

## **The Roads That Lead Far Away. The history of Finnish modernist movements and the rise of Post-war modernism**

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In this paper, I will make some preliminary remarks on the issue, with the objective to start the discussion of international connections and dimensions of Finnish post-war literature. I will chart the historical context of Finnish modernism, and explain the use of ‘modernism’ in defining and naming literary periods in Finnish literary history. In the introductory part of my paper, I will investigate the conceptual and historical background of post-war-modernism by noting in which ways international modernism arrived in Finland. My intention is not to embark here on an in-depth study of the modernist aesthetics and the complete history of the reception of international modernism in Finland. For my present purposes, I will focus on certain historical impulses, which I consider most relevant to post-war modernism. I will outline the major issues in the contemporary literary journals and give a brief overview of the critical discourse in order to map the impulses that came from abroad and contributed to the formation of modernist aesthetics in Finnish literary and cultural circles.

The attempt to classify 20th century literary periods and trends in Finland according to some general (pan-European) guidelines as to what is ‘avant-garde’ and ‘modernist’ seems to be quite challenging, if not utopic.<sup>1</sup> While fully realising the difficulties inherent in these concepts, I will make some remarks on the subject of Finnish post-war modernism. There have not yet been any serious attempts by Finnish literary historians to investigate Finnish post-war literature in relation to the European and Nordic literatures. In this paper, I will make some preliminary remarks on the issue, with the objective to start the discussion of international connections and dimensions of Finnish post-war literature. First, I will briefly outline the historical context of Finnish modernism, and explain the use of ‘modernism’ in defining and naming literary periods in Finnish literary history. In the introductory part of my article, I will investigate the conceptual and historical background of the post-war-modernism by noting in which ways international modernism arrived in Finland. My intention is not to embark here on an in-depth study of the modernist aesthetics and the complete history of the reception of international modernism in Finland. For my present purposes, I will focus on certain historical impulses, which I consider most relevant to post-war modernism. I will outline the major issues in the contemporary literary journals and give a brief overview of the critical discourse in order to map the impulses that came from abroad and contributed to the formation of modernist aesthetics in Finnish literary and cultural circles.

### Finnish literary history: many modernisms

In Finland, the words ‘modern’, ‘modernism’ and ‘modernist literature’ are concepts, which have been employed in different contexts, and they often have diverse meanings. It is commonly acknowledged by the Finnish literary historians that there has been two significant modernist periods in Finland. Firstly, modernist poetry was written in Finland as early as in the 1910s–1920s, but it was written in Swedish, not Finnish. The second modernist period was the Finnish post-war modernism of the 1950s. Both were very language-conscious movements, and they focused on the formal aspects of art work and broke free from the metric constraints of poetic language. They were striving after formal innovations and new forms of expression. Alongside prominent Swedish-language modernist writers, such as Henry Parland, Gunnar Björling and Elmer Diktonius, Edith Södergran (1892–1923) was a very important protagonist of this Swedish-speaking modernism. Some Finnish researchers have suggested that the age of modernism in the history of Finnish literature should be seen as a continuum of as many as five successive modernist periods (Kantola and Riikonen 2007, 447). The first period stretches from the 1890s to the early 1910s; the second modernist period is the era of Swedish-language modernism. The third modernism includes the Finnish-speaking group of writers called *Tulenkantajat* (the Torchbearers) in the 1920s. They embraced various novelties and new ideas, which came from abroad at that time. The fourth modernism has been associated with a leftish group called *Kiila* (literally translated as the ‘Wedge’), which was active in the 1930s and 1940s. The fifth, post-war modernism and ‘high modernism’ (1945–1959) did not emerge until the mid-1940s. Most researchers agree that the eventual breakthrough took place in 1951, when Paavo Haavikko made his debut with the collection *Tiet etäisyyksiin* (The Roads That Lead Far Away). The period after ‘high modernism’ between approximately 1960–1980 is called, rather vaguely, *jälkimoderni aika* (late modernism) or simply ‘the 1960s’ and ‘the 1970s’ (see: *Suomen kirjallisuushistoria* 3). The actual postmodernist period which is commonly associated with the philosophy of

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1 In his article “One Earth, Four of Five Words. The Notion of ‘Avant-Garde’ Problematized”, *Action Yes* no. 7 (2008) Per Bäckström gives a careful account of the complexities involved in the conceptualisation of the ‘avant-garde’ and ‘modernism’ and illustrates the national and language-based differences in use.

deconstruction, ironic self-reference and the heightened attention to, and undermining of, literary conventions did not reach Finland until the 1980s.

