**Literary Modernism in Finland**

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Literary modernism in Finland falls into a set of distinctive sub-movements, defined, in part, by the two languages in which Finnish literature is expressed: Finnish and Swedish. Early modernist features appear in turn-of-the-century impressionist and national-romantic (or symbolist) literature, as well as in the work of authors associated with the 1910s Finland-Swedish *dagdrivare* (‘idlers’), and in that of two movements of the interwar period: the 1920s *tulenkantajat* (‘Torchbearers’) and the 1930s *Kiila* (‘Wedge’) movements. Full modernism was achieved in the Finland-Swedish modernism of the 1910s and 1920s, in the work of poet Edith Södergran, critic and author Hagar Olsson, writer and composer Elmer Diktonius, poet Gunnar Björling, and others. In literature in Finnish, the modernist breakthrough took place as late as the 1950s. Key figures were editor, theorist and poet Thomas Anhava, poet Paavo Haavikko, and the authors Marja-Liisa Vartio and Veijo Meri.

**Early Modernist Literature**

The late nineteenth-century ‘Modern Breakthrough’ in the Nordic literatures, spearheaded by figures such as August Strindberg and Knut Hamsun, did also leave its mark on Finland, which in the period 1809-1917 was an autonomous Grand-Duchy in the Russian Empire. Early modernist features can be discerned in the work of the first professional author writing in Finnish, Juhani Aho (1861–1921), who spent a year in Paris during the world exhibition (1889) and brought back to Finland news, but also new forms and themes in literature. The long novella *Yksin* (*Alone*, 1890), the literary reflection of his experiences in Paris, has been considered an educational journey into European literary life, from which it brings back ‘contemporary topics and material, as well as a form, in which the cultural and artistic rupture of the era is crystallized’ (Nummi 2002, 129). The work heralds a changing perspective on urban modernity, using new stylistic features that have been described by contemporaries and later critics as distinctly impressionistic. The style of Aho, who also worked as a journalist, was in part influenced by the distinctly urban genre of the newspaper causerie. Several collections of his shorter writings, some of which had appeared earlier in periodicals, were published together in subsequent collections under the title *Lastuja* (*Chips from the Block*).

Finnish literature at the turn of the twentieth century was dominated by realist (and to some extent naturalist) tendencies. A less conspicuous, but important undercurrent in literature of the time is national neo-romanticism, the Finnish variant of international symbolism (see Lyytikäinen 1997). In poetry, Eino Leino (1878–1926) established, in his two collections of *Helkavirsiä* (*Whitsongs*; 1903, 1916), afusion of stylistic and thematic elements from Finnish folk poetry (made famous in Elias Lönnrot’s *Kalevala*, 1835/1849) and international symbolism. This happened during a time that became known as the Golden Age of Finnish art, when similar syntheses between international art movements and Kalevala-inspired themes and motifs were ventured in pictorial art by Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), in music in the work of Jean Sibelius (1865–1957), and in architecture by Eliel Saarinen (1873–1950).

Two authors who debuted within national-romantic/symbolist literature would be profoundly influenced by international literary modernism, and produce work that stands apart from that of most of their contemporaries in Finnish literature. The first is Volter Kilpi (1874–1939), who published, with *Alastalon salissa* (‘In the Hall of Alastalo’; 1933), a work that has often been compared to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) because of its dense language, inner monologue, intertextuality, and the mythological dimensions taken on by everyday events. Six hours of drawn-out action, set in a small coastal community in south-western Finland during the 1860, are described in the novel in more than 900 pages. The second author is Joel Lehtonen (1881–1941). He is most famous for *Putkinotko* (*Putkinotko*, 1919-1920), a one-day novel set in the Finnish countryside. Lesser known is his last novel *Henkien taistelu* (*Battle of the Spirits*, 1933), a highly self-conscious satirical novel in the best European tradition of the carnivalesque, which shows the influence of contemporary literary modes such as German expressionism, as well as drawing on the classical Menippeantradition of Petronius Arbiter.

