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History and Historiography in Contemporary Finnish Novel

The history of Finland is a mainstay topic in the Finnish novel. From Fredrika Runeberg to Väinö Linna to Lars Sund, Finnish fiction, historical or otherwise, has typically dealt with great Finnish national and historical events and contexts. In an essay considering the Finnish historical novel, Finnish literary scholar Markku Ihonen (1999, 126) points out that historical fiction has traditionally served ideological functions. Moreover, according to Ihonen (*ibid.*), Finns take their brief national history seriously. The project of building a Finnish nation has been the lot of Finnish literature; both the writing of history and historical fiction have been crucial in defining Finnishness and constructing an identifiable nation (for recent analyses, see Hatavara 2007, e.g., 40–43, 68–70, 317 and Kirstinä 2007, 10–13). The solemn attitude toward history and the important role of literature have found their counterparts in a strong realist and documentary poetics (see Hallila, forthcoming). In general, Finnish fiction represents history in mimetic terms.

In today's novels, the representation of history is as popular as ever. The history of Finland is frequently considered in contemporary Finnish novels, too. Among the authors active in the late 1990s and early 2000s, at least Bo Carpelan, Jari Järvelä, Rosa Liksom, Asko Sahlberg, Pirkko Saisio, Juha Seppälä, Lars Sund, Jari Tervo, and Kjell Westö have taken Finnish history as their subject matter. However, their novels relate Finnish history in a paradoxical manner. On the one hand, the novels continue to tackle issues that are traditionally seen as relevant. Authors still choose topics such as Finland's independence, the wars, and the lives of great men in Finnish history. Furthermore, national history is still often considered with the seriousness perceived by Ihonen. On the other hand, contemporary novels deconstruct the poetics employed in earlier Finnish historical fiction. They point toward new strategies of representing events and subjects in historical contexts. The changing strategies of historical writing associate with the narrative turn and postmodernism and thus represent a wholesale transformation of the notion of history and the writing of history.

The Contemporary Novel and the Question of Postmodernism

One influential attempt to conceptualise this change in the view of history was made by the Canadian cultural theorist Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1987). Hutcheon associates the new sensibility of historical writing with the postmodern con-

dition and postmodernist culture. For Hutcheon, postmodernism is a wide-ranging intellectual and cultural phenomenon. According to her view, it is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political” (Hutcheon 1987, 4). A sense of history and “the presence of the past” are essential for Hutcheon’s concept of postmodernism (Hutcheon 1987, 4). In addition, Hutcheon suggests that “postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges [...]” (ibid. 3). Paradigmatic literature of the postmodernist era is, for Hutcheon, historical fiction that applies the contradictory logic of postmodernism. She coined the term *historiographic metafiction* to refer to novels that take a critical and reflexive view of both novelistic conventions and the writing of history. On the one hand, historiographic metafiction contains metafictional features; on the other, it takes as its topic historical events and considers historical personae. Historiographic metafiction underscores both the reflexivity of historiography and the nature of the novel as a human construct. It is engaged and utilises irony and parody as the strategies of social and political commentary.

Postmodernism has had an impact on Finnish literary culture in a variety of ways. First, “surfictionists” such as Juha K. Tapio and Antero Viinikainen dwell upon the tradition of literary hocus pocus and linguistic acrobatics inhabited, say, by Jorge Luis Borges and John Barth. Second, satirists such as Kari Hotakainen, Juha Seppälä, and Jari Tervo ironically analyse Finnish society, culture, and history from the cynical viewpoint of the New Liberalist era. Finally, some authors embrace the contradictory project of postmodernism as defined by Linda Hutcheon. For instance, Rosa Liksom and Lars Sund write fiction that is easily interpretable in the context of Hutcheonian historiographic metafiction. Among critics, Rosa Liksom has been regarded as a leading Finnish postmodernist. Mervi Kantokorpi (1997) has noted Liksom’s strategy of undermining the conventions of Finnish realism in her short stories. In addition, her novel *Kreisland* (1996) (“Crazeland”) can be interpreted as contributing to the Hutcheonian project of rewriting history from the perspective of postmodernism (cf. Kirstinä 2007, 105–135). The same can be said about Lars Sund, whose *Siklax*-trilogy (*Colorado Avenue* 1991, *Lanthandlerskans son* 1997 [“Shopkeeper’s Son”], *Eriks bok* 2003 [“Erik’s Book”]) is Finnish historiographic metafiction *par excellence*, a fact that has not escaped the Finnish critical community. For instance, Marita Hietasaari (2007) and Jussi Ojajärvi (2005) have both considered Sund’s fiction in the context of postmodernist historiographic metafiction. Thus it seems, that at least some Finnish novels approach the history of Finland in an ironic and parodic vein.

The majority of Finnish historical fiction does not seem to be postmodernist in Hutcheon’s sense. Nevertheless, her theory seems valid for an important reason. Contemporary Finnish historical fiction, although not blatantly ironic or parodic, perceives

the writing of history and thus also the experience of history as problematic. Among others, the themes of *historical marginality* and *the narrative character of history* define this issue. In order to demonstrate the point, we will analyse three Finnish novels: *Drakarna över Helsingfors* (1996) (“Kites over Helsinki”) and *Där vi en gång gått* (2006) (“Where We Once Wandered”) by Kjell Westö, and the novel *Axel* (1986) by Bo Carpelan. The novels span relatively long historical periods and thus include representations of significant temporal nodes in the history of Finland. As such, they clearly belong to the great tradition of the Finnish historical novel. Nevertheless, they portray a more problematic attitude toward history and historical writing, an attitude arguably typical of contemporary Finnish fiction.