The division of Finnish modernism into five different modernisms is by no means undisputed. For example, the first ‘modernist period’ from the 1890s to the early 1910s is alternatively and compellingly called the *symbolistic*, *neo-romantic*, and *decadent* period in Finnish literature. (Lyytikäinen 2003, 13–14, 27.) Furthermore, the idea of considering the fourth modernism, *Kiila*, as an important link between *Tulenkantajat* and post-war modernism is not universally accepted.

### Post-war or ‘high modernism’ in Finland

The period that is called by Finnish researchers ‘high modernism’ in Finnish poetry was established by the mid-1950s, at the latest, when Eeva-Liisa Manner’s *Tämä matka* (This journey) was published. The collection of poems was hailed by the critics as a true modernist work, something like a paragon of modernist lyric poetry. It was warmly received by the reading public, being the first sold-out book of modernist lyric in Finland. In her study of the breakthrough of the new lyric poetry, *Muodon vallankumous*, 1981 (The Revolution of Form), Maria-Liisa Kunnas situates the modernist period between 1945–1959. During this period, the emancipation of new poetry from old forms and models was completed. At the same time, a new poetic language established itself with new forms of expression. Maria-Liisa Kunnas chose 1959 as a landmark year in the periodisation of post-war literature. In 1959 the culmination of modernism was attained with the publication of *Winter Palace* by Paavo Haavikko, one of the most important works in post-war Finnish poetry. It was a landmark in other respects as well: new topics began to emerge in the literary discussion in Finland. One of the most marked features of this discussion was the exploration of the relationship between literature and society. By the turn of the decade, it was evident that the – at times heated – debate on the formal aspects of poetry had cooled down.

One of the reasons for the belatedness of Finnish modernism in relation to Anglo-American modernism was the fact that the translation of the works of famous modernist icons, such as Eliot, Pound, Woolf, and Joyce was delayed. It must be remembered, though, that as early as at the beginning of the 1900-century, Swedish-speaking modernists translated Danish, Norwegian, and French literature into Finnish.

In the literary discussion of the Finnish-speaking literary circles of the 1920s, there emerged new words, such as ‘modern’ and ‘modernist’, and ‘avant-garde’.<sup>2</sup> These words have different contents from the concepts employed in the current discussion of modernity and avant-garde. This can be seen from the way Alex Matson, an eminent literary critic of the time, classified DH Lawrence, Dorothy Richardson, TS Eliot, and James Joyce as ‘avant-gardists’.<sup>3</sup> *Tulenkantajat*, another group of writers and literary critics, introduced many contemporary trends and *isms* (futurism, dadaism, surrealism) to the reading public alongside new art forms (jazz, cinema, modern dance). Although the members of the *Tulenkantajat* group actively translated new works, these efforts did not have any noticeable effect on the contemporary Finnish authors’ aesthetics. They continued the same as before, except for Aaro Hellaakoski, a poet who kept his distance from all sorts of literary blocs and groupings within

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2 It must be noted, however, that Swedish-language modernists, such as Sigurd Frosterus, have discussed the concept of ‘modern’ and ‘modernism’ as broad cultural concepts long before *Tulenkantajat*. Frosterus was an art critic and an essayist with many cultural interests. In his texts he explored modern society, its technical and artistic innovations, the idea of modernity, and the new world view (see Frosterus 1904, 1917a–b, 1930).

3 Alex Matson, a Finnish critic and translator used the term ‘avant-garde’, but in a context that seems a little odd for the contemporary reader (Matson, Alex 1927, 11).

