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## Picture – Word – Scream

### Hagar Olsson and the Art of Tomorrow

“Salvation is the name of the new aesthetics”, wrote Hagar Olsson in the early 1920s (“Frälsning heter den nya estetiken”, 1922b: 110).<sup>1</sup> A statement such as that is typical for her critical prose, not only in its uncompromising wording and messianic spirit but also in its anti-formalistic core: “Wherever someone creates man and saves others by saving himself, there the new song is sung, regardless of which formula it follows” (“Där någon diktar människan och frälsar andra genom att frälsa sig själv, där blir den nya sången sjungen, efter vilka formler det än sker”, 1922b: 110). Olsson was one of the foremost advocates of avant-garde and modernist literature in Finland in the inter-war period – and as such immensely sensitive to the form and materiality of art. This article seeks to highlight and discuss the fluctuations of Olsson’s medial awareness before World War II, the hopes and fears that she invested in different media and art forms. The contention is that such an investigation will further a more nuanced understanding of her work as well as of her assessment of expressionism and other “isms”, and, thereby, of her role as a mediator for international modernism and the avant-garde in Finland.

The intermedial approach taken here to Olsson’s critical and fictional work is partly inspired by W.J.T. Mitchell’s early work and concentrates on the values and problematics associated with different media and art forms (1986, 1994). However, whereas Mitchell focused on historical debates and works as part of a struggle between picture and word and sought to identify the idea of medial purity as “an ideology, a complex of desire and fear, power and interest” (1994: 98), a study of Olsson shows a more entangled and unstable state of affairs. Neither purism nor hybridity was of primary importance for her. If anything, she was an ambivalent anti-formalist and anti-materialist, working very consciously with media and matter, especially during the 1920s. Furthermore, a third means of expression, besides word and picture, also needs to be taken into consideration: the scream, on the verge between language and pure sound, and ranging from existential anguish to effective agitation.

In 1916, Olsson made her literary and critical debut and thereby started her career in a turbulent period that witnessed not only war and revolutions but also some of the historical avant-garde’s most radical, abstract and intermedial experiments. It should be stressed that the heightened medial, material and technological awareness among artists and writers in contemporary Europe was never detached from ideological, political, philosophical, and religious discussions and

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Swedish are mine.

examinations or even from occult theories (e.g. Mitchell 1994: 227; Hjartarson 2007: 187–88; Kleinschmidt 2012:17–18). Olsson's inter-war work resonates not only with the experimental "discoveries" of the continental avant-garde and the ongoing critique throughout Europe of *l'art-pour-l'art*, but also with a wave of modern messianism and utopianism. The latter is just as important for understanding Olsson's work and its curious combination of bold experiments, wariness about different new forms or isms and relentless strivings for an art (and mode of existence) to come.

### **"Modernism" and messianism**

Olsson engaged in pacifism, internationalism, collectivism, youth and education, feminism, and "modernism", a word she used as an umbrella term for every ism or work that broke with naturalism and traditional art. We might say that under this umbrella she recognised that what are commonly understood as opposites in many cases constituted overlapping fields: avant-garde practices, which (in Peter Bürger's terms) rejected the autonomy of art and aimed to destroy art as an institution and reintegrate it into the everyday life, and modernist art, which experimented with form and content without making these radical claims (cf. Eysteinnsson 2009).

What is notable is that when she was propagating these causes Olsson used language and imagery permeated by words, structures, and ideas drawn from religious and idealist traditions: "Samarkand", "the-land-which-is-not", "Paradise", "the golden kingdom", "Canaan", "the unknown", "the unconditioned", "salvation". She would describe the modernist poet as a revolutionary and a soldier, but also as a prophet and an evangelist, and her fictional works often depicted self-sacrifice, mystical experiences, spiritual breakthroughs, and death as thresholds to new worlds.

Yet, Olsson certainly did not propagate traditional idealism or religious views. Nor was her agenda political, at least not in the sense of party politics (Svensson 1975: 313; Meurer-Bongardt 2011: 148; it is possible though to detect a turn from a Nietzschean aristocratism, with a matching contempt for socialism, towards clearly expressed sympathies for socialist and communist ideas around 1920). Rather, her agenda was utopian and spiritual-social in a consciously vague and non-determined fashion.

In 1949, Olof Enckell pointed to a seeming split in Olsson's universe between mysticism and transcendence and commitment to the idea of brotherhood and social reform. He explained them as twin-ideas forcing heaven and earth together, rather than being contradictions (1949: 130–31). Others have also highlighted Olsson's rapprochement with mysticism (primarily Monica Vikström-Jokela 1993, but also Paillard 1956: 32 and Glyn Jones 1995: 174). Judith Meurer-Bongardt (2011), however, has criticised this interpretation in order to inscribe Olsson's work more thoroughly in a tradition of utopianism and to stress

Olsson's affinity with German Expressionism. Utopianism no doubt is a major key to Olsson's work, as Meurer-Bongardt's thesis confirms. The related concept of modern, non-theological messianism (Glazova and North 2014) might also prove helpful for understanding Olsson's complex navigation between the religious and the secular, as well as how her unrelenting steering towards a new dawn intertwines with her experiments with different media and expressions.