**The *Dagdrivare***

In the Finland-Swedish literature of the first decades of the twentieth century, new themes and stylistic features appeared in the work of a European-oriented group of intellectuals centred on the journals *Euterpe* (1901–1905), *Argus* (1908–1911) and *Nya Argus* (1911–present day). Torsten Helsingius’ novel *Dagdrivare* (*The Idlers*, 1914) would give its name to this loosely structured group of authors that appeared between 1907 and 1917. Influenced by *fin de siècle* decadence and aestheticism, their protagonists tended to be artistic young men from a bourgeois background who idled their days away in the public space of contemporary urban settings: streets, theatres, bars. Aloof from the political turmoil of the day so visible in literature in Finnish, authors associated with this movement focused on evocations of urban estrangement and artist life.

The aversion to politics, the concomitant inward turn to aestheticism, and the cultivation of modern alienation in the work of Finland-Swedish authors in this period has been associated with the gradual political marginalization of the formerly dominant Swedish-speaking population. The sense of belonging to the city while simultaneously cultivating a feeling of alienation came relatively easily to the Swedish-speaking upper and upper-middle class around the turn of the twentieth century. Ture Janson’s (1886–1954) famous poem ‘Staden’ (‘The City’*,* 1913) is symptomatic in this respect. It evokes how it feels ‘to be a stranger in one’s own city’, with no other option than to become a ‘brisk *flâneur*’ mingling with the ‘evening crowds on the promenades’. Nevertheless, the *dagdrivare* were always closer to the dandy than to the *flâneur*, and surrendering to the urban crowd tended to be described as a regrettable condition, rather than as the cherished mission outlined by Charles Baudelaire. In terms of literary form, too, the *dagdrivare* were no radical innovators: Janson’s ‘Staden’ was written in the sonnet form.

**Finland-Swedish Modernism**

In 1916, two poetry debuts appeared, written by Finland-Swedish authors who would not only become close friends, but who would be instrumental in facilitating the radically innovative literary movement that would become known as Finland-Swedish modernism – the first modernist movement in the Nordic countries. These authors were Edith Södergran (1892–1923) and Hagar Olsson (1893–1978). More than any other literary movement in Finland, Finland-Swedish modernism was closely bound up with the contemporary international avant-garde, from German expressionism and Russian futurism to imagism and Dadaism. The modernists of this group are arguably the only group of authors in Finnish literary history to work synchronously with similar innovative international movements, although their double linguistic isolation, as authors within a ‘minor literature’ (in the terms of Deleuze & Guattari 1975), writing in Swedish in a predominantly Finnish context, situated at the periphery of Europe, meant that their impact, both nationally and internationally, would always be limited.

Edith Södergran was the lyrical genius and iconic pioneer of the movement. Her radically innovative and self-confident visionary poems were met by contemporary critics with a distinct lack of understanding. The generally hostile reception of her poetry, combined with the tragic events of her personal life – she died young of tuberculosis, in relative isolation and poverty – have led to the image of a fragile, tragic and reclusive genius. Recent research (Rahikainen 2014) has modified that picture, emphasizing, amongst other things, her irony and lively cosmopolitanism. Södergran drew resourcefully on a wide range of influences, from German expressionism and Nietzsche’s work to French symbolism, Anthroposophy, and the Gospels. Södergran’s most celebrated works are the expressionist *Septemberlyran* (*September Lyre*; 1918) and the posthumously published *Landet som icke är* (*The Land that is Not*, 1925).

