

Gendering seekers and upstarts in early twentieth-century Finnish literature

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The search for truth and spirituality, intertwined with the search for one's self, has been a perennial theme in arts and literature. In some works of Finnish literature at the turn of the twentieth century, the figure of a person seeking for spiritual fulfilment tended to intertwine with that of the upstart (*nousukas* in Finnish). At first sight, it might seem odd that these two figures should overlap in literary works, but as I show, especially in early twentieth-century Finnish literature, such cases are not rare, given the wide range of meanings that the word *nousukas* would denote.¹

1 Forms of modern esotericism in Finland's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature have been mentioned and examined in various contexts (see Harmainen 2010; Kortti 2018); however, no deeper research has been done yet on the topic within the discipline of literary criticism. For a partial overview of recent research on *fin de siècle* esoteric trends in Finnish literature see Parente-Čapková 2019: esp. 7. The *fin de siècle* in Finland's literature (and culture in general) is characterized, as in many other countries in Europe, by a 'revival of interest in mysticism and mystery traditions of all kinds', turning to the 'heterodox spirituality of occultism, with its animistic sense of a living universe and broad range of teachings drawn from sources as diverse as those of mystical Christianity, the Hermetic traditions of the West, and the religions of the East' (Owen 2004: 4). For more background on the *fin de siècle* esoteric trends in Finland, see e.g. Harmainen and

In this article, I concentrate on two *fin de siècle* writers, who in their early work, engaged intensely with Symbolism and Decadence: Eino Leino (Armas Einar Leopold Lönnbohm, 1878–1926) and L. Onerva (Hilja Onerva Lehtinen, 1882–1972).² They belong to the category of authors in whose work the figure of the seeker overlaps, in some cases, with that of *nousukas*. Prolific and versatile literary artists who produced work in various genres, from poetry, prose and drama to newspaper articles, they have been known for their interest in Theosophy, religion(s) and heterodox spirituality, as well as for founding and co-editing the literary Theosophical journal *Sunnuntai* (1915–18) and contributing to the Theosophical journal *Tietäjä*. They may be considered representative of authors with a lively interest in spiritual and esoteric issues who did not adhere to any specific branch of modern esotericism. Both were interested in contemporary politics, societal turmoil and social problems; Leino especially had a

Leskelä-Kärki 2017 and Kokkinen 2019 and in this issue.

2 L. Onerva was H. O. Lehtinen's pen name, formed by the first letter of her surname and her middle name.

considerable influence on public opinion (see e.g. Larmola 1990: 323). Both Leino and Onerva identified with European culture (see e.g. Nieminen 1982) which they, as liberal cultural intellectuals (cf. Kortti 2020), mediated by means of various forms of cultural agency, from translations to journalistic activities, public lectures and debates; they disliked and criticized any form of narrow-minded nationalism and parochialism. At the same time, they cared a lot for Finnish culture and greatly contributed to the development of lyric poetry and modern prose genres in the Finnish language. Hence the ways in which figurations of the seeker and *nousukas* intermingle in their works are especially interesting, revealing important aspects of the discourses that surrounded them. What do the fusion or opposition of seeker and *nousukas* tell us about the concept of seekership found in the work of Leino and L. Onerva? What does it tell us about the ways in which spiritual and social concerns interact in their texts? To answer these questions, I look at both vertical and horizontal axes of seekers' and upstarts' activities as portrayed by Leino and L. Onerva in their prose works, mostly from the first decade of the twentieth century, paying special attention to the gender dynamic of the figures. Through concentrating mainly on ideas in the chosen texts I tackle, at least briefly, the rhetorical strategy of irony.

In their poetry, we can see Leino's and L. Onerva's concern with the concept of seekership in the very titles of some of the poems: for example L. Onerva's poem 'Seeker' ('Etsijä', 1908), or Leino's poem 'Seeker of Truth' ('Totuuden etsijä', 1912) (cf. Parente-Čapková 2019: esp. 4–6). For both L. Onerva and Leino, the search for truth fuses with that for art and spirituality. Like many of their contemporaries, the two authors were infatuated with Nietzsche's

ideas of comparing art and religion and considering the former as a substitute for the latter, as expressed for example in the 'Animation of art' in *Human, All-Too-Human* (1878): art takes over 'many feelings and moods engendered by religion' (Nietzsche 1878/1910: 156).³ Nietzsche's radically new way of understanding the relationship between art, artistic beauty and truth (e.g. Came 2014) had a profound influence on Leino and Onerva.⁴ Nevertheless, apart from their critical stance towards the institution of the (Lutheran) Church, the Christian and any other institutionalized religions as such, Christianity remained a source of inspiration for both writers, whether intertwined with pre-Christian elements of Finnish folk poetry and the 'Finnish epic' *The Kalevala* (e.g. Oksala 1986; Parente-Čapková 2019), their search for inspiration in pre-Reformation medieval Christianity, or a fascination with Catholicism.⁵

3 German original: '[Die Kunst] übernimmt eine Menge durch die Religion erzeugter Gefühle und Stimmungen' (Nietzsche 1878–9/1967: 146).

4 For more on Leino's and L. Onerva's Nietzschean inspirations see, e.g. Ervasti 1960; Kunnas 1972; Lyytikäinen 1997; Parente-Čapková 2004, 2014.

5 It was typical of many Western European Symbolist and Decadent writers (J.-K. Huysmans, Paul Verlaine, Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley and many others) to convert to Catholicism or to be, at least, strongly attracted to it, its mystic tradition, aesthetic appeal, and the 'dialectic of shame and grace' (Hanson 1997: 12, 27). The (mostly French and British) Decadents' and Symbolists' (Baudelaire, Huysmans, Yeats, Symons, Machen) interest in esotericism as spirituality or occultism has been a subject of lively interest and various polemics (see, e.g. Pynsent 1989: esp. 215–25; Goodrick-Clarke 1989; Burrow 2000; Sherry 2015: 8; Denisoff 2018).