The word "messianism" covers a long and heterogeneous tradition, which centres round the belief in the coming of a saviour (person or not) that will redeem humankind (or a chosen people) and effectuate the realisation of a new or restored paradise. The twentieth century saw various secularised versions of what originally was a religious and theological structure of thought. The era of German Expressionism coincided with an intensified messianic desire among thinkers and writers, as Lisa Marie Anderson has shown (2011; 2014). Anderson has described German expressionist messianism in terms of a dynamic between re-sacralisation and secularisation, resulting most often in non-religious visions clothed in a religious idiom, built up with central motifs from the Christian and Jewish scriptures. She sees it moreover as part of a modern and modernist reworking of the sacred, but specifically defined by suffering, utopian expectation and ecstatic expression, "with a generation of artists defining itself by its forbearance through severe unrest, in pursuit of an end both ecstatically envisioned and ultimately unknowable" (Anderson 2011:3; cf. Anderson 2014: 16–19).

Many expressionists expected their art to disrupt time and revolutionise humankind spiritually and/or socially. The intense and pathos-filled mode of expression was considered part and parcel of the transformative power of their art. Both their mode of thought and expression would quickly fall into disrepute, partly because of the resistance that the uses of pathos has repeatedly evoked throughout history (Zumbusch 2010), partly because of the potential affinity of messianism with totalitarian visions (Liska 2007: 197). In 1940 Walter Benjamin, and later Jacques Derrida among others, would reformulate the messianic in much more cautious, indeterminate, and "weaker" versions in order to rethink temporality and history without discarding the possibility of hope and change (Boldyrev 2014: 35; Glazova and North 2014: 8–10; Svenungsson 2014: 137–254).

It is largely against this background of unabashed claims and critical wariness within modern messianic thought that I propose to point out and analyse Hagar Olsson's uses and assessment of the word, the picture and the scream as means of expression in a number of fictional and critical texts written before the outbreak of the Second World War. She was castigated by both contemporary and later critics for her ideological and political vagueness, but it would be possible to view the vagueness as a deliberate strategy for maintaining a forward direction while avoiding a fixed and totalising definition of the longed for future. It is a strategy of mobility and constant renegotiation, which she also applied to her mediation of the international avant-garde. Olsson

was always intensely seeking the art of tomorrow, but at the same time wary of both repressive and impotent, “decorative” tendencies.

The points of relationship between messianism and avant-garde art are perhaps not only to be found in the hopes for a revolutionised society or the expressionist’s ecstatic desire and uses of religious traditions, but also in the role of violence in the two. “When we speak of a messianic potential”, Anna Glaxova and Paul North write, “we should be careful not to dwell only on its restorative or revolutionary power, when the destructive dimension is part and parcel of it. [...] Hope for a revolution that both destroys and creates is its classical form” (2014: 5). Destruction and violence were also part of avant-garde aesthetics and its conflation of art and action – from the futurist glorification of war to André Breton’s idea of firing a gun into a crowd as the most surrealist action (*Second Manifesto of Surrealism* 1930, cf. Hjartarson 2007: 183; Hermansson 2015a: 7–8; Hermansson 2015b: 110–114). Actual brutality and the new art’s violation of aesthetic rules and boundaries were imagined in this way as parallel actions. The similarities between messianic hopes and avant-garde practices and ideas should not be over-emphasised. However, Olsson’s navigation in the complex field of messianic thought and modernist and avant-garde aesthetics may be seen as a mixture of fascination with and resistance to this inherent aggression and violence amidst ideas of creation and salvation, an ambivalence which would be typical for early Nordic modernism (Hermansson 2012; 2013; 2015a).

In the following, I shall single out some of Olsson’s work, beginning with her first short fiction, which was published between 1916 and 1917, and which connect and contrast scream and pictorial art in different ways. I shall then turn to reviews and articles from the early 1920s in which Olsson commented on expressionism. I then discuss two of her dramas from the late 1920s, and finally the novel *På Kanaanexpressen* (*On the Canaan Express*) from 1929. The latter not only signal its messianic core in the title, but remains Olsson’s most thorough intermedial experiment within the confines of a book. In the conclusion, I will briefly discuss the results in the context of early Nordic modernism and/or avant-garde.

### *Screaming and silent pictures*

One of Olsson’s first published texts “En konstutställning” (“An Art Exhibition”, 1916) was a dense hybrid between a review and a piece of non-naturalistic short fiction. It related a visit to the national gallery in Helsinki, the Ateneum Art Museum, which in 1916 showed a retrospect of salon painter Gunnar Berndtson’s (1854–1895) meticulous work. To the narrator, however, a painting by van Gogh was the only one that provided a truly transformative art experience. It appeared as if it was screaming and it awakened in the narrator a fear of a threatening, imminent but unknowable revolution or change.

Anxiety is only the final of a range of reactions to the exhibition. Berndtson’s detailed and harmonious art causes ennui in the narrator

and a rebellious, disrespectful laughter, which turns into angry aggression. The narrator feels an urge to tear, scratch and kick these works to pieces. Faced with van Gogh's painting, pathos-filled fear and pity replace laughter: "And I felt it whistling with heavy wings over my head, that which the lonely one [van Gogh] awaited, but which struck him with terror and drove him to self-destruction, that which we all await" ("Och jag kände det susa med tunga vingar över mitt huvud, det som den ensamme väntade, men som väckte skräck och drev honom till självförstörelse, det, som vi alla vänta", 1916: 204). In passing, we note that van Gogh represents not only true and transgressive art, but also self-aggression.