After Södergran’s death, Hagar Olsson became the most vocal defender of her poetical legacy. Olsson had become the theorist of modernism in between the wars, and closely followed international developments in art and literature, which she introduced in Finland and the Nordic countries by way of her prolific critical writing and essays. Of her several collections of essays, the volume *Ny generation* (*The New Generation*, 1925), stands out as a conscious program of literary modernism. In her own work, in particular her expressionist drama and prose, she aimed – with mixed success – to bring into effect some of that literary program. Literary magazines such as the radical bilingual magazine *Ultra* (1922) and *Quosego* (1928–1929) constituted an important mouthpiece for Finland-Swedish modernism. Gunnar Björling (1887–1960), one of the most innovative but least recognized Finland-Swedish authors, contributed to both magazines, and it was in *Quosego* that he presented his ideas on modernist ethics, as well as his own characteristic variety of literary modernism, ‘a Dadaist universal stream of life’ (Jansson 2013, 678).

Elmer Diktonius, who edited Södergran’s posthumous poetry collection *Landet som icke är*, was, like Olsson and Björling, a contributor to *Ultra* and *Quosego*. Diktonius’s early poetry was defined by a hardness, sharpness and violence, in particular in his collection *Hårda Sångar* (*Hard songs*, 1922), which contains experiments with aggressive images and the rendering of storms, violent movement and explosions. His poetry has a distinctive rhythmical and musical quality – he was also occupied as composer of experimental music – and contained experiments with sound poetry. Diktonius was well-acquainted with international movements – he translated Ezra Pound – and, while he knew the work of continental modernism, he had a closer affinity with Anglo-American imagism. Diktonius’s most well-known prose work is *Janne Kubik* (*Janne the Cube*, 1932), subtitled a ‘woodcut in words’. The novel’s eponymous protagonist is a member of the Red Guard during the Finnish Civil War (1918), becomes a bootlegger during the Prohibition (1919–1932), and eventually transforms into a member of the extreme-right Lapua movement. The strained political events of the first three decades of the twentieth century are rendered in a set of fragmentary scenes and in complexly twisted language. Diktonius was politically involved: his debut collection of poetry was published by a small communist publishing house in Stockholm, and his early poetry brings together a radical innovation of lyrical form with political engagement and a call to action, epitomized in the poem ‘Jaguaren’ (‘The Jaguar’).

The innovative poetics of many of the authors within Finland-Swedish modernism derived part of their strength from a complex multilingual context. Edith Södergran had attended a German school in St Petersburg during her youth, had experimented with writing poetry in German and was living in between different languages. Elmer Diktonius drew in his prose and poetry almost in violent fashion on the various languages he spoke, in particular on the overlap and intermingling of Finnish and Swedish. The effect was not only aesthetic; multilingualism was also the ‘key to understanding the link between aesthetics and politics in his work’ (Tidigs 2012, 573).

**The *Tulenkantajat* and *Kiila***

The fascination with the exotic and with European modernity in turn-of-the-century symbolist authors was shared and to some extent magnified in the work of the *Tulenkantajat* (‘Torchbearers’), a group of poets who debuted in the 1920s and whose emphatic war cry – borrowed from Diktonius – was to ‘open the windows to Europe’. Most of them were involved with the magazine *Nuori Voima*. They experimented with free verse and a range of new thematics: exoticism, urbanization and modernization. The poetry collection *Valtatiet* (*The Main Roads*, 1928) by Olavi Paavolainen (1903–1964) and Mika Waltari (1908–1979) sums up several of the preoccupations of the generation, cultivating images of speed, mobility and urban modernity.

The *Tulenkantajat* were not as radical or innovative as the contemporary Finland-Swedish modernist movement, with whom they were only remotely associated. Later critics have castigated the movement for a blind enthusiasm bordering on the naïve. Olavi Paavolainen can be considered as the most important theoretician of this movement, of which he was also the harshest critic. Paavolainen’s richly illustrated collection of essays *Nykyaikaa etsimässä* (*In Search of Modern Times*, 1929), dedicated to Hagar Olsson, contains a detailed account of the diverse -isms that fascinated this generation, from Russian and Italian futurism and Dadaism to nudism (including considerations of the latter’s political implications in 1920s Germany).

