish). She began writing poetry (initially in Swedish) as a teenager and started her literary career by writing for children's magazines. Asp began her studies at the Teacher Training College in Jyväskylä in autumn 1871 with the aim of working as an elementary school teacher, but she also dreamt of becoming an established author someday. Unfortunately, her early death meant that most of her poetry remained unpublished until the 21st century ².

First, I explore the libraries and other reading opportunities that were available to Asp during her childhood. I investigate what kind of literature she read and why she was able to read extensively as a child in the remote Finnish-speaking countryside at a time when Finnish-language literature for children was scarce, still only nascent and being developed for nationalistic reasons: in those decades most of the books and publications were still written in Swedish. I study what kind of publications in what languages were available in the libraries she used. I analyse in particular the gendered experiences of reading (and writing) in the life of a young girl and woman from the countryside, because in

those days most of the authors were men living in towns. I study her autobiographical sources using a biographical method and consider what kind of literature and libraries inspired her career as an early female poet.

Secondly, I consider how her identity as a writer was influenced by these reading opportunities, and also by her early experiences of writing for her readers and publishing her texts. My special focus is on the texts that she wrote and edited for children's unpublished and handwritten magazines in her early youth in the 1860s. Writing those texts gave her a chance to practise being a professional writer, to edit of a handwritten magazine, and to replicate the real processes of publishing.

The identity of a writer, like identities generally,³ is formed through the communal activity of the writer: his or her relationship with other people such as readers and fellow writers⁴. The identity of a young person in particular is often still developing, and in precisely the same way a novice writer is still building his or her identity on the basis of the works he or she produces. A central and visible factor in a writer's identity is his or her literary production, the publication of new works – in other words, making them available to readers in some way or another. Only when their texts are published can writers feel themselves to be “real” writers and thereby acquire the status of a writer in their community and connect with their readers.

A writer's professional identity is constructed and changes over time through writing (and reading) as he or she matures both as a person and as a wielder of language⁵. The identity of a writer can be examined from the point of view of a situation such as a serious illness that has influenced his or her life in a significant way⁶. Every writer writes in an individual way, and a personal style is articulated through his or her writing. The language a person speaks, writes in and expresses him- or herself in is an important element in his or her identity⁷.. The individual traits of writers' identities merge with their social identities, i.e. their sense of being a part of (or excluded from) their immediate environment.

Because of her early death, Asp's identity as a writer never had time to develop fully, but more important from the point of view of this study are the factors that influenced the birth and early development of her identity. Asp's personal identity and her identity as a writer were influenced both by her young age and crucially by her bilingualism. Asp's mother tongue was Finnish, but when she was a child Swedish had a stronger position as a language in schools that led to further education. It is true that this situation was changing sharply just at the turn of the 1850s and 1860s, when the position of Finnish as the language used particularly in popular and elementary education and also in administration was becoming stronger.⁸ Thus the change from one language to another was a crucial step that framed her public career as a poet.

In this examination, I approach Asp's identity as a writer as a qualitative case. A microhistorical approach enables a more profound analysis of a previously little studied subject.⁹ The literary identities of multilingual Finnish-speaking female writers working in the 1860s and 1870s have

received scant attention from scholars for a natural reason: in that period there were very few of them. Generally, there has been little research on the experiences of young Finnish lower-class women from the countryside who sought careers and a professional identity of their own at that time.

Some of the handwritten works produced for children's magazines by Asp in her younger days have survived in a collection of her handwritten manuscripts,¹⁰ although most likely there were more of them originally. Moreover, individual pieces of information about her handwritten texts have been preserved in biographical research literature. I study these sources using a biographical method¹¹ and consider what kind of literature inspired her career as an early female poet and how she engaged in writing (professionally) from her early years on.

In examining the course of Asp's life, I employ a biographical approach, combining this among other things with the study of the history of mentalities. A biographical method is needed in the analysis of writers' identities, because a writer's personality cannot be distinguished from the entirety that is connected with his or her professional conception of him- or herself. The biographical method makes it possible to analyze the working methods of the writer in relation to the different stages in her life and to elucidate what kind of significance her experiences of life had on her thinking and her mental and professional development.