Unlike Edvard Munch's globally iconised *The Scream*, the painting by van Gogh in Olsson's text is not a representation of a scream. Rather, the scream is an effect of the painterly expression, the twisted trees and houses which lean shuddering against each other. This effect lasts all night, as the narrator experiences a nightmarish scene in her or his room: the furniture is twisting with anxiety, and the laughter is taken over by the threatening "unknown", trolls, and time personified. Unlike the admired artist, however, the narrator endures and in the morning is able to use a broom to wipe away the laughter, which has fallen like dry dust to the floor.

Thus, in Olsson's modernist hybrid text, the scream functions as a metaphor for the expressive style and "distortions" of modern art, as the contemporary art discourse would name it, and scream and modern art are presented as two sides of the same coin. A year later, however, scream and painting came to represent two contrasting ideas of art in Olsson's cycle of short prose texts, *Själarnas ansikten* (*The Faces of the Souls*, 1917; cf. Enckell 1949: 122). Yet, both scream and a certain kind of painting are defined as the new and necessary forms of the art of tomorrow.

In the opening text of *Själarnas ansikten*, four cornerstones of romantic idealism are put within quotation marks, negated, and replaced: "art" by "anti-art", "God" by "He who is not" (Honom som icke är), "truth" by "the unconditioned" (det Obetingade), and "faith" by an image of traumatic rapture: "Your soul should be a large open wound from which enthusiasm flows" ("eder själ skall vara ett stort öppet sår ur vilket hänförelsen rinner", 1917: 10). The art of tomorrow, anti-art, is furthermore defined as "an inarticulate scream [in] towards the infinite" ("ett oartikulerat skri in mot det oändliga", 1917: 10; "skri" here equals the German expressionist "Schrei" of existential anguish and protest against existing norms).

*Själarnas ansikten* functions almost as a medieval anthology of edifying exempla in which de-individualised men and women struggle with fear, pain, and desires. They sacrifice and overcome themselves and eventually experience a spiritual breakthrough. The language is biblical-Nietzschean and stylised; the milieus consist of mountains, the sea, low huts and houses, and trees that twist themselves in van Gogh's manner. However, the second and third of the texts in *Själarnas ansikten* introduce an individual in a sketchy modern environment. The story of

Stig Henrik's adolescence lets him test and discard a range of ideologies – conservatism, socialism and anarchism – and settle for the aesthetic and world view of a female artist called *Stjärnbarnet* (*The Star Child*).

Two portraits play a significant role in the brief story of Stig Henrik, one of his late mother and the other a self-portrait by *Stjärnbarnet*. We are told that both of them picture a human's loneliness and pain before the infinite, and that the frame around the *Stjärnbarnet* looks as if it is about to burst from its expanding content. In a conversation with Stig Henrik, *Stjärnbarnet* preaches that art is the source of man's spiritual renewal; it is destined to become revelation and grace. She prophesies that a chosen few with a pure passion for beauty will create an art "simplified to the uttermost contours, whose stylised, beautiful and crystal-like balanced system shall be transparent to the light of the infinite and the inexpressible and whose colours and words shall not obscure the road to that which is not" ("den till den yttersta konturen förenklade konst vars stiliserade, sköna och kristalliskt avvägda system skall vara genomskinligt för det oändligas och utsägbaras ljus och vars färger och ord icke skola skymma vägen för det som icke är", 1917: 48).

In this work then, the amorphous scream and anti-art is associated in a paradoxical way with an inward direction, which is nonetheless also the direction towards the infinite, whereas the stylised form is endowed with a more direct expanding and transcendent power. Together the scream and the stylised art (materialised through colours and words) form a paradoxical aesthetic, combining the ugly, base or abject (the wounds, the bestial scream) with balanced beauty, as well as inwards and outwards aggression with tranquillity and transcendence.

A key word in *Stjärnbarnet*'s vision of a future art is "transparency", an ideal that she herself seems to incarnate. From the beginning, she is thin, virgin-like and pale, indeed almost transparent. Her face is pure soul, and this is captured in the painted self-portrait, which Stig Henrik experiences at the art gallery. When communicating with him, *Stjärnbarnet* whispers and what draws her away from him and earthly existence is also the silence and whispering of "the infinite". Thus, *Stjärnbarnet* is on the brink of both colourlessness and wordlessness, and in the end she simply evaporates into that which is not. The faces of the souls, the title of the work, is that which lies behind and beyond the body – and similarly the reduced materiality of art (scream, crystal, words, colours) is supposed to annihilate itself in a transition towards the infinite and inexpressible. This is probably the closest Olsson got to a line of aesthetic-messianic thought of which Kandinsky was the best known exponent. Through the purifying of art forms and their material and following the principle of inner necessity a new spiritual kingdom could be built, he wrote in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1912) (Kandinsky 1984: 141; Kleinschmidt 2012: 58).

The attention Olsson pays to the scream as well as to avant-garde pictorial art (stylised, distorted or abstract) in these two texts is characteristic of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pictorial art was perceived as taking the lead among the arts, and with the dissemination of futurism, cubism, and expressionism throughout Europe, modern painting

was formulated as a model for other arts, especially for literature, thus creating an *avant-garde ut pictura poesis*-tradition (Mitchell 1994: 228; Jelsbak 2005: 87). In addition, the scream was reformulated and loaded with new aesthetic as well as utopian qualities, not the least by proto-expressionists and expressionist writers (Anglet 1997: 191; Anglet 2003: 3). This went hand in hand with a Nietzsche-inspired reinterpretation and reevaluation of pathos launched by members of the *Neue Club* in Berlin, among others. In the *Neopathetische Cabaret* and the magazine *Der neue Pathos* (1913–1919), they launched pathos and the scream as a sign of vitalism, but also as a more immediate and original form of communication uniting poet and the masses (Stücheli 1999; Streim 1998; Zumbusch 2010: 17–20). In the expressionist drama, the scream functioned as “mute” gestures expressing that which lies “beyond the epistemological grasp of conventional representation” (Murphy 1999: 143). It is also as “a revolutionary gesture of insight”, a culmination of what was also articulated with words and other gestures (Kuhns 1997: 132).