In the late 1920s and 1930s, the aesthetics and thematic interests of the *Tulenkantajat* found their way in the prose of a number of Finnish authors. Mika Waltari remains the most well-known of these, although more for his later historical novels than because of the literary work of his youth. His debut novel *Suuri illusioni* (*The Great Illusion*, 1928), written partly during a stay in Paris, draws repeatedly, though rarely consistently, on an early modernist repertoire of literary techniques and motifs, and makes use of occasional interior monologue, collage, and a forceful nominal sentence structure. It contains references to Hagar Olsson’s call for a modernist program that would focus on the illusory and that would celebrate – following the poem of the same name by James Elroy Flecker – the ‘Golden Journey to Samarkand’ (see Ameel 2014). Waltari himself later denounced his debut novel as a sin of youth, and in the course of the 1930s, he turned with other authors of his generation to ‘more robust, national traditional values’ (Laitinen 1982, 336). The political radicalization of the 1930s left little room for the poetics of international modernism. Unsettling literary and artistic works were increasingly frowned upon. A telling case is that of Erkki Vala (1902-1991), who, during his tenure as editor-in-chief of the short-lived journal *Tulenkantajat*, was condemned to serve prison time for publishing an excerpt in translation of Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Good Soldier* Švejk (1921–1923).

An ideological counterweight to the rightist cultural environment in the 1930s appeared in the form of the Marxist literary group *Kiila*,founded in 1935. *Kiila* included authors from working-class backgrounds, and left-leaning intellectuals. They were generally more interested in message than form, and their contribution to Finnish modernism remains a point for debate (Riikonen 2007). One of the dominant authors within *Kiila* was Arvo Turtiainen (1904–1980), who went to prison for his political convictions during the continuation war (1941–1944). His most influential literary work (including his pioneering use of Helsinki slang in poetry) and translation (including translations of Edgar Lee Masters and Vladimir Mayakovsky), however, belongs to a later period, and was published in the late 1940s and 1950s.

**Finnish modernism of the 1950s**

In literature written in Finnish, the modernist breakthrough took place relatively late, in the late 1940s and 1950s. Less concerned with the avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 1920s, it took its cues from New Criticism, French existentialism and earlier high modernist models from Anglo-Saxon literature, the work of T. S. Eliot (translated into Finnish in 1949), in particular. Parallels can also be traced to the almost contemporary German *Gruppe 47*, whose ‘premises, tenets and even outcomes can be compared with the activities and results of the Finnish modernists’ (Hökkä 1999, 74). The Finnish modernists established a new idiom in prose and poetry, focusing on a poetics of the everyday and a matter-of-fact style. The literary paradigm shift they brought about would have a long and lasting influence on Finnish literature: the modernist tendencies of the 1950s were rapidly institutionalized, with leading figures occupying prominent positions in publishing, literary criticism, and the university.

Eeva-Liisa Manner (1921–1995) and Paavo Haavikko (1931–2008) are the most important poets amongst the Finnish modernists of the 1950s. Haavikko’s most celebrated work is *Talvipalatsi* (*Winter Palace*, 1959), a poetry collection in which the new lyrical paradigm ‘discusses itself, takes this technique to its zenith, and celebrates its own dense ambiguity and rhetorical boldness’ (Envall 1998, 185). Haavikko was also one of the few modern authors in Finland to integrate themes from Finnish folk poetry (and more generally from Finnish history) to great effect in literary work that commented upon contemporary developments. Eeva-Liisa Manner’s poetry collection *Tama matka* (*This Journey*, 1956) has been credited with achieving the breakthrough of modernist poetics to a greater audience. Manner was also a playwright, critic and translator, translating, amongst others, poetry by Tranströmmer.