Seekership and (social) climbing

The concepts of *seeker* and *seekership* (*etsijäys*), adopted from the sociology of religion, have been introduced into the *fin de siècle* Finnish context by the art historian Nina Kokkinen (within the project 'Uuden etsijät – Seekers of the New') in her 2019 study on occulture in the visual arts; that is to say manifestations of the *mélange* of esoteric, mystic and occult trends in early twentieth-century visual art in Finland. Kokkinen (2019: 52) speaks about occulture as a milieu formed by various esoteric discourses, seekers being key agents in this field. I use the concept of seekership in a very similar way, denoting a type of agency relevant for the context. While my main focus is on literary representations of the seeker, the search for spirituality was clearly a central personal issue for both Leino and L. Onerva; they reflect on it in a similar way in both their fictional works and their letters. Writers, like other artists, can be seen as religious and spiritual seekers who, in their texts, express their need or urge 'to shape independently their religiosity and the art connected to it, bringing together and uniting various elements, weighing and pondering their personal experiences' (Kokkinen 2019: 56; see also 51–7). It is remarkable that the very words 'seekership' and 'seeker' (namely seeker of truth) were used so often at the turn of the twentieth century, as Kokkinen and Riikka Stewen have shown (2019: e.g. 55–7).⁶ In Finnish literature, the word occurred frequently in the work of Eino Leino and L. Onerva (see

Parente-Čapková 2019). The description of the seeker as somebody critical of the church and seeking 'a new perspective on religion', 'a metaphysical wanderer ... drifting between religious alternatives, remaining open to the various views (often connected with esotericism) but ultimately not subscribing to any of them' (Kokkinen in this issue⁷) fits Leino and L. Onerva very well.

Seekership implies searching – vertically, horizontally and beyond all directions. Apart from the metaphorical meaning, it often implies a literal exploration of varied landscapes and cityscapes. Many *fin de siècle* seeker figures look for the truth, art and spirituality in various places, travelling feverishly to find them in some remote part of the globe. Others, especially those with Nietzschean Over(wo)man (*Übermensch*) aspirations, try to rise above the surrounding society, literally climbing mountains and exploring the metaphor of elevating oneself, typical of many religions and other forms of spirituality, including Theosophy. Nietzscheanism tends to fuse with Romantic and *fin de siècle* ideas about the personality of the artist, as well as with ideas of 'New Humankind' (*uusi ihmisyys*), and the 'New Human Being' (*uusi ihminen*). The writer, the artist, who became – especially in Symbolism – a kind of a priest, prophet or seer, imagines himself (and, in exceptional cases, herself) as elevated above a surrounding crowd which cannot understand his genius, in the spirit of Baudelaire's 'The Albatross': the bird's 'wings, those of a giant, hinder him [the albatross] from walking'.⁸ At the turn of the

6 Kokkinen brings up Riikka Stewen's observation of how much the verb 'to seek' was used among the Finnish and Scandinavian artists who were working in Paris during the 1890s, uniting artists, spiritists, scholars and scientists (Kokkinen 2019: 55–6, pointing to Stewen 2014).

7 Kokkinen refers to Sutcliffe 2017.

8 French original: 'Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher'; from 'L'Albatros', first published in 1859; translation into English by Elli Siegel.

twentieth century, the search for art, truth and spirituality could mean descending to the depths of one's soul, in a more general or specifically psychoanalytic sense (see e.g. Kunnas 1972). This was often symbolized by the figure of Narcissus diving into his reflection, explored in both Symbolist and psychological or psychoanalytical contexts (Lyytikäinen 1997), and in terms of characters from other mythologies descending into the underworld.

Meanwhile elevation, decline and descent also had social connotations, as with the *fin de siècle* artists' contempt for *les bourgeois*, the Decadents' controversial admiration for aristocracy and their ambivalent view of the 'lower classes' and society's outcasts. The social context is directly connected to the 'social field of action that transcends the individual seeker' (Kokkinen in this issue). This was, obviously, very different in countries such as France and Britain than in Finland, where the process of 'national awakening' peaked in the early twentieth century (e.g. Hroch 1985). Since the nineteenth century, the essence of Finnishness had been seen in the *kansa*, that is the native, ordinary Finnish speakers, the country folk or populace (e.g. Klinge 1990). Hence Finnish-speaking Symbolist/Decadent⁹ authors had a different relationship to the various strata of society than their colleagues did in European cultural centres.

Given Eino Leino and L. Onerva's interest in politics (in the large sense of the word) and social issues, it is no surprise that some seeker figures in their works intermingle and overlap with the figure of *nousukas* (lit.

9 In Finnish literature, it is not always possible or meaningful to differentiate between the various 'isms' (see e.g. Lyytikäinen 1997).

'a person on the rise'). The term has been notoriously difficult to translate: none of the translations, such as *parvenu*, *arriviste*, *nouveau riche*, *upstart*, *social climber*, *Emporkömmling*, *uppkomling* or *выскачка* seem adequate, given the different ways of 'elevating oneself' socially in various contexts. In view of the difficulties with the translation, I use the original Finnish word *nousukas* (or occasionally *upstart*) throughout the article. In the early twentieth-century Finnish context, *nousukas* referred not only to a person who strives to climb upwards economically, but also to a person who seeks to elevate him/herself by means of education, becoming a member of the intelligentsia.¹⁰ This concept echoed, at least partly, ideas about the need to bring the intelligentsia and lower strata of society closer together, mainly through education, as coined by the thinker, journalist, writer and politician J. V. Snellman, later called Finland's 'national philosopher' (see e.g. Lahtinen 2006: esp. 69–80).