*Själarnas ansikten* quite explicitly partakes in the re-evaluation of pathos, and exhibits a related, yet different Nietzsche-reading than the neopathetics and later expressionists, with whom Olsson would have not had contact at this point. The overall effect of the collection is one of an intense and pathos-filled, but controlled and stylised prose (Paillard 1956: 30; Donner 1963: 9). Only one scream is in fact “uttered” in the book and it is by a female narrator in the final text. It is a scream of existential fear and despair that is answered by “the infinite” and turned into a mind-expanding initiation: Angst and pain is transformed into a precious tiara. The final note is not just one of humble joy, but a longing for another human being. The scream as a final peak of intensity releases a contact not only between humans and heaven/the infinite, but also between humans.

### *Expressionism, art and action*

When Olsson introduced her readers to the literature of German Expressionism, the dynamics between silence and scream, words and picture, people and infinity that we find in the two early texts were altered. Her presentations and assessments of expressionism during the 1920s are in fact quite revealing for how she navigated between art forms, media, and modes of expression. Traditional and *avant-garde* forms competed when she tried to find words for the art of tomorrow, art which is engaged and engaging and thus avoids drawing all the attention to either the beauty or shock effect of itself as art. Apparently, she found it increasingly important that art did not become either too detached from earthly reality or tend towards the market logic of the newest fashions.

In February 1920 she used the image of a finely cut marble pillar – a calm, classical and architectonic form – to contrast Else Lasker-Schüler’s poetry with the “isms” of the day, which were treading towards a chaotic dance to the drumming of the expressionist’s prophet Kasimir Edschmid.

Olsson characterised contemporary literature as having two faces: one ghostlike, fading into blue, with an unhealthy mysticism, the other “distorted by a ruthless elementarism which seems to touch upon the inarticulate howl as the only salvation from the untruth and artificiality of art” (“förvridet av en frän elementarism, vilken tyckes tangera det oartikulerade skränet såsom den enda frälsningen ur konstens osanning och förkonstling”, Olsson 1920). Lasker-Schüler’s poetry, according to Olsson, represented a calm and sound mysticism combining earth, human blood, and the expanse of heaven.

In her first lengthy comment on expressionism, “Det expressionistiska seendet” (“The Expressionist Vision”, 1920) Olsson stressed its affinity to avant-garde pictorial art, which she associated with a new, active, and productive vision (1953: 28; cf. Holmström 1993a). This is less surprising when seen in the context of the modern *ut pictura poesis*-doctrine. The article comments on a new edition of *Expressionismus* (1916) by the Austrian critic, Hermann Bahr, which had been the first published monograph discussing literary expressionism. Olsson made two interesting choices when presenting his work. Firstly, she chose *not* to use his most famous and most quoted paragraph, in which he defined expressionism as a scream: “der Mensch schreit nach seiner Seele, die ganze Zeit wird ein einziger Notschrei. Auch die Kunst schreit mit, in die tiefe Finsternis hinein, sie schreit um Hilfe, sie schreit nach dem Geist: das ist der Expressionismus” (Bahr 1916: 123). This choice seems to be connected to the fact that expressionism in this case was metonymic for modernist/avant-garde art, which Olsson propagated. Apparently she deemed the scream and the howl as suspiciously uncontrolled or powerless. Instead of stressing the sense of desperation, Olsson’s expressionism was more potent, rebellious, and constructive: it comprised an awakening, a revolt against limitations, dryness and the uniform life. But she also added a (modern-vague) messianic touch, when she wrote that expressionism was a visionary attempt to draw the sign of “the unknown” (“ett nytt försök till ett ritande av det obekantas tecken”, 1953: 30).

Secondly, she concluded with a comment on Bahr’s bewilderment when he tried to read works by Martin Buber. Bahr could appreciate the music in them but not make sense of the actual words and sentences. Olsson almost lectured Bahr and stressed the importance of being able to listen to the rhythm of poetry. Sensitivity towards the visionary as well as the rhythm was paramount for understanding the new art. Her version of expressionism was, in this case, going beyond the meaning of words towards a new vision and a new hearing – which were revolutionising the world, but in a constructive and controlled way.

Two years later, Olsson had still not decided whether expressionism was a superficial craze or a serious artistic endeavour. This becomes clear from the treatment of expressionism in the short-lived magazine *Ultra* (1922), which she edited together with Elmer Diktonius, Lauri Haarla, and Raoul af Hällström. In a programmatic text in the first issue, she stated that all isms should be surmounted, schools of art were only for “those who must scream in order to be heard, because their

words lack inner power, and for those who need to gesticulate in order to be understood, because their faces are dead” (för dem som måste skrika för att göra sig hörda, emedan deras ord saknar inre makt, de äro till för dem som måste gestikulera för att bli förstådda, emedan deras ansikten äro döda, 1922a: 16. The unsigned article is attributed to her by Roger Holmström 1993b: 57). When Diktonius wrote an introduction of Edith Södergran’s poetry for *Ultra*, Olsson insisted that he should avoid making Södergran into a sort of advertising sign and therefore avoid using the word “expressionist” (undated letter, SLSA 568: 5).