The choice of a biographical approach also involves the question of whose story deserves to be told using a historiographical methodology. In the 1870s, women and in particular young female writers were still just beginning to break into the Finnish literary field (and to write under their own names). Previous biographical studies of Asp have concentrated more on presenting a chronological and narrative description of her life as a nationally important writer and stressed the tragic nature of her early death. This applies particularly to Helmi Setälä's (Krohn) early biography and also to Hyytinen's 1986 work. A small selection containing a few of her poems was published in connection with both of these works. In the early 21st century, Toivo Hyyryläinen re-aroused interest in Asp's life, particularly through his translation of her poems into Finnish. The contribution of my article to this biographical research lies in the fact that it explores more deeply the significance of her childhood experiences in her development as a writer. Asp's life has not previously been studied as an example of the professional development of a female writer in the nineteenth century. Often the focus has been on the exceptional nature of a career as a writer for a woman and the possible obstacles involved in it. With regard to young female authors, less attention has been paid to analyze more profoundly the experiences that motivated them to write and led them in their young days to take up a career as professional writers.

Magazines intended for maturing teenage girls in the late nineteenth century were generally published in printed format.¹² The early history of Finnish printed magazines for children and young persons has been studied and is well known.¹³ On the other hand, research on handwritten

children's magazines in Finland in the nineteenth century has been quite scarce. Researchers in other countries have examined, for instance, handwritten texts sent to the front in the exceptional circumstances of wartime,¹⁴ nineteenth-century handwritten school magazines¹⁵ and handwritten newspapers promoting the struggle for independence and political rights in the late nineteenth century.¹⁶

In Finland, too, the handwritten texts of student societies, popular movements and workers' associations have been studied.¹⁷ The texts of these organizations were written by young adults or teenagers, but the handwritten magazines produced for early teenagers in the 1860s have been less studied and often ignored. Similar handwritten pamphlets or newspapers were composed in upper-class Finnish families in the late nineteenth century, and the children of the family in their early teens sometimes participated in this activity. Among these families that cherished literary culture and the Finnish language were the Järnefelts and the Krohns from Helsinki, for whom Finnish was also the language spoken at home by the children, unlike in most other (mainly Swedish-speaking) families of a similar social rank at that time. The future wife of Jean Sibelius, Aino Järnefelt, wrote pieces for family compilations when she was young. One of the Krohn sisters, Helmi, wrote for the published children's magazines (as did the mother of the family). Her younger sister Aino achieved later an international reputation as a writer under her married name Aino Kallas.¹⁸ The young Isa Asp wrote for magazines written by hand and edited by the girls themselves, which were comparable to the family compilations that were read within these small circles.

Reading, writing and libraries in the world of the young Isa Asp

The period 1867–1868 in Finland is known as “the Famine Years”, when as a result of a momentary cooling down of the climate there were several years of crop failure followed by famine. About one tenth of the population of Finland perished from starvation or ensuing epidemics.

¹⁹ At Christmas 1867, Isa Asp received a welcome gift which, despite the hard times, brought the 14-year-old girl pleasure and entertainment throughout the following year. Opening the gift wrapping revealed a Swedish-language magazine for children *Trollsländan* [The Dragonfly].

²⁰ It is not known who Isa received the gift from, but it inspired her tremendously as a writer. There was not much new reading to be had in the countryside, particularly in Finnish, and libraries for the common people had not yet been established in all parishes, although in the areas where Asp lived as a child, Utajävi and Suomussalmi in central northern Finland, such libraries had already been established in the 1850s.²¹ However, it is not known whether Asp borrowed books from them as a child.

In the beginning of the 1870s, when Isa Asp started her studies in the Jyväskylä, approximately half of the inhabitants of the largest towns in Finland had both reading and writing skills, but in the countryside the ability to write was considerably less common than in urban areas. In rural Finland, the Swedish-speaking population had better writing skills than Finnish-speakers, and men could write more often than women. Also people living in the coastal areas and rural southern Finland tended to have better writing skills than those in inland Finland. In 1880, still only 12.6% of all 10-year-old Finns could write, while approx. 85% were able to read.²² Thus Isa Asp, who was born in a Finnish-speaking inland area, was not expected to even start studying at a teacher training college and certainly not to be able to wield a pen.