The figure of *nousukas* was thus directly connected to the nationalist aspiration of the day, given that the early twentieth century was the culminating phase of the national awakening in Finland. *Nousukas* denoted 'rise' and 'fall', but also movement of persons between 'the people' (*kansa* – considered the fundamental force of the national cause), or so-called 'lower classes', on the one hand, and the so-called 'upper classes' and intelligentsia on the other (cf.

10 For the history of the word *nousukas* in Finnish see e.g. Rojola 2009: esp. 12. In the nineteenth century, *nousukas* referred mostly to economic and social climbing; this is still the case in K. A. Järvi's novel *Nousukas* (1904). In L. Onerva's collection of short stories, *Nousukkaita* (1911), the meaning of 'social climbing' is much broader, deeper and also gendered.

e.g. Melkas *et al.* 2009). Both intelligentsia and *kansa* were, of course, heterogeneous groups with many inner differences, from ethnicity and linguistic identity to gender (Rojola 2009: 6–7). *Nousukas* figures depicted in Finnish literary works at the turn of the twentieth century were often students coming to the city (mostly Helsinki) from the countryside (‘peasant students’, *talonpoikaisylioppilaat*), and artists. As mentioned above, the artist’s urge to ‘rise’ is sometimes linked in the *fin de siècle* context to Over(wo)man fantasies; in conjunction with *nousukas*, it might acquire rather grotesque overtones. As such, *nousukas* is a deeply ambivalent, mostly melancholic figure, a seeker for the impossible, obsessed with both the search for a – mostly unattainable – ideal and the eternal – mostly abortive – ‘longing to belong’ (cf. Sasson 2012). This last did not necessarily mean longing to belong to a higher social rank only, but also desire to identify with a particular idea.

Eino Leino’s male seekers and upstarts

As indicated above, Eino Leino’s and L. Onerva’s early twentieth-century works were strongly influenced by Decadence, Symbolism and Nietzscheanism. Both writers were involved in the search for (a new) spirituality in which, like many of their contemporaries, they explored a wide range of ancient and modern ideas and beliefs.¹¹ In Eino Leino’s work, the figure of

11 Leino explored themes and motifs from Finnish folk poetry in depth, either directly, or from its textualizations as the so-called Finnish national epic, *The Kalevala* (1st version 1835, 2nd version 1849), based on a mixture of pre-Christian and Christian material, with various layers manifesting common features with nineteenth-century mystic and esoteric teachings. *The Kalevala* was a most important source of inspiration



Eino Leino in Kangasniemi in the summer of 1903. Wikimedia Commons.

the *nousukas* is often ridiculed and appears in satiric pieces. Sometimes, he calls the whole Finnish nation a *nousukas*, referring to the short history of high culture in the Finnish language (for example, in the novel *Olli Suurpää*, 1908). In his poem ‘Civil Peace’ (‘Kansalaisrauha’, 1919), the ambivalence of the notion of the *nousukas* is aptly expressed in the way Leino calls on the ‘Finnish kin’ or nation (‘suku Suomen’) to ‘be an aristocrat, though you are an upstart [*nousukas*]!’¹² The final verse of the poem

both for its potential use in the national project and for its appeal to everybody interested in esotericism (see e.g. Carlson 2008). L. Onerva drew more on the Western tradition of classical antiquity and European literature, though also using Finnish folk poetry as a source of inspiration (see Parente-Čapková 2014, 2019). Both were also interested in non-Western thought and belief systems.

12 Finnish original: ‘Ole ylimys, vaikk’ olet nousukas!’ (Leino 1919/26). All the

suggests that ‘elevating oneself’ and ‘being an aristocrat’ do not depend on belonging to the ‘real’ aristocracy, but on great and noble inner qualities that make the Finnish kin the ‘European bastion of honour’ (‘Euroopan kunniamuuri’, *ibid.*). Narrow-minded, provincial nationalism is ironized and ridiculed, with an apparent desire to ‘elevate’ the Finnish nation and build faith in its future.

Leino’s seekers, who are pronouncedly male, move on both vertical and horizontal axes. Especially in Leino’s early poetry, the seeker appears as an Overman artist, embodied often in the figure of a shaman. His extraordinary abilities allow him to rise above the rest of humankind when undertaking the ‘shaman’s journey’; in a kind of katabasis, he also descends to the underworld, like the figure of Lemminkäinen in Finnish folk poetry, known mostly from Elias Lönnrot’s *The Kalevala*. The journey the artist-shaman undertakes can be (or, sometimes, explicitly is) interpreted as a search for the truth and ultimate knowledge, and as a journey into his own soul.¹³ In Leino’s prose, we often find the figure of the artist or student who comes to the city from the countryside; he faces a dilemma between dedicating himself

translations of Leino’s and L. Onerva’s quotes are mine.

13 As Michael Branch (1978: 11) has pointed out, the pantheist Symbolist theory appeared, in a way, parallel to ‘the ancient Finnish concepts of an existence in which the living and the dead were part of the same whole, interdependent and able to communicate through the medium of the shaman’. Apart from the heroes from *The Kalevala*, the most appealing shaman figures, heroes defying their fate and involved in the search for the truth and the ultimate knowledge, appear in Leino’s collection of poems *Helkavirsiä* (*Whitsongs*, 1903) (cf. e.g. Peltonen 1975; Oksala 1986; Parente-Čapková 2019).

to *l’art-pour-l’art*, hedonism and a bohemian way of life, and taking responsibility to speak for the nation, his own people, becoming their conscience (in this context, this means dedication to both the patriotic mission and to a quest for deeper truths). This struggle is permeated with a search for the spiritual; here, the *nousukas* intermingles with the seeker. The idea of rising above the surrounding world (or exploring the depths of one’s soul) in the name of a search for the spiritual and/or art is embodied in a number of Leino’s characters.