Finnish literary life. His collection of poems, *Jääpeili* (1928) can be termed ‘experimental’ because of its free typographic form.

After the war years, there was an abundance of new translations of world classics in literature and philosophy, as well as established classics of international (mostly Anglo-American) modernists, whose texts had not yet been translated into Finnish because of the suspensions and breaks in the publishing business during the war years. A special case in point is the translation of TS Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), “Four Quartets” (1935–1942), and his other poems to Finnish in 1949. The book was edited and translated by leading critics, poets and translators of the time, Lauri Viljanen, Kai Laitinen, Sinikka Kallio-Visapää, and it had a major influence on the development of modern Finnish literature.

The significance of the translation of Eliot’s poetry cannot be overemphasised; however, in the 1950s, literary critics also discussed in their literary reviews and essays other interesting topics, such as: the pan-European aspects of modernism; the predecessors of modern poetry in romantic and symbolic poetry and the arts; German poetry, predominantly Rilke as the important predecessor of modernism; stream of consciousness; Anglo-American and Scandinavian modernism, and modern French literature (Sarajas 1949, 197–204; Nikula 1954, 346–355; Hein 1959, 253–263) and existential philosophy including Sartre and Camus, among others. (*Taiteen maailma* 1948, 10–11.) Critics and writers were particularly impressed by Imagism, a movement in early 20th century Anglo-American poetry that favored precision of imagery, and clear, sharp language.<sup>4</sup> The critics adopted these ideas into their discourse and raised them as aesthetic ideals against which the artistry of Finnish poets should be measured.

Another reason for breaks and delays in the transmission of modernism immediately after the war was the scarcity of high-grade translations of significant literary works. However, this did not last long; the number of good translations of the most important works gradually increased. Literary critics, academics and writers often analysed in their essays the characteristics of individual writers and analogies between literature and other art forms. They were especially interested in the writers that belonged to the Western modern canon: TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, Emily Dickinson, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Paul Valéry. In addition, the aftermath of French symbolist poetry, Central European Dada and experimental poetry, among others, received much attention from the critics in their discussions of topical issues in the literary journals of the 1940s and 1950s, such as *Ajan kirja*, *Näköala*, *Välikysymys*, *Taiteen maailma* and *Parnasso*.

### Inspiration from Contemporary Swedish modernists

Some literary journals, *Ajan kirja*, *Näköala* and *Parnasso*, occasionally published overviews of current Scandinavian and European literary trends. Most often there were essays and introductions to the so-called *Fem unga*, a group of Swedish writers. Arthur Lundkvist, Erik Asklund, Josef Kellgren, Harry Martinson, and Gustav Sandgren were the names mentioned (*Ajan kirja* 1949/1, 51–56). In the journals of Swedish-language modernists in Finland (*Arena*, for example) the ties to Scandinavian literary movements were close and the newest trends in Sweden and Scandinavia were followed more closely. In Finnish journals – partly because of the language barrier – this Scandinavian connection was kept alive thanks by the contributions of a few observant critics. It was sometimes a conscious intention of young Finnish critics to look for similarities between Finnish modernist poets and their Swedish counterparts. In his essay, Kai Laitinen, a prolific critic, saw in Bo Carpelan’s lyric features in

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4 In her study of Eeva-Liisa Manner’s works, Tuula Hökkä (1991) discusses the significance of Imagism for Manner’s poetic imagery.

common with the *Fyrtotalister* in Sweden.<sup>5</sup> He also categorised Carpelan's poems in the tradition of miniature poems which characterised, according to Laitinen, the poetic art of Swedish-language poets in Finland: Elmer Diktonius, Gunnar Björling, and Rabbe Enckell (Laitinen *Ajan kirja* 1949/4, 49–52, 73–76).