For Isa Asp, the attraction of reading and writing²³ was downright defiant, at any rate if one considers that she came from a poor family in the countryside, where she was expected to become a housewife or perhaps a farmer's wife at a very early age, not an educated professional. One can wonder where she originally obtained reading matter from since not much other than religious literature had yet been published in Finnish²⁴. On the other hand, her literary inclinations were encouraged at home. Asp inherited an interest in poetry and literature in general from her father Jaakko, who was an accountant in an ironworks and later a municipal registrar. Like his daughter, he also composed occasional poetry to entertain members of his family and friends.²⁵ Her family had a strong influence on the young Isa getting practice in reading, writing and composing poems and stories from an early age.

Isa's delight with the Swedish-language magazine *Trollsländan* is explained by the fact that her father and grandmother had seen to it that she had learnt elementary Swedish as a child at home. In 1864 and 1865, Isa attended a private girls' school in the town of Raahe on the north western coast of Finland, but she was not able to complete her studies there for financial reasons.²⁶ So she returned home but continued to read and write in her spare time. The books that Asp read as a child were mostly borrowed from libraries outside her own home. As a child, she made friends with family members of the local clergy, thereby obtaining friends of a higher social order who encouraged her to study and helped her to acquire reading material by lending her books of their own.²⁷

On the threshold of adulthood, Isa became acquainted with the family of the minister Johan Fredrik Thauvón, who had moved into the vicarage of Puolanka, the parish where she was living at the time. Especially his daughter Sally became a good friend of Isa. The Thauvón family encouraged Asp to study privately for the entrance examination for the Teacher Training College in Jyväskylä. Moreover, the young Asp was able to borrow books, discuss literature and even participate in the teaching given by the family governess when she visited the family of the local clergy.²⁸ The vicarage of the Thauvón family in Puolanka possessed what was in the countryside an exceptionally large library for the time, and Isa was able to read the books in it. She used to discuss literature, for

example the works of the national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg, with members of the minister's family, particularly his wife, the mother of Sally.²⁹ Runeberg's verses also influenced Asp's own writing. In addition to the poems of Runeberg, the family's library contained nearly all the important literature that was read by the upper classes at that time. Not all the titles are known any longer, but the library also contained for example works by Zacharias Topelius, Per Atterbom, Esaías Tegnér and the Irish writer Thomas Moore.³⁰

In an essay later written by Asp at the teacher training college, she described an ideal library of her own which she dreamt would someday contain both classic works and books by famous contemporary writers. The essay shows that by the time she entered the college she had become acquainted not only with the major works of Swedish and Finnish literature but also with European classics. Asp admired both the works of J.L. Runeberg, Elias Lönnrot and Zacharias Topelius, the leading writers of the Finnish national awakening, and those of Esaías Tegnér, Frans Michael Franzén, B.E. Malmström and Fredrika Bremer, as well as the European classics of Goethe, Schiller and Victor Hugo. She also mentioned Lord Byron, Charlotte Brontë and Henrik Ibsen among others.³¹ Asp would have liked her dream library to also contain religious literature, such as the works of Luther and Arndt³², whose writings at that time still held an important place on Finnish bookshelves, particularly as a result of the rise of revivalist movements. Asp's parents had converted to Pietism when she was a child, and consequently the Bible and other religious works were held in high esteem in her home.³³

At the time of her early childhood in the 1860s, it was the norm for the majority of girls in the countryside not to continue their studies in public or indeed private institutions, and the ability to read and perhaps write was considered sufficient education for them. In the countryside of central and more northern Finland, there were hardly any schools for girls where they would have had an opportunity to pursue their studies beyond the elementary level. Partly for reasons of national language policy, the first Finnish-language teacher training college was established in Jyväskylä in 1863, and in the following year the first Finnish-language secondary school for girls was opened.³⁴ Many of the aspiring teachers in the classes of the early years of the teacher training college had graduated from the girls' secondary school, after which they could apply for entrance to the college. The Jyväskylä Teacher Training College also offered young persons from the Finnish-speaking countryside a chance to study for a profession since they could receive instruction there in their own mother tongue.³⁵ Isa Asp, too, was interested in gaining admission to the teacher training college and pursuing a career as an elementary school teacher, and she was encouraged to do so both by her own family and by that of her friend Sally in the vicarage.³⁶ The importance of such networks was indeed considerable for a person aspiring to a profession as a teacher.