Her negative assessment of isms as such seems to be motivated by a resentment of another version of the scream, which was growing in significance in the urban sphere as well as in the arts in the inter-war period. This was the agitating scream (for earlier instances, see Anglet 2003: 284–96). This (articulate) scream or cry, was perhaps seen and read just as much as it was heard, as the many depictions and examinations of the dynamics between agitator and masses in literature, painting, sociology, journalism and so on during the inter-war years suggest (Lewer 2011, Jonsson 2013). More than ever, the smartness of commercial advertising, the dedication of political engagement, and the ironic and shocking effects of avant-garde art and manifestos became overlapping, interacting fields. Olsson’s reaction to this screaming for attention leaned to the negative in 1920–1922, and her later comments and literary depictions show deep ambivalence.

Nevertheless, expressionism was presented and scrutinized more than other isms in *Ultra*, probably in a large part due to Diktonius’ dedication. But Olsson was also softening towards it because of its connection with mysticism, spirituality, and utopianism. Whereas their Scandinavian colleagues, such as Emil Bønnelycke and Tom Kristensen, continued to imagine literary expressionism as equivalent to colourful, brutal, distorted or non-mimetic avant-garde paintings, Olsson and Diktonius more clearly associated expressionism with the longing for a New Man as well (Hermansson 2015b: 42–98). In 1922, when Olsson named the new aesthetics “salvation”, she identified it as an inheritance from the great Russian writers and the German expressionists. By at least 1924, for Olsson expressionism had become a positive force in literary history, albeit one that had been rightly overcome and abandoned.

She now formulated the shortcoming of the expressionists as too deep a reliance on words instead of action. In “The New Revolutionary Poetry”, (“Den nya revolutionära dikten”, 1924), Olsson claimed that unlike the expressionist poet, the new “singing revolutionary” did not just *sing* about love, reconciliation, murder, and violence, but simply *was* in the struggle itself. This poet interpreted the sufferings of the wordless and nameless masses, and Olsson seemed to expect that his words would be transformed into action. This idea led her once again to the problem of finding a mode of expression that was able to transcend the medium of the written and spoken word.

## Words and bodies on stage

With a few exceptions, Olsson was extremely negative towards film and the cinema, especially in the early 1920s (Fridell 1973: 71, 175; Holmström 1993b: 40). Her argument could be summed up as follows: film is not art; it is soulless, superficial, mechanical, banal, uniform, cut-up, and easily digested. In contrast, for Olsson the theatre was an affair of the heart and in the second half of the 1920s she produced her most extensive experiments with intermedial combinations as a novelist and playwright.

Olsson's first staged drama, *Hjärtats pantomim* (*The Pantomime of the Heart*, premiered January 1928, published 1962), presented an idea of a communal heart and contrasted it against individual worldly desires in a prologue, four tableaux, and an epilogue. In the drama, a man wins the lottery, discards his beloved, and seeks happiness in luxury articles. Through a line of nightmarish tableaux the man understands that he has gone astray. He screams once when he recognises himself in a rich and miserly man, and he jumps to murder the miser/himself – an action of (interrupted) violence that embodies the start of his awakening and return to the heart and the woman. The scenography at the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki was created by the modernist artist Wäinö Aaltonen (Donner 1962: 11; Fridell 1973: 76), and lightning, rumbling, music and pictorial projections were part of the art work. On the level of the plot, however, the drama worked against visual media as well as against the word.

The only negatively conceived character in the drama is tellingly enough an author. Olsson made him a self-absorbed conventionalist in Hamlet costume, and in an interview she described him as “the spirit of conventional calculation” (Donner 1962: 11). But it was not just his conventionality or nose for business and fame that tainted him. It was the fact that he offered words instead of his heart. The woman exclaimed, “Words cannot alter the course of the drama. That which a heart has endured, no word can erase. Words mean nothing, the heart determines everything!” (“Ord kan inte rubba dramats gång. Det som ett hjärta har genomgått, kan inte ett ord utplåna. Ord betyder intet, hjärtat avgör allt!”; Olsson 1962: 78). When the author appreciated the *sound* of this pathos-filled line, the woman called him a parasite, feeding on other people's hearts. She continued, saying that visions (“illusioner”) are not worn on the lips but carried under the heart, and then delivered to the world under great pain. Consequently, she turned her attention to an inner world and concentrated intensively on the “invisible drama” in which the man returned to her, while the author and an art dealer ventured on a discussion about art on the visible stage.

Lena Fridell has shown that this epilogue was difficult to manage on stage. It was rewritten several times during rehearsals and revised for the 1962 print version. In the original version, the man is neither heard nor seen and the invisible drama is related only through the words and gestures of the woman (Fridell 1973: 114, 117). However, the later manuscripts reveal that the director found it necessary to show the man

on stage and have his words heard in order to convey the message to the audience more clearly. The man was forced to articulate his experiences and insights. In the staged version, the author was moved by this “other” drama. Whereas the staged version highlighted the transformative power of the “true” drama, the printed text accentuated Olsson’s critique of aestheticism and the word instead. In the printed version only the woman’s voice is heard, and the true drama stays invisible, mediated entirely through her reactions. She goes through rejoicing and fear and ends in quiet ecstasy, falling on her knees and exclaiming, “All is consummated” (Allt är fullbordat). Here the author keeps his cynical stand and gets the final word: “The heart! What a banality”.