In Leino’s prose of the 1900s and 1910s, these themes are connected to seekership involved in a cause, for ideas and ideals, as well as with the back-and-forth movement between social classes and a search for one’s place in society, for belonging. Within the genre of novel of ideas, these are discussed in Leino’s trilogy *Tuomas Vitikka* (1906), *Jaana Rönty* (1907) and *Olli Suurpää* (1908). In *Tuomas Vitikka*, Leino (1906: 7) ironizes the idea of a ‘national synthesis’ in the character of the tutor Aavasaksa, introduced as a ‘goat-eyed friend of his country’ (‘vuohensilmäinen isänmaan-ystävä’):

According to the solid, unbroken and idealistic worldview, which despises everything incomplete, he was, at the same time, a thoroughbred socialist and a thoroughbred language zealot, a pious Christian, and an extremely Pagan-minded ancient Finn. ... He embraced everything that was between heaven and earth and digested it in his huge, glowing, apostle’s heart. (Leino 1906: 48)¹⁴

14 Finnish original: ‘Eheän ja ihanteellisen maailmankatsomuksensa mukaan, joka halveksi kaikkea puolinaista, hän oli samalla kertaa sekä täysverinen sosialisti ja yhtä täysverinen kielikiikhoonien natsionalisti,

Another character in this novel, the German F. G. Meyer, ‘a redundant professor of aesthetics and art historian from Heidelberg university,’¹⁵ similarly strives to create a broad synthesis of ‘opposite artistic currents’, celebrating Finnish folk life, but also striving to capture the ‘eternal strivings of humankind’ (‘ihmiskunnan iäisyden pyrkimyksiä’, Leino 1906: 53). Leino’s multilayered irony, sometimes blunt, sometimes subtle, functions on many levels (Ojajarvi 2009: 217–22); here, it is aimed at all kinds of ideological or religious fanaticism (cf. Harmainen 2010: 139) and at alleged syntheses that are not products of genuine seekership, but recycle bombastic, empty words.

The most remarkable character in Leino’s novels that fuses the figures of the seeker and *nousukas* is the ‘eternal seeker’ Johannes Tamminen in the Slave Tetralogy, who can partly be viewed (especially *vis-à-vis* his seekership) as the author’s *alter ego*. The tetralogy is a series of novels published in 1911–13, titled *Työn orja* (‘Slave of Work’, 1911), *Rahan orja* (‘Slave of Money’, 1912), *Naisen orja* (‘Slave of Woman’, 1913) and *Onnen orja* (‘Slave of Happiness’, 1913). Though irony is present even in this novel series, there is less of it than in the previous trilogy. Johannes, a seeker and a *nousukas*, searches for fulfilment by various means, as the titles of the respective novels suggest. Johannes’s upstart ambition, evoking the genre of the novel of ambition,¹⁶ was

samalla harras kristitty ja tuiki pakanallinen muinaissuomalainen. ... Hän sulki syliinsä kaikki, mitä maan ja taivaan välillä oli, ja sulatti sen oman suureen leimuavaan apostolinsydämeensä?

15 Finnish original: ‘Ylimääräinen estetiikan professori ja taidehistorioitsija Heidelbergin yliopistosta’ (Leino 1906: 8).

16 According to some critics, the very genre of the novel of ambition can be ‘conflated’

noted and highlighted in its contemporary reception. Some of the contemporary critics saw Johannes Tamminen as the quintessence of (social) climbing. For example, the critic E[ero] J[ärvinen] (1912), according to whom the concept of *nousukas* points to the kind of people who are ‘most typical of our country at this moment’,¹⁷ observed that Johannes comes from the lower-middle class and although he hates the upper class, he tries his best to rise socially by all means. In the novels Johannes is contrasted with other upstart figures, some of them describable as *nouveau riche*, trying to climb socially by means of wealth, that is without striving intellectually and spiritually. For Johannes, the search for faith and spirituality, truth, ideas he could identify with, love (profane and sacred) and freedom are central, juxtaposed with a search for his own self. Religious ideas are juxtaposed with capitalism, socialism and patriotism in the novels, which are set mostly in cityscapes of central, western and southern Europe, where Leino himself travelled during the first decade of the twentieth century.

The tetralogy is a third-person narrative, but the narration is consequentially focalized through Johannes, providing the reader with an unmistakably male perspective (Hyttinen 2014: 40). The novels consist of many, at times rather improbable, plot twists and peripeteias. In *Rahan orja*, we find a most intriguing scene of love and tenderness between women (seen by Johannes in the mirror through the

with ‘the figure of the parvenue in a parallel psychoanalytical reading’ (Sasson 2012: 9–10).