In Asp's time, there still prevailed a strongly traditional and romantic view of the writer as a person who was driven by an inner calling to

write. On the other hand, becoming an artist conflicted with the reality of poverty and hard times. Asp resolved this conflict by acquiring an independent profession and obtaining a livelihood as an elementary school teacher, which at the time was one of few respectable ways for a young unwed woman to support herself. A career as a writer was not her first priority, but Asp saw in her job as a teacher an opportunity to work as a writer part-time.

Isa Asp only began to write poems more extensively in Finnish during her time at the Jyväskylä Teacher Training College, when she was commissioned to write pieces for celebrations at the college where they were read aloud in public.³⁷ They were not necessarily published in printed format, but the poems could be disseminated in the form of handwritten copies. In fact, she got her first poems published even before she applied for the teacher training college – and where else than on the pages of children’s magazines!

The fabulist Zacharias Topelius as a model for the young Isa Asp

During her time at the girls’ school in Raahe, Isa and her schoolmates used to produce their own handwritten school pamphlets. One of the girls, Fanny Hohenthal (b. 1852), who was a year older than Isa, was the daughter of the curate of Raahe Otto Mauritz Hohenthal and his wife Karolina Björkman. The girls edited their literary pamphlets in Fanny’s home in the vicarage. Fanny acted as an assistant editor for Isa’s magazines for children *Fågeln* [The Bird] and *Laulaja* [The Singer]. The latter was given a Finnish title despite the fact that the content was in Swedish. In producing the magazine *Fågeln*, which was in the form of poems, the girls were guided by Miss Heickell, the principal of the girls’ school that they were attending.³⁸

Isa Asp’s first poems come from the time she was in Raahe, and it was then that her writing activity became permanent and goal-oriented. She later revised the first versions of the poems that she had written for the *Laulaja* magazine and added others.³⁹ Her poems reached their first readers during her time in Raahe because the pamphlets were probably read by others than just the young editors and their teacher. However, the poems became properly public only when they reached their readers on the pages of printed magazines. The poems she produced in her time at school in Raahe were nevertheless an important stage in her path as a poet because they developed her abilities as a writer and paved the way for her later literary career.

An important model for young Isa was the master himself, the father of the whole Finnish genre of children’s literature, Zacharias Topelius (1818–1898), a fabulist whose works were read for a long time in the other Nordic countries as well. Topelius was not only a journalist and a writer, but later, from 1854 on, also a professor of history, and he was awarded the honorific title of “Councillor of State” in 1878. In his early

teenage years, he had been a pupil of Runeberg. As a young journalist, he published poems in the newspaper *Helsingfors Tidningar* and soon began to write serial stories for the paper. His first collections of children's tales came out in the late 1840s. Among his best-known historical novels is *Fältskärens berättelser* [English translation: *Times of Gustav Adolf*], a work in several volumes. In the years 1854 to 1856, Topelius published almost 60 tales or poems for children in *Eos*, a new magazine for children, and in 1856 he also wrote the first of his two popular education textbooks titled *Naturens bok* [The Book of Nature]. A second important textbook written by him was *Boken om vårt land* [The Book of our Land], which was published in 1876. Both works went into numerous reprints.⁴⁰ *Boken om vårt land*, particularly in its Finnish translation *Maammekirja*, became familiar to numerous generations of elementary school pupils in the course of the following decades.⁴¹

Zacharias Topelius has maintained his position among the Finnish people over the decades as an important children's writer. For example, Claes Andersson (1937–2019), a Swedish-speaking psychiatrist, writer and Finnish minister of state (Minister of Culture) described how he learnt to read at the age of six. His aunt Elna had read Topelius' tales to him throughout his early childhood, and the young Claes had found the writer's varied and precise vocabulary and his richly nuanced language challenging and partly incomprehensible. Andersson later pointed out that Topelius did not underestimate his readers but rather knew that children were keen to learn and interested in mysterious challenges.⁴² This indeed is to a great extent the basis for Topelius' popularity over the decades. The main element in Topelius' (religious) educational thinking was Christian nationalism. His educational ideas were largely based on Fröbel's child-centred philosophy, in which the child and his or her world are at the hub of education.⁴³