Historical Marginality

There is a sense of *historical marginality* in all three novels. Interestingly enough, both Carpelan and Westö are Swedish-speaking Finns and the novels consider the history of the Swedish-speaking minority. While these novels deal with issues of acknowledged historical relevance, a voice is given to minor characters, and history is told from unexpected viewpoints. Historical marginality surfaces in the representation of both characters and events.

All kinds of characters – narrators, protagonists, and minor characters alike – are apt to thematise marginality. In Carpelan’s fictional diary of Baron Axel Carpelan, the history of Finland from the end of the hunger years to the first years of Finnish independence is told from the subjective perspective of an authentic historical figure. Axel Carpelan is a brilliant music critic and great lover and connoisseur of music, a close friend and patron of Jean Sibelius, and a devoted supporter of the Finnish sovereignty. At the same time, however, he is a failed musician who is mentally fragile and degenerated, asocial, and hesitant.

Due to Axel’s peculiar mental disposition, he seems to live through the lives of others. Painfully conscious of his own failure, Axel projects his ambition onto Sibelius’s genius. In a way, Axel is a cultural-historical parasite; supporting Sibelius becomes Axel’s life work, but the relationship between these two men is also essential to the construction of Axel’s identity. This identity work springs as much from a sense of personal inadequacy as it does from the admiration of a great artist. The presentation of the first meeting of Axel and Sibelius sums up Axel’s position of marginality: “Looked around for J.S., but did not see him until he was standing there, and his shadow fell over me, and shall remain” (Carpelan 1989, 195). In a sense, then, Axel is merely a minor historical character. Nevertheless, by giving Axel Carpelan a voice, the novel points out the eventual cultural and historical significance of his life. Thus the novel engages in a critical dialogue with the official history of great men.

(Carpelan 1989, 93); “Bobrikov’s dictatorial decree the final blow to freedom.” (Carpelan 1989, 230). One would expect that the external narrator’s narrative would provide a more comprehensive account of historical events, *Zeitgeist* and such. This is far from being the case, however. The passages of external narration concentrate on Axel’s internal life. There is hardly any commentary on Axel’s historical context. The external narration is just as subjective as Axel’s diary entries.

Westö’s *Drakarna över Helsingfors* comprises three narratives; that of Rickard Bexar, Marina Bexar, and the external narrator. The narration resembles that of *Axel* in that there is no rigid hierarchy between the characters’ narration and the external narrator’s perspective. In this respect, the novel subverts the traditional notion of an objective view of history. In both *Axel* and *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, the strategy of providing several equally subjective narratives thematises the postmodernist notion of history and historiography as problematic issues. The narration of *Där vi en gång gått* seems more compatible with the conventions of historical fiction. In the novel, there is a prominent narrator figure who claims to present the unfolding of events objectively. The narrator refers to extensive research into the characters’ correspondence and notes, but by no means is the narrator merely a compiler of historical documents. Instead, paradoxically, the narrator presents information available only to an eyewitness taking part in the historical events. Furthermore, the narrative plunges into the minds of characters without the aid of archival material. Thus, the novel uses and abuses the conventions of historical fiction.

In all three novels, implicit and explicit commentary on writing and historiography is essential. Some characters in Westö’s works reflect upon the possibility of writing about their life and the life of their contemporaries. Especially Ivar Grandell in *Där vi en gång gått* serves as the prime example of the impulse to record one’s historical context. Grandell’s notebook, filled with information about the life of his acquaintances, is analogous to the novel itself: “[H]an brukade göra anteckningar om deras krogvällar och nachspiel genast följande morgon, en vacker dag skulle han kanske överraska dem med romanen om deras liv.” (Westö 2006, 181); (“He had the habit of making notes about their pub nights and after parties right the following morning; one beautiful day he would perhaps surprise them with a novel about their life.” Trans. Hallila & Hägg).

Explicit metacommentary of history is frequently presented in Westö’s novels by the external narrator. In *Där vi en gång gått*, the narrator habitually presents conclusive remarks about history and life: “En ny tid hade börjat, på det ena eller andra sättet bar de den inom sig.” (Westö 2006, 168.); (“A new time had begun, in one way or another they carried it inside themselves.” Trans. Hallila & Hägg). The same can be said about the external narrator of *Drakarna över Helsingfors* who overtly characterises the nature of history and the position of individuals in it. The motto of Carpelan’s *Axel* is a quota-

- SUND, LARS 1991: *Colorado Avenue*. Helsingfors: Soderström.
- SUND, LARS 1997: *Lanhandlerskans son*. Stockholm: Rabén, Prisma.
- SUND, LARS 2003: *Eriks bok*. Helsingfors: Soderström.
- WESTÖ, KJELL 1996: *Drakarna över Helsingfors*. Söderström & Co Förlags Ab.
- WESTÖ, KJELL 2006: *Där vi en gång gått*. Söderströms.