The main theorist of the movement was Tuomas Anhava (1927–2001). His influence in the poetics of the 1950s is visible in his prolific work as critic, editor, and translator (he translated Chinese and Japanese literature, amongst others). In prose, the leading modernists were Veijo Meri (1928–2015) and Marja-Liisa Vartio (1924–1966). Meri’s most important work, the novel *Manillaköysi* (*The Manila rope*, 1957) is a satirical account of the Second World War from the perspective of the common soldier. A work that ‘vacillates between a novel and a collection of oral tales’ (Schoolfield), it focuses on the seemingly disconnected small stories and anecdotes recounted by soldiers on a train home for a holiday. Like other works by the 1950s modernists, it has as one of its main thematics the problematization of truth and rationalism, foregrounding instead a vision of reality based on language and (increasingly unreliable) consciousness. The importance of Marja-Liisa Vartio, who was married to Haavikko, has not been sufficiently considered until fairly recently, when a number of academic studies have appeared to reappraise her position in the literary canon as well as her relevance as an innovative surveyor of both human consciousness and literature’s ability to render the workings of the mind in language (Nykänen, 2015). Vartio’s main works are *Se on sitten kevät* (*This Then is Spring*, 1957) and the posthumously published *Hänen olivat linnut* (*The Parson’s Wife*, 1967).

If compared to the national project inherent to preceding mainstream Finnish literature (especially that of the 1930s), the apolitical poetics of the 1950s may appear as distinctly refreshing. In comparisons with the following generations, however, the modernists of the 1950s have been criticized for their aloofness from political questions and for their focus on aesthetic matters. The literary generations of the 1960s and 1970s represented an exceptional political activism. The key figure of that politically vocal authorship was Pentti Saarikoski (1937–1983), whose many public personae included that of Finnish poetic Che Guevara, iconic beret included. Saarikoski’s literary method of ‘dialectical poetry’, visible, amongst others, in the poetry collection *Mitä tapahtuu todella?* (*What is really happening?*, 1962), is a direct continuation of the literary innovations set in motion by Diktonius and others, as much as it has been understood as the first example of postmodernism in Finnish literature.

**Images**

Image 1. Juhani Aho

Image 2. Olavi Paavolainen

Image 3. Edith Södergran

Image 4. Hagar Olsson

Image 5. Elmer Diktonius

Image 6. Paavo Haavikko and Marja-Liisa Vartio

**List of Works**

Aho, Juhani: *Yksin* (‘Alone’) (1890)

Aho, Juhani: *Lastuja I-III* (‘Chips from the Block’) (1891, 1892, 1896)

Diktonius, Elmer: *Hårda Sångar* (‘Hard songs’) (1922)

Diktonius, Elmer: *Janne Kubik* (‘Janne Cube’) (1932)

Haavikko, Paavo: *Talvipalatsi* (‘Winter Palace’) (1959)

Kilpi Volter: *Alastalon salissa* (‘In the Hall of Alastalo’) (1933)

Leino, Eino: *Helkavirsiä I-II* (*Whitsongs*) (1903, 1916).

Lehtonen, Joel: *Putkinotko* (‘Putkinotko’) (1919-1920)

Lehtonen, Joel: *Henkien taistelu* (‘Battle of the Spirits’) (1933)

Manner, Eeva-Liisa: *Tama matka* (‘This Journey’) (1956)

Meri, Veijo: *Manillaköysi* (*The Manila Rope*) (1957)

Olsson, Hagar: *Ny Generation* (‘The New Generation’)(1925)

Paavolainen, Olavi: *Nykyaikaa etsimässä. Esseitä ja pakinoita.* (‘In Search for Modern Times. Essays and Columns’) (1929)

Saarikoski, Pentti: *Mitä tapahtuu todella?* (‘What is really happening?’) (1962)

Sördergan, Edith: *Septemberlyran* (‘The September Lyre’) (1918)

Södergran, Edith: *Landet som icke är* (‘The Land that is Not’) (1925)

Vartio, Marja-Liisa: *Se on sitten kevät* (‘This Then is Spring’) (1957)

Vartio, Marja-Liisa: *Hänen olivat linnut* (*The Parson’s Wife*) (1967)

Waltari, Mika: *Suuri illusioni* (‘The Great *Illusion*’) (1928)

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