Zacharias Topelius was an important contributor to the children's magazine that Asp received as a Christmas present in the famine year of 1867. The Swedish-language periodical *Trollsländan* came out in Helsinki in the years 1867–1873.⁴⁴ It was published by Theodor Sederholm, a Helsinki journalist, bookshop owner and publisher whose teacher in the upper secondary school in Porvoo had been J.L. Runeberg. Particularly in its early years, *Trollsländan* had, like its exemplar *Eos*, been a very modern children's magazine, containing stories about nature and animals, fairy tales and poems, puzzles and exercises. The periodical came out once a week, and in the first years it issued 600–700 copies. The main problem with it became the paucity of illustrations it had. However, after Sederholm was negligent in publishing it, Topelius became disinterested in writing for it, and its circulation diminished.⁴⁵

For its part, *Eos* was the first Swedish-language periodical for children in Finland, appearing in Turku from 1854 to 1866. In its day, it was the leading children's magazine in the Nordic countries, and Topelius was its most important contributor. He strove to write for the magazine on the children's own terms. Although it was written and edited according to the

principles of Christian propriety, the magazine was lively and in addition to fairy tales contained stories about nature and animals and puzzles, like its successor *Trollsländan*. Its central contents included *Walters äventyr* [The Adventures of Walter] written by Topelius⁴⁶. The magazine was also exceptionally richly and artistically illustrated, and the first strip cartoons in Finland were published in it. *Eos* was mainly read in upper and middle-class families. In its first year of publication, it had almost 700 subscribers, and at the beginning of the following decade its circulation rose to 900 copies. However, the magazine began to languish after it received a Swedish competitor and encountered financial setbacks and when Topelius no longer contributed to it to the extent he previously had.

⁴⁷ The withdrawal of an important contributor like Topelius was enough to weaken the magazine's popularity. Nor did its successor *Trollsländan* manage to establish a position for itself without the help of Topelius.

Trollsländan nevertheless managed to attract the attention of the young Isa Asp. She also wished to submit her own poems and other texts for publication in it, and in the spring of 1868 she began to compose suitable tales to send to the magazine, but they were never published in it. However, in the following year, a poem by her *Till vår slända* [To Our Dragonfly] did appear on the pages of the periodical, and the young poet received two books as remuneration. Although the poem was published, the editor urged her the next time to pay more attention to the form of the text and to express her ideas more clearly. In August 1871 she wrote a letter to *Trollsländan*, which reveals that she had been reading the periodical for three years (apparently since the beginning of 1868) and had enjoyed doing so. She also suggested to the magazine that its columns might in the future give information to its readers about the art of poetry so that young beginners might receive instruction and guidance in writing poetry.⁴⁸ This fragment shows clearly that Asp searched actively possibilities to learn to be a more skillful writer.

Topelius was an important model for Asp when she was young. His poetry anthologies *Ljungblommor* [Heather] that appeared in the 1840s and 1850s inspired her to write several poems for her friend Sally. These were published under a *nom de plume* in *Trollsländan* in December 1871 and in August of the following year.⁴⁹ Entries in her diary reveal that she had read one of the *Ljungblommor* anthologies together with Sally.⁵⁰ Asp was probably well aware that Topelius was a contributor to, and also a reader of, the magazine.

It was crucial for Asp's identity as a writer that she got her texts published as a tyro writer. As a young woman, Asp had a clear need to get her poetry published even though, as was typical for female writers at the time, they were published under a *nom de plume*. Most of her oeuvre was published posthumously, with only a few works appearing before her death (published under her own name).⁵¹ However, these first published poems offered the young Isa an experience of what it was like to be a poet, and they gave her the confidence to work on the manuscripts of her other own poems.

Conclusion: Writing for children's magazines as preparation for a career as a writer

To conclude, the analysis shows that already in her early years Asp had a chance to develop her artistic expression and opportunities to write in Swedish as well. The self of the writer, i.e. who the person is, and all his or her experiences in life up to that moment together with their associated interests, values, beliefs, and social positionings as well as his or her contemporary interests, worldviews and the personal conception of his or her own agency all contribute to creating a writer's identity.