The stage directions in the printed version describe the author as pale, immaterial, shadow-like and powerless against the reality and logic of the true, passionate drama. The shifts between what is presented as material and immaterial can be explained as a way of highlighting the paradox between visual and non-visual reality that is a basis of the play, as Fridell has suggested (1973: 133). But it also means that art as such holds an ambiguous position in the drama. The aesthetic eye and ear is parasitic, false, and impotent. Apparently, to avoid this, the printed version continually shifts between visual and auditory elements, between the scenery and the bodies on stage, and the words pointing away from the stage towards the immaterial non-art.

Olsson’s next drama, *S.O.S.* (published in December 1928, premiered in March 1929) accentuated a tension between different styles and aesthetics, but with a markedly greater confidence in all kinds of media. The intricate problem lies more in the valuation of the agitating scream and the idea of the masses versus the individual. At the centre of the plot is a scientist, Patrick, who has awakened to his ethical responsibility and destroyed his new chemical weapon. When he turns up on stage, Patrick is a fugitive enemy of the state, and when he has left it, he is described as almost a religious leader for a sort of underground resistance group. The activities are summed up in abstract terms: the youth, the heart, humanity is fighting against the reign of machines, weapons, and money.

This drama also adopted a non-naturalistic, expressive acting style, and decorations and costumes in the different productions underlined that *S.O.S.* was a new landmark for modernist theatre in Finland. After the second act, the events were interrupted by two scenes comprising a fantastic and allegorical interval in which the suffering of the world is confronted with the growing militarism despite ongoing talks of peace and disarmament. The interval virtually bombarded the audience’s senses with shifting tableaux and “futurist decorations” plastered with headlines, as well as screams, noise and shouts. A choir cried “Woe upon us!” (“Ve oss! Ve oss! Ve oss!”) while lights flashed, signalling *S.O.S.* The first scene ended with Patrick’s desperate scream “But this is madness!” (“Det är ju vansinne”, 1928: 60). In the second he turned into an agitator swinging the red flag, promising to cry louder than all storms, wars, and destruction and summoning everyone for the last battle, while the choir sang the “Internationale”.

The play's similarities with Georg Kaiser's *Gas-trilogy* (1917-1920) are apparent, as Egil Törnqvist noted (1976: 67). But whereas Kaiser's dramas problematise the messianic figures' ability to salvage the all too swayed and blinded masses, Olsson is more interested in the process in which a young woman, Maria, sacrifices her personal desires and becomes a soldier for the cause – a better tomorrow. Thus, the rest of the drama pays more attention to Maria, who helps Patrick with his first escape. The more realistic scene that follows the interval sheds a contrasting and ironical light on Patrick-the-saviour with the powerful voice. He is nervous and afraid, while Maria engages in a controversy with her father, Patrick snatches the money she has stolen for him out of her hands and runs like a thief. This is a turning point for Maria as she realises that Patrick will not fulfil her romantic desires. She accepts this and remains calm but burns with quiet enthusiasm for the cause and the beloved leader throughout the rest of the drama. Her role as a soldier is connected to passive endurance, belief and suffering rather than violence and action.

Maria's transformation and dedication is not only depicted as solemn and pathos-filled, but is also associated with more traditional art and a sentimental component. Both father and daughter address a painting of the dead wife/mother and they play the violin in order to connect with her. In short, the chaos of the day and the protests against it (the militant anti-militarism, as it were) are presented through screams and avant-garde styles and effects, while the vision for tomorrow, Maria's dedication, is framed as quiet, leaning towards the sentimental and traditional. Both aesthetics are efficient. They serve the same goal, but the emotional centre of the drama lies with Maria, her sacrifice and her calmness.

### *From pictures to the scream*

Olsson's photonovel, *På Kanaanexpressen* (*On the Canaan Express*, 1929), shares several features with *S.O.S.* It is also a pacifist work which presents an individual, Peter, who decides to wipe out his individuality and (paradoxically) become an anti-militarist soldier for the cause of revolutionising society from within and creating a New Man and a new tomorrow. The religious and messianic connotations are enhanced and combined with vague socialist ideas. The word "Canaan" (the promised land) and the French "impossible" quoted from Étienne Cabet's communist-utopian novel *Voyage en Icarie* (1840) serve as mottos for Peter and a young woman, who together decide to honour the victims of World War One by rejecting the pessimism of post-war Europe. As mentioned, the novel is also a striking intermedial experiment (Brynhildsvoll 1991; Meurer-Bongardt 2015; Holländer's reading 1993 is less convincing). However, its effect and framing are slightly different than those of *S.O.S.*

The novel is arranged as a montage of pictures and texts with different focalisations and genres. Eleven photographs and one

reproduction of a painting are inserted into the text. The pictures range from cubism, abstraction, Bauhaus and Neue Sachlichkeit to advertisements and celebrity and documentary photography. The cover uses photographs in a montage designed by Olavi Paavolainen. Thus, in this work almost all available media and art forms of 1929 are present – concretely or mediated through words. The result looks stunningly modern. However, as I have argued elsewhere, in many cases the words and pictures complicate each other. Modern pictorial art is paradoxically associated with both violence and meaningless superficiality (Hermansson 2013; 2015a; 2015b: 140–155).