Most often a sample of Swedish and Swedish-language modernists was examined and reviewed in the same essay, with the sole exception of Gunnar Ekelöf, the prominent and paradoxical figure in Swedish modernist poetry. An entire essay by Kai Laitinen was given over to the examination of his literary career and the characterisation of his poetic language. In compliance with the modernist critical interest in the intermedial relationships, Laitinen adopts several musical terms to describe Ekelöf's poems. His poems are described as using polyphonic structures, and consequently the totality of his poems is termed 'a score', and 'an orchestral composition' (Laitinen, *Näköala* 1950/3, 235–246). Since there was a genuine interest in the poetry of Ekelöf, one would expect that the translation of his poems as well as many Swedish-language modernists' works into Finnish would be of primary interest to writers and translators in Finnish literary circles. However, a selection of Gunnar Ekelöf's poems was only translated into Finnish in the late 1960s (Ekelöf 1968). Gunnar Björling's poetry was fated to wait even longer, as a selection of translations of his poems was published in the early 1970s (Björling 1972). One possible reason for the delayed translations of major modernists was due to the fact that the poetic language made extreme demands on the translator's ability to render the experimental forms, the bold imagery and the different shades of meaning into Finnish.

Another explanation could be the simple fact that Finnish post-war modernists held these modernist writers in high esteem, and many of them could read the poems of Swedish language modernists in their original language. It was very common that prominent Finnish poets were skillful translators as well. Often lacking any other means of making their living, poets worked as freelance translators selling their services to publishing houses. So it did not come as a surprise that some young Finnish poets included in their collections of poems their own translations of European, Anglo-American and Scandinavian poets. Lasse Heikkilä's collection *Miekkalintu* (1949) for example, contained some translated poems of the *Fyrtotalister* of Sweden, a fact which was mentioned approvingly in the reviews of Heikkilä's book. The inclusion of translations into one's own collection of poems became standard practice which characterised many modernist poets; Eeva-Liisa Manner, Helvi Juvonen, Eila Kivikk'aho and Aila Meriluoto, all often included some translations of foreign poets in their own collections. This practice was especially dominant in the 1960–1970s. In the 1950s, Helvi Juvonen's translations of Emily Dickinson's poems and her essay on Dickinson published in *Parnasso*, a major literary journal at the time, clearly showed her interest in Dickinson's art (Juvonen 1958, 245–249).

## The justification of modernism and modernist aesthetics

The discussion of modernism among critics and writers can be described by the profusion of contrasting, even polemical voices. It can be characterised as a kind of a 20<sup>th</sup> century version of the *Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns* that heated up in late 17<sup>th</sup> century French academic and literary circles. Like their predecessors, 'the ancients' of Finnish literary circles – the conservative critics – accused young Finnish modernists of 'making demands'. They meant that modernist writers called for breaking old rules and forms in art and literature

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5 In Finnish literary journals, *Fyrtotalism* in Sweden was the most discussed single literary movement abroad ( see Bengtsson 1949, 51–56, Holmqvist, 1950, 58–6, Sarajas 1950, 176–179, Holappa 1956, 217–224). It was compared to the Swedish-language literature of the 1940s in Finland (Torvalds 1950, 42–50) and its influence on Finnish modernism was also mentioned (Anhava 1951, 85–86).

(Manner 1957). While more conservative critics and writers adhered to the old values, the young generation stressed the importance of innovation and regeneration (Laitinen 1949, 208–214). According to them, the new rhythm of life requires new forms of expression, new ways of using poetic images. The idea behind these thoughts is the belief that artistic form is equivalent to reality, and artistic work does not copy reality; art *creates*. Consequently, artistic work creates its own reality, and the value it carries springs from the conviction that the essence of (modern) life is embodied in the art work. The conservative opponents were not convinced; their main argument and complaint was that ‘modernism had a problem’. One critic actually chose to title his essay as “The problem of modernism” and went on to enumerate all the flaws and shortcomings of the new modernist trend (Oinonen 1949, 57–60). The main point was that modernist literature lacks taste and nuance. Moreover, he said that it is too intellectual and theoretical, meaning that modernism is decadent and shallow, presenting a stark contrast to sincere and profound art.