⁵² Isa Asp's world in the 1860s was undoubtedly materially poorer and more restricted in opportunities than that of the urban upper classes. It also conformed to a great extent to the peasant estate's view of the world, in which religion, for example, held a strong position, and many religious nuances can be discerned in Asp's poems. In terms of her identity as a writer, Asp was located between the view of the world of the old traditional society of the estates and a modernising civil society which aimed at educating the whole population and developing (for political reasons) the status of the Finnish language and culture. The latter endeavor made possible social advancement for ever greater numbers of the rural population and was based to a great extent on the idea that the enlightenment and education of all (i.e. increasing their human capital) would benefit the whole nation.

On the other hand, as a child Asp had had a model for her literary activities and encouragement to refine her artistic creativity into poetry in her home. Moreover, she had received instruction in the Swedish language when she was still young, which was rare for a child living in the Finnish-speaking countryside. The support of her family and friends had thus bolstered Asp's conception of her own agency in various ways and allowed her to think that even though she was a woman born in the countryside she would be able to progress in her studies and pursue a career as an elementary school teacher.

Her family had early on wished to ensure that she would have a command of the Swedish language, which was needed in upper-class families. This later also helped her to progress in her studies at the Jyväskylä Teacher Training College, which prepared teachers for Finnish-language elementary schools, most of which were located in the Finnish-speaking countryside. Many of the students in the early years of the teacher training college came from Swedish-speaking families, and during their time there they had to learn Finnish grammar right from the rudiments up.⁵³ Asp, on the other hand, benefited from her bilingualism: she had studied in Swedish in the girls' school in Raahe, and she spoke Finnish, her mother tongue, much more fluently than many of the other students at the college. Asp wrote her early poems in Swedish, which was the main language of her artistic expression up to her years at the teacher training college.

Despite the fact that Asp did not have a vast amount of literature in her own home, she was able to obtain a wide variety of literature and reading

material through her relations with friends and other networks⁵⁴. Thus she had more reading available that might have been expected and greater opportunities to read and write than an average woman of the rural peasantry. All this nourished her literary creativity. In her early youth, she played with writing texts for children by hand, and concomitantly her propensity towards being a poet developed. In the girls' school, her teacher also gave her guidance in writing for this kind of handwritten magazine. This was actually a conscious practice for writing poetry.

Asp herself also contemplated the possibility of becoming a poet and actively sought opportunities to this end in her immediate environment using such resources as were available to her. Asp particularly liked the contents of the early children's magazine *Trollsländan*, and asked its editors about the possibility of it providing "instruction on becoming a poet" and associated advice for young readers. All this shows that her development as a writer was a deliberate, goal-oriented process that would in the end lead to the publication of her poems.

The major Fennoman authors, the national poet J.L. Runeberg and the poet and historian Zacharias Topelius, were the main literary models for the young Isa Asp. As she expressed in her diary, their works inspired her to write and to aspire to a career as a poet and author⁵⁵, an occupation that was still rare for a woman. My analysis shows that writing for children's magazines was a crucial stage in her career, and her identity as a writer was strengthened by the opportunity they offered to get her poems and short tales published. Moreover, writing for these handwritten and published magazines made her dreams visible and encouraged her to pursue her efforts.

Despite her short life span, there is also a chronological change to be discerned in Asp's identity as a writer as she grew older and matured as a poet. Identities are often by nature communal and involve networks.⁵⁶ The publication of her poems written when she was studying at the Jyväskylä Teacher Training College and obtaining the community's approval of them were important for the young poet. The change in Asp's identity as a writer was part of her natural development into adulthood, a period when other identities are also changing, but unlike her contemporaries Asp seems to have succeeded in manoeuvring on the borders of the traditional, expected social identities. Although she was aware of the limited opportunities available to her, she nevertheless strove to achieve a position as a writer. The encouragement to pursue a career in writing that Isa with her literary gifts received as a child from her immediate surroundings helped her to achieve her dreams, which in the end turned out not to be impossible to realise.

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Notes

- 1 This article is a part of my broader research project on the life and oeuvre of Isa Asp, in which I study Asp's youthful manuscripts in greater detail. I want warmly thank the Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland for the funding of the project, which has made it possible to write also this article.
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