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Modernist Minds in Marja-Liisa Vartio's Prose

Elise Nykänen: Worlds Within and Without. Presenting Fictional Minds in Marja-Liisa Vartio's Narrative Prose. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2014. 318 s.

Elise Nykänen's doctoral dissertation *Worlds Within and Without. Presenting Fictional Minds in Marja-Liisa Vartio's Narrative Prose* is a rare example of genuinely diachronic narratology with a clear literary historical target. Diachronic narratology often uses singular cases from a broad range of periods and cultural contexts, which results in a series of readings linked together only by some single phenomenon under scrutiny. Nykänen's concentration on Vartio's prose fiction enables her to reach a much more in-depth analysis of the material and of the period. Together with skillfully constructed and elaborated critical context, Nykänen is able to re-evaluate the nature of Finnish modernism both as an aesthetic and a stylistic phenomenon, at the same time contributing to the theoretical discussion on fictional minds.

The dissertation consists of a rather short introduction, followed by a chapter with heavy theoretical emphases and five chapters each analyzing one novel by Vartio. The research questions are formulated in the first two pages introducing three areas of study: Vartio's prose, modernist fiction, and the study of fictional minds. The third one is first formulated rather modestly to offer "an interesting point of departure" (p. 2), but is clarified and given more emphases on page 6, where previous Vartio study is reviewed: "These readings demonstrate how Vartio's narrative art offers a an intriguing playground for testing the formulations of (cognitive) narrative theory." All three goals – the nature of Vartio's prose fiction, the formal and thematic conventions of modernism, and testing narrative theory – are very worthy of pursuing, and Nykänen manages to gain results in all these areas.

The theoretical framework laid out in chapter 2 is mainly derived from studies on fictional minds, possible worlds theory, and narrative causality and plot theory. Chapter two is through and through well-informed and learned in its discussion of these areas of study. It is clear Nykänen knows and is able to evaluate and modify the theories, and to use them for the benefit of her study. The first area mentioned, fictional minds, gains most attention. Not only does Nykänen go through the classical theories, most importantly the ground breaking work of Dorrit Cohn, and demonstrate her command on the newer ideas introduced by Monika Fludernik, Alan Palmer, David Herman and Lisa Zunshine; additionally, she employs ideas from cognitive sciences by Antonio Damasio, Colin McGinn, and Joseph LeDoux.

Nykänen's research is original in putting together cognitively inspired narratology vis-à-vis the distinctiveness of an author's oeuvre. Nykänen manages to skillfully relate and discuss both current trends

and seminal traditions in the study of fictional minds. The application of newer theories on mind-reading, intermentality etc. clearly benefit from not abandoning the older models of consciousness representation or, for example, focalization. The combination in many places results into illuminating analysis of Vartio's novels. The use of cognitive and psychological models, on the other hand, raises the question of the possible distinctiveness of fictional minds when compared to real ones. The debate has gone on for long, and it is formulated quite clearly in David Herman's introduction to his book *The Emergence of Mind*, also used in Nykänen's dissertation. As Nykänen argues, literary fiction has been regarded as a laboratory for human cognition, a testing ground where the abilities and limits of the human mind are tried out and transgressed. The topical debate on the possible distinction of fictional mind representation is addressed in Nykänen's dissertation, but she does not take a definite stand herself.

For me, the analytical practice of the book seems at times somewhat too readily to move from stating a quality of the human mind outside of fiction into applying it to the minds represented in Vartio's prose. This happens especially in the analysis of *Hänen olivat linnut*. While this constitutes no real problem, it begs the question if it would also have been possible to emphasize more the very nature and distinctiveness of Vartio's fiction not just in relation to "the human mind" but in more detail to modernist aesthetics. The results of the chapter analyzing *Hänen olivat linnut* are, nevertheless, convincing, and Nykänen states, for example, that "[t]hese [textual] illusions reflect the prototypical activity of a human mind, and also, at the same time, the activity of fictional minds as purely artificial constructs." (p. 295). These are excellent results, clearly proven by the preceding pages of the dissertation, and testify to Nykänen's sound relation to the exceptionality debate.