17 Finnish original: ‘Se laji ihmisiä, joka ehkä on isänmaallemme tällä hetkellä ominaisin, nimittäin nousukkaat.’

open door);¹⁸ on the whole, however, the female characters appear mostly as various aspects of the protagonist's psyche, or as elements of the plot. In *Onnen orja*, at the end of this 'epic of development' (*kehitysepos*, see Oksala 1986: 63), or in other words, his journey of spiritual searching (cf. Kokkinen in this issue), Johannes Tamminen stays in Italy, where he is fascinated with the way 'Pagan' strata intermingle with later Christianity and contemporary Catholicism.¹⁹ Leino deals with this theme in an exoticizing, often also eroticizing way, typical of Decadent writing: for example, when Johannes explores the figure of Helena, the Roman empress and saint, enjoying the union of 'Christian piety' and 'Byzantine cruelty, glamour and greed for power'²⁰ he finds in her (Leino 1913/2001: 582–3). 'This kind of Christian he could have been. Belonging to St Helena's court, he could have become a mystic, at least for a while' (Leino 1913/2001: 583).²¹

Thoughts provoked by the mixture of St Helena's 'Asian paganism' ('aasialainen pakanuus', Leino 1913/2001: 584), the thin layer of Christianity and the sensual

atmosphere derange Johannes so badly that he becomes consumed by the 'duty' to get rid of 'sinful woman' in the figure of his beloved Liisa. He tries to murder her in the Roman catacombs, which symbolize primitive and atavistic instincts, as physical and metaphorical underground places in Leino's works often do.²² The murder plan fails and Johannes is brought to a mental asylum. Only after this last, wild and macabre peripeteia, a kind of purgatory, does he find peace. At the end of the tetralogy, Johannes lives the modest life of a hermit in the mountains. The motif of the hermit, so important for many mystical traditions (see Kokkinen 2019) remains on a rather general level, similarly to various others religious, mystical and occult motifs and allusions that appear in the tetralogy. Disappointed by the political and philosophical ideas he has encountered, by carnal love, traditional religion, and by the ready-made spiritual alternatives, Johannes finally finds happiness as a hermit, observing the world around him from a new perspective, after having – literally – *risen and climbed* a mountain. He lives on Monte Cavo, the highest mountain of the Colli Albani (Alban Hills) near Rome, seeking solitude in his village. Every day, he climbs on the peak of Monte Cavo, enjoying the happiness of his solitude far from the world:

Is he a Christian? Is he a Pagan? He does not know himself. He knows only that the Truth is the highest religion of all and that the Sun is the same for everyone, though its light falls on the

- 18 For a queer reading of this section of the novel see Hyttinen 2014: 39–41. Traditionally, the erotic scene between the two cousins, Signe and Johannes's wife Irene, used to be interpreted as a manifestation of high society vices, indulgence in an 'artificial', 'unnatural' kind of love (see e.g. Oksala 1986: 64).
- 19 An important topic for intertextual research would be Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which Leino was translating into Finnish in the same period (published as *Jumalainen näytelmä* in 1912).
- 20 Finnish original: 'Kristillinen hurskaus yhtynyt hänessä byzantiniseen julmuuteen, loistoon ja vallan himoon.'
- 21 Finnish original: 'Tuollainen kristitty hänkin olisi voinut olla. Pyhän Helenan hoviin kuuluvana hänkin olisi voinut ehkä hetkelisesti tulla mystikoksi.'

- 22 For example, in the earlier novels such as *Olli Suurpää* (see Molarius 1998: xvii), or *Jaana Rönty*, where the dangerous and atavistic primitivism is symbolized by the bog. See also Kunnas 1972.

earth in the form of different beams.
(Leino 1913/2001: 611)²³

Elevating himself above the rest of the world (albeit without the Nietzschean egotism he had overcome earlier), living in harmony with majestic nature under the 'Sun', Johannes proclaims the peace and harmony typical of Leino's pantheist and Theosophical inspirations (cf. Sallamaa 2008) that Maria-Liisa Kunnas (1972: 252–71) called 'religious pantheism'. The route to truth and happiness, the positive way of ascendance, should be the same for everyone: 'The same path, the same truth, the same life' (Leino 1913/2001: 611).²⁴ This conclusion expresses both Leino's concern for social justice and a synthesis of religions, belief systems, ideologies and world-views (cf. e.g. Oksala 1986: 50), a synthesis that he does not ironize, but develops in his other works. Johannes's 'Truth' appears in tune with Leino's striving towards transcendent individualism, typical also of Theosophy (cf. Harmainen 2010: 139).

L. Onerva's feminine and androgynous seekers and upstarts

As pointed out above, in the Slave Tetralogy, Leino's hero is unmistakably male.²⁵ In L. Onerva's work, gendering the

figures of the seeker and *nousukas* is thematized and problematized. The Symbolist and Decadent aesthetic and strong influence of Nietzscheanism make L. Onerva's early texts resound with an ecstatic and blissful tone, intermingled with a pessimistic and melancholic mood. Her seekers and *nousukas* characters are marked by a search for spirituality, truth, love, and art, though in a different way from Leino's. In L. Onerva's early work, all gods are broken and fragmented, as suggested by the title of the collection *Särjetyt jumalat* ('Broken Gods', 1910); nevertheless, in a typically Decadent paradox, God is often invoked (Parente-Čapková 2019: 17–18). L. Onerva's early works are also marked by an oscillation between ironic distance and pathos, another paradox to be found in poetry and prose by the French authors she read and translated at the turn of the twentieth century.²⁶

In her work, L. Onerva constructs, explores and questions various figurations of gender fluidity. However, L. Onerva's *nousukas* and seeker figures are often feminine women, as in the novel *Mirdja* (1908), called the most Decadent and a strongly Nietzschean of Finnish novels, which has been included in the Finnish feminist literary canon since the 1990s. *Mirdja* is a special kind of *nousukas*, the daughter of

23 Finnish original: 'Onko hän kristitty? Onko hän pakana? Ei hän tiedä sitä itsekään. Hän tietää vain, että totuus on korkein uskonto kaikista ja että aurinko on kaikille sama, vaikka sen valkeus eri säteinä maahan lankeaa.'

24 Finnish original: 'Sama tie, sama totuus, sama elämä.'

25 There are female protagonists in Leino's novels (e.g. the eponymous heroine of *Jaana Rönty*, 1907), but as characters they tend to be less rich and rounded than the male ones. Hence their seekership and various ways of rising and climbing tend

to be rather one-dimensional, especially compared to the complexity of Leino's male seekers and upstart characters (see also Molarius 1998: xxii).