In the novel, Peter exclaims that youth have their belief in action, not in words, (1929: 37). But when this is translated into a programmatic slogan – “even poetry must be action” (“Även dikt skall vara handling”, 1929: 61) – by a poet in Peter’s circle of acquaintances, Peter rejects it as an empty attempt to exploit the new ideas and media for the sake of profit and self-promotion. He is nauseated by the poet’s idea of outshining Marinetti by adapting his poem on Charles Lindberg’s aeroplane to film, and he reacts aggressively. A photograph of an American military airship reinforces the theme of exploitation, militarism and violence. The irony is that Peter’s own public breakthrough is just as much a cunning media stunt.

When Peter’s childhood friend Teresia kills herself, he publicly claims that he and all society is the killer. At this point, Peter, a quiet, middle-aged film censor suffering with ennui and impotence, re-creates himself and the fate of Teresia as a work of art that transgresses all medial boundaries and affects everyday life, not the least for a group of young people connected with a small, avant-garde magazine, *The Torch* (Facklan, supposedly modelled on the Finnish *Tulenkantajat*). The decisive difference with the poet is of course Peter’s non-commercial and non-individualistic conviction and goal. Nevertheless, the novel shows that the reception of Peter’s ideological “work” and slogans runs its own course. Regardless of Peter’s intentions, suicide becomes modern. The young torch bearers are fascinated as much with him as an individual and with the style of his expressions as with his utopian ideas. They fantasize about his character: the magazine editor sees, for example, an agitator and *dictator*, and he jealously admires the effectiveness of Peter’s slogans, which are shouted by the newsvendors on the streets (cf. Meurer-Bongardt 2011: 321).

After Peter decides to become a soldier, the narrative is interrupted by an abstract photo by Hannes Flach (in *Der Querschnitt* 1928 it was entitled “Welten im Werden”) and a short poem by Walt Whitman which are printed on each side of the opening of the book. The picture is a calm, yet dynamic composition. The poem, “Hast Never Come to Thee an Hour”, invokes the moment of epiphany and reduction into pure existence. Both words and picture strive at reduction on several levels. The narrative, however, does not depict Peter’s calmness and “reduction” in the moment of his breakthrough as either epiphany or creation, rather as machine-like (1929: 175, 195).

Along with the story of how Peter becomes an almost inhumanly efficient agitator, the novel pays attention to the women around him. They are women of his own generation, who give up and cease to take part in life, and younger women who willingly sacrifice their individual desires to work for the coming of the new dawn. This gendered slant is emphasised and complicated by the pictorial elements. Half the pictures in the book represent female faces and bodies, and all but one (and Max Burchart's portrait on the cover of a young girl "Lotte" cut in half) is in danger, confinement, or distress. The first and the last of the female portraits establish an interesting formal and thematic dialogue with each other and with Flach's abstract photo. The first portrait is Marie Laurencin's self-portrait *La prisonnière I* (1917), which shows a woman's face behind a dark grid that covers the canvas. The last is a self-portrait by the Berlin photographer Yva (Else Neuländer-Simon), double exposed with a cubist painting by Heinz Hajek-Halke (Finnan 2006). The features are androgynous, the expression is calm and neutral, the hands are arranged over the chest, creating multiple associations with wings, self-protection, or a dead body that has been laid out. The cubist painting interfering with the portrait echoes both Laurencin's imprisoned self and the Y-shape of Flach's abstract photo. The effect becomes a flickering between confinement and liberation.

As it interacts with words and other pictures in *På Kanaanexpressen*, Yva's self-portrait seems almost paradigmatic for Olsson's continuing process of drawing near to avant-garde aesthetics and resisting them, her shifting between hopes and fears for the future and for the future of avant-garde art. But for some reason, Olsson chose to close the novel with words that approach a verbalised scream. They come from Teresia's younger sister, Florrie, who is deathly ill from tuberculosis. They are printed in spaced out letters on the last page without a concluding full stop:

I feel the fever. It is life burning in me. My heart will endure for days and nights, it will not weaken. My heart is a predator, it will consume all of my anxieties, my tears and my loneliness. It will consume the last remnant of my love and my last expectations, nothing will tie my hands in the breaking of dawn. My heart is a glorious predator, it has clutched its teeth in my own flesh, it hungers, hungers (1929: 231)

Jag känner febern. Det är livet som brinner i mig. Mitt hjärta skall hålla ut i dagar och nätter, det skall inte förslappas. Mitt hjärta är ett rovdjur, det skall förtära all min ängslan, min gråt och min ensamhet. Det skall förtära den sista resten av min kärlek och min sista förhoppning, ingenting skall binda mina händer i morgongryningen. Mitt hjärta är ett härligt rovdjur, det har huggit tänderna i mitt eget kött, det hungrar hungrar (1929: 231)

Whereas Peter's sacrifice made him into a strong and attractive public figure, Florrie's is staged as private and bloody. The contrast to the calmness of the diptych with Whitman's poem and Flach's abstract photo is striking. The heart as a predator feeding on its own flesh not

only (again) turns aggression inwards, but also echoes typical images of expressionist poems, at least in a Nordic context (Pär Lagerkvist, Edith Södergran, Elmer Diktonius). The hunger is ecstatically messianic, emphasising the logic of destruction and restitution/construction.