Interestingly enough, all the participants in the discussion of the new literature, its form and aesthetics, knew that what was at stake, was not just literature, but power relations; the question of who of the players of this game would win, who would lose. It was a question of who would have the right to speak authoritatively about literature. The inevitable rise of modernism was significant in another respect too. Before the Second World War, the cultural influence from Germany was dominant in Finland. Members of the academic and cultural elite could read the German classics in the original language. Academic dissertations and research papers were written in German. But after the war, all this changed. The German culture was overshadowed by Anglo-American influence. This was the major trend in post-war modernism.

Young writers and critics were fully aware of the historical situation in which they lived. They reflected on their situation and saw it as the continuation of history and tradition. The heavy emphasis laid by the young critics and debaters on the connections between national and international modernism contributed to the fact that national modernism gained more importance and value. One of them noted in his essay, written in reply to an older critic’s piece in which he challenged the artistic values of modernity, that in the essence of every art lies the question of its history and tradition, and the battle between old and new. Instead of discussing the problem of modernism, it would be more accurate to speak about the problem of tradition (Tiainen 1949, 73–78). This remark indicates that the younger generation was very much concerned about tradition and wanted to be a part and an outcome of that tradition, despite the accusations of anti-historicism. Of course, attitudes to tradition varied to some extent; there were critics who had adopted modernist ideas, but the writers they chose as examples to illustrate the modernist ideas were not those whose texts represented the cutting-edge of modernism such as Paavo Haavikko and Eeva-Liisa Manner.

There are also certain features regarded as the manifestations of modernism in literature – modernist imagery, the liberation of metrical thinking from fixed meter, poems that imitate spoken language, metafictional and narrative experiments. Intermediality and interart relationships are much less researched phenomena. Young critics spoke about new structures in poetry and prose, which are reminiscent of musical structures in polyphonic, symphonic and vocal music. Typically, they referred to a poem or novel by a Finnish author as a ‘score’, or ‘music in words’, or ‘word-music’ (Kivitie–Manner–Rainio, 1948, 30–31; Laitinen 1949, 208–214; Kula 1949, 90–92; Laitinen 1950, 235–246). By using such vocabulary, they wanted to point out the similarities between the literary structures of modern Finnish literature and the corresponding forms and structures in the works of Gunnar Ekelöf, the Swedish modernist of the 1940s, Virginia Woolf, TS Eliot, and James Joyce. Some of these authors discuss the relationship between music, literature, and voice in their novels and lectures: Woolf (“The Waves”, 1931); Eliot (“The Music of Poetry”, 1942), and Joyce (“The Sirens”,

1922). In modernist literary aesthetics, the sense of sight is emphasised together with the sense of hearing. Therefore, it is not surprising, that in the discussion of the arts, intermediality and the interrelationship between the senses are stressed. Ezra Pound's *cantos* are introduced to the reader in the context of cubistic painting. Similarly, French novels and poetry are portrayed as the continuation of the spiritual heritage of Cezanne and Gauguin (Sarajas 1950, 257–263).

In order to further develop the study of the critical language of the young critics, it is important to investigate the discursive space of intermediality within the debates and discussions and analyse its relationship to other criteria and definitions of modern poetry and literature. This precaution is necessary, because in the reviews and essays one can discover the tendency to use similar terms – musical or other interart terms – in the most divergent contexts. The supposed discovery of “music” in literary works was the bandwagon on which almost everyone climbed. It is important to note that, when a literary work is termed “symphonic” by a critic of the older generation, the term does not necessarily signify the same thing as in the case of a young critic who underscores the “symphonic” qualities and structures in the works by TS Eliot or Paavo Haavikko. Therefore, it is appropriate carefully to examine whether there are decisive markers of modernist aesthetics in the discussions of the musicality of a literary work.

### The division between the young and the *defeated*

Two important examples of diversity within the modernist discourse, which not only debated on literary aesthetics and aesthetic forms, but also on Finnish culture and society in general, is the retrospective reflection on the past, and as a result of this, dispute between older and younger generations of writers. The late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed a radical change of political and cultural atmosphere that had a direct impact on the way people thought about Second World War. Around that time a debate arose on the actions of war-time politicians and political decisions that were made at the time were critically and often ruthlessly questioned by the younger generation of politicians and politically active writers and journalists. Furthermore, the 1960s radically changed general attitudes towards the war generation; it was no longer held in as high esteem as before.