26 L. Onerva was one of the most prolific translators and mediators of French culture in early twentieth-century Finland; not least of works by Charles Baudelaire, Alfred de Musset, Paul Bourget, Camille Mauclair, Joseph Bédier and most importantly here, Anatole France's *Thaïs* (1890, L. Onerva's translation into Finnish published in 1911) with its 'gnostic Decadence' (cf. Forshaw 2018).

a ‘gypsy singer’ and a bohemian Decadent dilettante. Like every *nousukas*, she is obsessed with the question of origin (cf. Sasson 2012: esp. 20–4), though, paradoxically, in the company of Decadent artists and dilettantes, her ‘bohemian’ origin is seen in a positive light. She is a Decadent version of the *picara*²⁷ on an eternal quest, brought up by her uncle, a ‘philosopher and a hermit.’²⁸ Throughout her life, she seeks her roots and identity, art and artistry, love in the sense of ‘mystical marriage’ and the fusion with the beloved, the existence of an Over(wo)man and a Universal Being (fantasized about by Mirdja’s father), motherhood (that of both her own mother, who died giving birth to her, and her own), spirituality and, eventually, (the female) deity.

L. Onerva’s spiritual search was manifested by her aforementioned interest in Catholicism; she felt that Protestant Christianity lacked a female deity and she was captivated by the Catholic cult of sacred womanhood. In *Mirdja*, she makes her protagonist search for her mother and the secrets of mystic motherhood, both at the very earthly level, and through art and spirituality.²⁹ In the novel, institutionalized



L. Onerva, 1907. Wikimedia Commons.

- 27 As Anne Kaler (1991: 45) points out, many elements of the *picara* narrative dovetail with *picara*’s origin in stories of the lives of saints.
- 28 The figure of the hermit appears in L. Onerva’s other texts, namely the short story ‘Naisen arvoitus’ (‘The Enigma of Woman’), in *Jerusalem in suutari ynnä muita tarukuvia* (‘The Cobbler of Jerusalem and Other Mythical Tales’, 1921); see Parente-Čapková 2019: 21–2.
- 29 See also Parente-Čapková 2014; 2019: 19–20. L. Onerva’s interest in the figure of Virgin Mary was further expressed in the collection of stories *Neitsyt Maarian lahja ynnä muita legendoja* (‘The Virgin Mary’s Gift and Other Legends’, 1918); see Parente-Čapková 2019: 20–2.

Protestant religion and the (Lutheran) Church are fiercely rejected; church marriage is derided. Mirdja’s mentor, a decadent dilettante named Rolf Tanne (inspired by the figure of Eino Leino), teaches her to hate the ‘pillars of society’, the ‘great twin idiot idols’ (‘*epäjumalainen suurkaksois-idiootti*’, L. Onerva 1908/56: 248): state and church. The nationalist zeal of middle-class parochial patriots is also ridiculed.

Yet the ‘nation’ is by no means irrelevant to Mirdja’s search. Her way of elevating herself socially is characterized by the back-and-forth movement mentioned earlier, as for example when she tries to ‘merge with the *kansa*’ at a folk festival she visits by chance. The folk, in the image of a crowd, approaches Mirdja – who was brought up as an Over(wo)man and has been used to taking a bird’s-eye perspective – at her own level (L. Onerva 1908/56: 134). She experiences contradictory emotions, from the

blissful feeling of participating in ‘God’s feast’ and an ecstatic urge to merge with ‘the ocean’ of people, the ‘overwhelming, liberating force’, expressing ideas of a ‘unity of all human beings’, common across many *fin de siècle* currents of thought, and typical for the Decadents. This contradiction resonates with ‘one of the basic conflicts of modern people, the conflict between desire for symbiosis’, the ‘belief in the spiritual origin of humankind and shared solidarity’, typical of Theosophy, and the *fin de siècle* individualism and ‘need for self-reflexivity’, fusing with various pantheist tendencies (Parente-Čapková 2014: 59–60); moreover, it also evokes a complex ‘longing to belong’. Mirdja’s urge and subsequent disappointment are strongly gendered, since, after the ecstatic phase – in the form of fear and emotion – she experiences a kind of a collective rape (not physical). The episode ends in feelings of alienation from the *kansa* and despair. Mirdja’s whole search ends up in a bog, where ironically, she, a female seeker and *nousukas*, sinks into the depths, looking for the child she never had. This tragic ending is in tune with the opportunities a woman seeker like Mirdja had at the very beginning of the twentieth century.³⁰

Mirdja is a beautiful woman with many feminine qualities, and, as such, she seeks to appropriate the role of the artist and genius. Indeed, Mirdja’s father dreams of a ‘new human being’ as a ‘universal creature in the figure of woman’ (‘kaikkeusolento nainen hahmossa’, L. Onerva 1908/56: 124). In L. Onerva’s early short story ‘The Fantasist’ (‘Kuvittelija’ from *Murtoviivoja*, ‘Broken Lines’, 1909), the gender of the perfect fantasy creature is pronouncedly ambivalent.

30 For the many stages, peripeteias and aspects of Mirdja’s search, see esp. Parente-Čapková 2014.

In this short story, the seeker and the *nousukas* are juxtaposed – or rather, opposed. An unconventional person called Tuulos, who lives in his own world, as if above or beyond the surrounding reality, sees only things relevant to him. He finds the ideal of absolute beauty and perfection in a creature he fantasizes for himself and worships like a deity.