As conclusion to this tour-de-force of modern visual culture, war and violence, art, gender issues and messianic hopes, Olsson chose words – and not just any words, but a sort of verbalised agony with the intensity and imagery of expressionism. Why? Perhaps we should understand it as combination of two tendencies in the earlier works. Firstly, we have noticed Olsson's incessant interest in the painful process of transgressing and discarding the individual self, and her subtle unease with the fictional figures the moment they turn into efficient agitators/saviours. If we should name her relentless investment in "tomorrow" as an instance of modern messianism, it is, as we have seen, indeed a messiah-sceptical one, fascinated by and simultaneously sceptical of the nature of exchange between the saviour-figure and the masses. Added to this is Olsson's tendency to bend aggression and brutality inwards as a more acceptable form of violence, in aesthetics as well as in "real" life. Apparently, she felt expressionist imagery and expressions of existential anguish to be more appropriate for this than modern pictures.

Secondly, we might also read it as a symptom of Olsson's habit of shifting between media and styles. The novel does not provide answers to the questions that it poses, but gives the outlines of a process. In fact, the most common feature of the works I have analysed here seems to be a constant shifting of attention towards and unease with most of the available media and forms of expression – the word, the picture, film, the body and the inarticulate howl – a constant moving to or from unconventional forms of expression.

### ***Mediating international avant-garde and propagating a new dawn***

Olsson's idea of the scream and of pictorial art was not one, but many. During the inter-war period, she was enthusiastic about the liberating power of modern pictorial art and modernist rhythms, but nevertheless balanced it with calmness, classical sculpture and music. This ambivalence is matched by an apparent need to use the scream in almost all its modern variants and to control it all the same. The messianic mode of being and thinking in its expressionist variant, the intensity and pathos with which the poets and writers sought to revolutionise the world through their art, and the focus on the saviour-figure likewise seems to have both attracted and repelled Olsson.

Olsson negotiated avant-garde aesthetics not only in her essays and reviews but also in her fictional work. Her assessments were less determined by conservative moderation and more by a persistent wariness towards surfaces and inauthenticity. Rather, Olsson's sceptical attitude to avant-garde aesthetics such as futurism and expressionism was Janus-faced, wary about formalism, aestheticism, shallowness, and, at the same time, fascinated with and anxious about the violent energies

in them. Her heroes were soldiers as well as prophets – aggressors, but most of all martyrs for a cause. She often used aggressive attacks on traditional art and society but also replaced them or channelled them into self-castigating gestures. As we have seen, the anti-formalist stance is extended to a suspicion of all kinds of expressive media: the body, the word, the scream, the picture. Olsson's unease is often due to her avant-garde demand on art to be performative, to engage, to transform.

In Olsson's universe before World War Two, the imperative of transgressing borders and pressing onto new beginnings seems to have resulted in a restlessness both in how she employed different media and how she assessed them within the fictional worlds. It would be wrong to see this as a lack of decisiveness or firm conviction on her part. Instead, the texts examined here point out an incessant and engaged navigation between (perceived) possibilities and pitfalls connected with the different media, between expectations and watchfulness. Of course, the art of tomorrow (and the society with which it was linked) remained vaguely defined.

In a Nordic context, the messianic slant in Olsson's work is rather idiosyncratic. But the ambivalent and conditioned ways in which she both used avant-garde devices and attitudes and critically assessed them is recognisable in other contemporary Nordic works. (For other Nordic prose modernists inspired by expressionism, see Hermansson 2015b). This tendency does not need to be understood merely as cautious moderation, typical of peripheral cultures as opposed to the centres of the true or pure avant-garde. As Benedikt Hjartarson and Per Bäckström have suggested, it may also be viewed as a conscious, active and critical response, which in fact takes part in the formation of the avant-garde (2014: 23). While specifying a distinction between modernism and avant-garde is a meaningful, albeit difficult enterprise (see e.g. Eysteinnsson 2009; Hubert van den Berg 2005 and 2012), it is equally important to recognise the dynamic and performative negotiations that went on in the overlapping fields, in the centres as well as the peripheries. In this way, Olsson's work in the inter-war period is both part of the formation of early Nordic modernism and an active response to (and thereby also a formative part of) the European avant-garde.

Olsson's novel *Det blåser upp till storm* (*There's a Storm Brewing*, 1930) marked a turning point, when avant-garde art ceased to attract the same attention in her fictional work. The seemingly hyper-rational narrator, Sara, declares that modern painting is utter nonsense and poetry and fiction a thing of the past. She prefers functionalist architecture; hearing the masses sing the *Internationale* makes her proud and gives her pleasure. But classical music does give her a new understanding of art and she experiences a moment of cosmic rejoicing in her heart (1930: 128–29; cf. Meurer-Bongardt 2011: 231). In *Chitambo* (1933), modern pictorial art produces only one passing comment (1933: 62–63). In both works, however, secular messianic thought is still active. The atheist Sara even explicitly reflects upon her own inclination to use the language of religion to describe a feeling of richness and grace (1930:

145). The novel ends with her optimistically looking ahead towards a new dawn, in spite of the death of her beloved.

Nevertheless, after the Second World War, Olsson expressed her continued belief in the transgressive power of avant-garde art and literature in the essay *Jag lever* (I Live, 1948). The essay describes how looking at avant-garde paintings releases the individual consciousness and opens for a powerfully radiating, universal consciousness. Olsson wrote, “The impulse comes from the canvas, the miracle happens within you, and the alien power that carries you is flowing from your own inner you” (“Impulsen kommer från duken, undret sker inom en, och den främmande kraften som bär en utströmmar från ens eget inre”, 1987: 96).

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