Eila Kivikk'aho is one of the few Finnish writers who has been able to give an aesthetic form to some of the bitterest experiences of the generation between the old, pre-war generation and the young, emerging poets (Polkunen (1975, 1998, 489). Kivikk'aho did not join the group of young critics and writers who burst on to the post-war cultural scene with their new ideologies and set of values. On the contrary, she identified with the marginalised and ‘defeated’ – Kivikk'ahos term for those who fought on the front lines and those who bore the responsibility of duties on the home front during the war years and could not communicate their war experiences, because they were too painful to remember, and therefore incommunicable, or, because there was no one willing to listen to them. The following excerpt from Kivikk'aho's poem *Sukupolvet* (The Generations) deals with the post-war situation, the division between the young generation which had not experienced war and the older generation which had lost its youth in the war:

#### *The Generations*

You slap your youth on the table –  
a green trump: a living seven-towered  
crowning castellation  
with not a single grave

in its funeral barrow:  
just a road coming and going –  
and all the knowledge  
inherited: guesswork  
culled, inoculated, cross-fertilised. [...]

And yet: could *you*  
conquer us?  
Our game was up  
before you were born.  
How can you conquer the defeated?

(*Parvi*, 1961, Translated by Herbert Lomas, 1992, 111)<sup>6</sup>

“The living seven-towered/ crowning castellation” of the youth is starkly contrasted with the older people, who are, paradoxically, unconquerable, because they are “defeated”; they have already lost everything.

When the *Parvi* collection was published in 1961 the younger writers did not concede that ‘the victors and the vanquished’ dichotomy even existed. Pentti Holappa, a Finnish writer, took a critical stand for it; he considered the opposition ‘contrived’. Väinö Kirstinä, though, admitted that there might be something about the youngest generation that could be defined as a penchant for aestheticism and decorativeness that provokes the adherents of the traditional poetic style, i.e., the pre-war generation of writers. But, Kirstinä also said that one should not bring the issue to a head. The differences in aesthetic viewpoints and poetic style should not be stressed too much. Despite this downgrading of the difference between the older and younger generations, a rift persisted in their attitudes and understanding of the past.

In general, the discussion of modernism among the critics and writers can be characterised by the concept of diversity, by which I mean the profusion of diverse literary groups, the most

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6 The original Finnish version of Eila Kivikk’aho’s poem reads as follows:

#### **Sukupolvet**

Te iskette pöytään nuoruutenne,  
vihreän valtin, seitsentornisen latvan,  
elävän linnoituksen jonka kummuissa  
ei ole yhtään hautaa,  
vain tietä tulossa ja menossa  
ja kaikki tieto,  
peritty ja aavistettu,  
poimittu, ympätty, risteytetty. (...)

Ja kuitenkin: tekö voittaisitte meidät?  
Meidän pelimme pelattiin  
jo ennen teidän syntymääänne.  
Miten voittaisitte sen  
joka kärsi tappion. (...)

(Kivikk’aho [1961] 1998, 290).



prominent and influential of these were ‘the Anhavalaiset’, the state of the art of modernists from Helsinki, who gathered around the very famous Finnish literary critic, Tuomas Anhava. Contrasting voices could be heard from writers from Northern and Central Finland who depicted in a realistic style the everyday life in agrarian communities in Finland. In later years, Väinö Linna from Tampere and some of his colleagues from the east of Finland criticised the modernists as having too pessimistic an outlook on life, exaggerated aesthetics, and little regard for Finnish culture and its values. These polemical voices arose from the battles fought on the pages of contemporary cultural and literary journals.

An interesting future topic of research would be the investigation of the factors which mediated or directly influenced the shaping, delimiting, and controlling literary discourses.

What are the criteria that entitled some of the debaters to speak authoritatively about the modern poem? Furthermore, it would be interesting to discover the rhetorical and ideological means by which the debaters tried to establish the authority of the new literature alongside the tradition of Finnish literature with its venerable classics.

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