Since the word was the only one used in Finnish in similar contexts in the early twentieth century (see Parente-Čapková 2001), Tuulos calls the creature a hermaphrodite (*hermafrodiitti*, L. Onerva 1909: 58): ‘Hermaphrodite! The perfection of beauty! The perfection of humankind ... which holds eternity in the curve of his/her eye!’³¹ Tuulos elevates himself into a secret realm that he himself constructs, which the surrounding society cannot see or comprehend. There – and only there – can his ideal being exist. He is completely misunderstood by the first-person narrator, an ironized *petit bourgeois* and a conventional kind of *nousukas*, alien to aesthetics, philosophy and the committed spiritual search. ‘The Fantasist’ shows L. Onerva’s familiarity with the *fin de siècle* interest in – almost obsession with – the figure of the androgyne as ‘the absolute goal of human spiritual evolution’; by creating this figure, artists created ‘a form of mystical art’ that, for some, served ‘to re-establish the role of religious art in intellectual society’ (Davisson 2005: 34).³² At the same time, the fantasy

31 Finnish original: ‘Hermafrodiitti! Kauneuden täydellisyys! Ihmisen täydellisyys ... joka silmänkaarroksessaan kantaa kaikkeutta!’

32 Davisson discusses especially Joséphine Péladan’s concept of androgyny. About the figure of the androgyne in Decadent and Symbolist art, see e.g. West 1993; in the Finnish context, see e.g. Sarajas-Korte

of androgyny served the author in her concern with gender issues (see Parente-Čapková 2001).

L. Onerva's *Nousukkaita* - frustrated and happy seekers

Finally, I discuss some examples of the figures of the *nousukas* and seeker merging in L. Onerva's collection of short stories, entitled with *nousukas* in a plural form, *Nousukkaita* ('Upstarts', 1911). The stories in the collection are mostly tragic ones about different seekers who try to elevate themselves in various ways, but almost always fail. There are some typical *nousukas* figures; students or artists who move from the country to the city, Helsinki or even Paris. Each of these characters is unique, with psychological depth, and each case has its own distinctive features. The eponymous protagonist of 'Marja Havu' is one of the most tragic in the collection. She comes from amongst the lowest strata of *fin de siècle* urban society, 'between pariah and parvenu' (Sasson 2012: 32–51): a laundrymaid's daughter, a simple and naïve admirer of the bourgeoisie. She seeks for higher forms of existence by economic advancement through hard work and personal sacrifice, accompanied by ardent faith in the Christian God: indeed, she interprets important events of her life as manifestations of the 'finger of God' ('Jumalan sormi', L. Onerva 1911: 75).

Marja was not always a seeker; she used to humbly accept her fate and believe in God in the most traditional way, never questioning anything. However, one night she begins to dream about elevating herself through a kind of mystical, revolutionary eschatology, and defiance grows

1966; Lahelma 2014; Kokkinen 2019. For more on L. Onerva's treatment of the theme of androgyny, see Parente-Čapková 2001.

in her soul. She begins to see 'abysses and heights' she could never have dreamed of ('ennen-aavistamattomia kuiluja ja kukkuloita'). 'Accusation gained a foothold in her humble, Christian heart, and the socialist world spirit swept through her musty brain for the first time' (L. Onerva 1911: 79–80).³³ This kind of bliss, resulting from attempts at a synthesis of socialism and various esoteric trends – namely Theosophy – is known from *fin de siècle* literature both in Finland and abroad (Owen 2004; Beaumont 2010; Kemppainen 2017). However, when Marja wants to get hold of the public space, wandering the streets at night in an ecstasy of fantasy during her search for a liberating revolution, in a cruelly ironical plot twist, she is shamed and 'put in her place', being labelled an 'old slut' ('vanha lutka') by a passer-by. She falls back into her usual Christian humbleness, knowing she is, 'by her roots, attached to her old God': her 'attempt at defiance had been suppressed' (L. Onerva 1911: 83;³⁴ see also Parente-Čapková 2013).

A similar ending can be found in the short story 'Kaija', though the protagonist appears to be the opposite of Marja: Kaija is a second-generation upstart, the only daughter of the director of a paper mill, a *nouveau riche* who spoils his offspring, allowing her to believe she can do whatever she wants. Upbringing by a *nouveau riche nousukas* also seems to yield different results than for the aforementioned protagonist of the novel *Mirdja*. While *Mirdja*

33 Finnish original: 'Syytös oli saanut jalan-sijan tässä nöyrässä, kristillisessä sydämessä ja sosialistinen maailmanhenki puhalsi ensimmäisen kerran läpi hänen ummehtuneiden aivojensa...'

34 Finnish original: 'Hän oli juuristaan kätetty kiinni vanhaan Jumalaan.' – 'Marjan uhma oli kukistettu' (L. Onerva 1911: 83).

also grows up a narcissist, she is nevertheless concentrated on art, while Kaija from *Nousukkaita* becomes a selfish, power-hungry woman who seeks more and more power, indulges in self-adoring ecstasy of an Over(wo)man and elevates herself above other people both literally, climbing up high mountains, and metaphorically. When she stands on a high mountain, she ‘imagines standing on the peak of a giant kingdom’ (L. Onerva 1911: 165).³⁵ Her hubris, lack of conscience and pity come to an end when she causes an injury to a small child: suddenly she feels an agony of conscience, sinks into madness and silence and begins to practise traditional, that is, Christian Lutheran, religion. Though Kaija fell from her ‘highest castles in the air to the depths of reality’, the ‘feeling of sin could not kill her imagination’: it just changed ‘from a Pagan to a Christian’, as the ironic narrator of the short story informs the reader. The reader is left to wonder whether the narrator is still being ironic when she goes on to state that Kaija’s imagination has been ‘led to understand people’s misery and search for the eternal peace of the Kingdom of God’ (L. Onerva 1911: 174).³⁶