The analytical chapters follow the order of the publication of the novels. This choice gives Nykänen the possibility to follow closely the development of narrative techniques in Vartio's prose. On the other hand, there is a slight imbalance between the theoretical framework outlined in the chapter two and the analytical practice exercised in the chapters to follow. This, I believe, originates from a possible discrepancy between the theoretical traditions used in the dissertation. It is generally understood that post-classical narratology's emphasis on experientiality and the embodied fictional minds is connected to a shift of focus away from features like sequentiality and temporal ordering in classical narratology. This move is most prevalent in the study of fictional minds, but also in the study of possible worlds, where the storyworlds are approached more as spaces and modalities than as series of happenings or events. Despite of post-classical emphasis in the theoretical chapter, the analytical part of Nykänen's dissertation builds heavily on the ideas of relating event sequences into causal, random or even counterfactual series. This discrepancy or tension between the theories used and the analytical practice is at least partially consolidated by the application of Hilary Dannenberg's research on counterfactuality, where time and

space are brought together. Moreover, Nykänen's analysis also makes use of theories and methods from the relevant generic traditions – most importantly female Bildungsroman –, and the study of motifs, plot structures, metaphors, and themes. This analysis connects Nykänen's dissertation very strongly to the core of literary studies, and provides a solid foundation for the dissertation.

With her approach, combining a rich theoretical frame and the analysis of an important author's oeuvre, Nykänen offers a significant contribution to the literary historical study of modernism by revisiting and revising the assumption that modernism included a move from the external world into the subjective consciousness as the center of attention. For this purpose, Nykänen introduces her model of the internal and external perspectives on fictional minds. The two perspectives allow her not only to thoroughly investigate the narrative techniques used in Marja-Liisa Vartio's novels but also to analyze how the characters in the novels negotiate between the private and the public, the individual and the collective, the conscious and the unconscious, and the rational and the emotional.

Nykänen's research is the first serious attempt to form a comprehensive overview of Marja-Liisa Vartio's prose fiction from a theoretically grounded perspective. This combination of theoretical, critical and historical aims is most recommendable, and a growing trend in the study of Finnish literature. Nykänen's dissertation will undoubtedly strengthen the status of Finnish literary tradition as a part of world literature due to its language (English) and its concentration on one of Finland's most notable modernists. Moreover, the dissertation contributes to the development of Finnish literature as a field considerably contributing to the development of literary theory and participating in comparative literature debates.

Marja-Liisa Vartio's novels and Nykänen's readings of them undisputedly revise and challenge the assumption of an inward turn in mind representation in modernist fiction. The readings also significantly illuminate and enrich the understanding of Vartio's relation to the modernist literary tradition and her contribution to the generic and stylistic evolution of literature in the 1950's and 60's. These are outstanding achievements in Nykänen's dissertation.

What comes to testing and developing narrative theories, the dissertation succeeds in a somewhat lesser degree. The effort is, however, worthwhile as an attempt to import new analytical methods into the study of modernism. And as stated before, Nykänen is successful in her readings of Vartio's prose, in the sense that the choice of theoretical framework does tease out new, insightful interpretations of Vartio's prose. What is more, I very much support Nykänen's practice of reading Vartio's prose in a bit more traditional literary studies sense than that advocated by cognitively inspired narrative theory. Discussing the motifs, themes, genres, plots and metaphors along with tracing the mental and intermental functionings of the characters results in a very sound and balanced analyses and interpretation of Vartio's prose.

The book's emphasis on the generic and literary tradition serves both theoretical, periodical and author-specific goals. Methodological choices that stem from the long tradition of literary analyses together with the newer insights, I am sure, ensure the results on Vartio, modernism and narratology offered in the book will prove more lasting than would have been the case had Nykänen fully immersed herself in cognitive narrative theory. The fact that Nykänen in practice has had to resort to analytical tools outside of her primary theoretical frame also testifies to the limits of cognitive narratology as a text analytical apparatus – and to Nykänen's ability to independent research, not confining herself to any one theoretical school but independently picking and choosing frameworks and methods. Elise Nykänen's dissertation is firmly grounded in her command of literary studies' tradition, and is recommended reading to literary scholars beyond just those interested in literary modernism or narratology.

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Making History

Novels, Histories, Novel Nations – Historical Fiction and Cultural Memory in Finland and Estonia. Edited by Liina Kaljundi, Eneken Laanes & Ilona Pikkanen. Finnish Literature Society, Helsinki 2015. 342 p.

Given the polysemy of the – adjective or noun – “novel”, it is almost astonishing that no earlier accounts of such a book title have been found. In this sense it was about time to detect and reveal the interdependence between nation building and historical fiction and put it into a handsome title for a nice collection of a dozen of profound and competent articles on this topic. This is the first thing to praise the editors for. They have brought together Estonian and Finnish scholars in order to shed more light on the prominent position a certain literary genre can obtain, and indeed obtains, within the process of nation building. This topic is often neglected though very well-known. The oscillating reputation of the historical novel, or historical fiction in general, led to a situation where literary scholars did not take notice of the genre and historians regarded it as irrelevant anyway as they prefer ‘facts’ to fiction.