In the whole collection, the only story with any kind of a happy ending appears to be the final one, ‘The Voice of Blood’ (‘Veren ääni’). The protagonist Kaarina is, once again, a *nouveau riche* upstart’s daughter, who wants to climb even higher by

marriage, ‘the ultimate step of social climbing’ (Sasson 2012: 83). A Finnish-speaking daughter of a self-made man who has enabled her to study, she marries a Swedish-speaking aristocrat, but feels uneasy and unhappy in the new environment. She begins to hate her new family and, gradually, begins to listen to the ‘voice of [her] blood’, which tells her to abandon the Decadent and decaying world of aristocracy and return to her own origins, her own ‘race’. Though she had never perceived herself as a seeker, she begins to search for truth and experiences a ‘mystical stream of strength’ (‘mystillinen voimavirta’, L. Onerva 1911: 216) entering her at her father’s deathbed, when he stares at her with his ‘cosmic, distant gaze’ (*ibid.*). Kaarina feels mystically united with her father, family and kin, being just ‘a small living drop in the eternal stream’ (‘pieni elävä pisara sen ikuisessa virrassa’) – she feels how her father’s spirit transfers into her, and, with it, the ‘sorrow and responsibility of life’ (‘elämän murhe ja edesvastuu’; L. Onerva 1911: 217, 219). She finds the sense of belonging and the meaning of her life in serving Finnish speakers, perceived as the essence of the Finnish nation. The mystical bliss she experiences fulfils her more than any social climbing or traditional religion. Metaphors of drops in the sea, ocean or stream, well known from Theosophy, are fused with the metaphor of the ‘voice of blood’ and the national cause – this time, it appears, without irony.³⁷

35 Finnish original: ‘Kun hän seisoi korkealla vuorella, kuvitteli hän seisovansa jättiläisvaltakunnan huipulla.’

36 Finnish original: ‘Langennut korkeista pilvlinnoistaan todellisuuden kuiluihin’; ‘synnintunto ei voinut tappa hänen mielikuvitustaan, se oli vain muuttunut pakanallisesta kristilliseksi’; ‘johdettu ymmärtämään ihmisten kurjuutta ja etsimään Jumalan valtakunnan iankaikkista rauhaa.’

37 For more on the metaphor of the ‘voice of blood’ in Finland’s *fin de siècle* literature see Rojola 1999. For more on the metaphor of a drop fusing with the sea or ocean (in L. Onerva’s work and in *fin de siècle* literature), see Parente-Čapková 2014: esp. 58–63.

Conclusions

Analyses of how the gendered figures of the seeker and *nousukas* are juxtaposed, at times also opposed, how they intermingle and fuse, reveal new aspects of both figures in Finnish literature of the turn of the twentieth century. This gives us new insights into Eino Leino and L. Onerva's reflections on the spiritual search. Both authors, especially Leino, were mostly critical of institutionalized religion, but neither adopted any specific form of esoteric teaching, though Theosophy was certainly an important source of inspiration for both Leino and Onerva. Horizontal and vertical dimensions of seekership intersect with the various ways of exploring distant places and their cultures, typical of truth seekers (see Kokkinen in this issue), as well as with elevating oneself, rising, climbing, falling and sinking, typical of the *nousukas*. The metaphor of rising, while *per se* positive, can acquire negative overtones when it implies an egotistical revolt unconnected to any deeper quest. The metaphor of descending, sinking and diving also appears to be ambivalent, associated both with diving (e.g. into one's soul) in search for truth and with dangerous atavism and dark forces. The aristocracy and upper classes are often shown in a negative light, not as ideal beings worth following and identifying with; only an 'aristocracy of the spirit' is presented as something to pursue. The idea of social justice is strongly present, sometimes as an allusion to syntheses of socialism and various esoteric trends.

The attempt to synthesize various ideas and spiritual paths is ironized (especially in Leino's work), when it consists of a superficial patchwork without a more genuine and committed search. When pursued with 'truthfulness', however, such a synthesis can become the highest goal. Return to, or refuge in the 'old' ways of believing, that is,

institutionalized Lutheranism, is portrayed as negative (as a 'fall') and ironized. In this respect, Leino and Onerva differ considerably from some other Nordic writers who employed a Decadent mode in their works, such as Arne Garborg (see Barstad 2020). Neither Onerva nor Leino followed in the footsteps of authors who converted to Catholicism.

In Leino's work, most seeker and *nousukas* figures are male. The protagonist of the Slave Tetralogy, Johannes, achieves peace and finds happiness through exploring the world both horizontally and vertically, eventually elevating himself in both a concrete and symbolic way. In the given context, it does not seem possible that a female protagonist could achieve the same. This is obvious from the tragic stories of Onerva's female seekers and upstarts (whose attempts to expand their horizons both horizontally and vertically typically fail), and from the fantasies of non-binary figurations of gender, evoking mystic and esoteric teachings. The only exception is Kaarina from 'The Voice of Blood', whose social ascent (marrying a Swedish-speaking aristocrat) proves to be a fall. The true ascendance happens only by means of a mystical union with Kaarina's own 'race', that is, her family and her nation. Though parochial nationalism is ridiculed in Leino's and Onerva's works, the idea of the nation is not.

The irony used by both Leino's and Onerva's narrators make the tone of their texts highly ambivalent and destabilize any unequivocal interpretations. Further analyses are needed to explore the various spiritual stimuli channelled into the concept of seekership in the context of the rest of their work; their other sources of inspiration, be it social, aesthetic, philosophical or political; and their intertextual affinities in a broader comparative framework. ■

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