

HARRIVEIVO

## Introduction

The third volume of *Joutsen / Svanen* gathers articles on Finland's literature by foreign scholars: Andrew Nestingen discusses Miika Nousiainen's novels as post-national literature, Gunilla Hermansson analyses Hagar Olsson's medial awareness and modernist aesthetics, Anne Heith looks at the situation of Sámi and Tornedalian literature from a post-colonial and transnational perspective and Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska focuses on double address and philosophical intertexts in Tove Janssons Moomin-books. The research articles are followed by reports on research and education in Finnish studies in Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic. The review section includes contributions from Finland and abroad.

The scope of the current volume is thus international and Finnish at the same. The driving idea behind this is not a simple strategy of internationalisation (research in Finland is already highly internationalised), but rather a set of questions: do Finnish literary studies exist at an international level? Is there a body of research on Finland's literature produced abroad? Are there non-Finnish literary scholars and Finnish scholars residing permanently abroad bound together by a frame of references, an education or a set of questions that is sufficiently focused and stable so as to support the sense of a shared discipline, of a scientific community? If the answers to these questions are affirmative, one may further ask what the specific character of this body of work or this community is. What language does it speak? How does it imagine its place in academia and in society?

The articles in this volume do not address these questions directly. They are research contributions in their own right, stemming from specific questions and arguing for specific ways to understand the authors and works upon which they focus. The reports offer views on national traditions and institutional contexts and the challenges and discussions that are pertinent within these frames, showcasing the vitality and richness of the work done in the three countries in question. Brought together, the texts offer examples of the kind of research and discussion the volume as a whole calls forth and questions at the same time.

Research on Finland's literature has traditionally been carried out in two scientific contexts: Finno-Ugric studies and Scandinavian studies. These institutional frames have distinct disciplinary traditions as well as different sets of priorities in research and education. For students speaking an Indo-European language as their mother tongue, studying Finnish means a lot of hard work simply to acquire the basic linguistic competencies. The institutional context of their education is often shaped by scholarly traditions in linguistics, Finnish being traditionally taught and researched in the same departments as its linguistic relatives, principally Hungarian and Estonian. Students of Finland's other national

language often have easier access to the basic competencies due to the proximity of Swedish with many European languages. This research is often conducted in departments of Scandinavia studies, which brings in a specific set of historical and cultural information and connections.

This situation is wrought with tensions that one might even call paradoxes. For students of Swedish, the Swedish literature of Finland – and the existence of the Swedish-speaking population of the country – may be a small detail in a larger picture dominated by Ibsen, Strindberg, the Vikings and the Sagas. The modernism of the 1910s and '20s seems to be the only movement that attracts larger attention. This is certainly due in part to the quality of the literature itself, but also to the fact that this specific movement was canonised early in Sweden and has retained its position ever since. The road from Finland to Scandinavian studies goes via Stockholm. On the other hand, the connections between Finland, Estonia, Hungary and the linguistically related populations of Russia, studied in the academic tradition of Finno-Ugric studies, are relevant for a limited set of research questions only and may overshadow more important cultural and historical links with the countries of the Baltic Sea region and Western Europe, Estonia being perhaps the only case that is relevant for a number of reasons (see Cornelius Hasselblatt's review article in this volume). The very idea of, let's say, the history of Finno-Ugric literature sounds odd, as it would impose on Finnish literature a grid of interpretation that would not match the understanding most Finnish scholars have of their field (which is not, of course, to say that such a thing would be uninteresting and impossible).

The academic traditions in Scandinavian and Finno-Ugric traditions define their research object in their own ways. In this process, connections and interpretations that scholars in Finland take for granted are disregarded and new ones proposed instead. The same holds when the situation is observed the other way round. Literary research in Finland is today internationalised to the point where knowledge of sophisticated theoretical and methodological discussions in the English-speaking world is often strictly necessary simply in order to understand what is done and why. Students in Finnish departments abroad not only have to struggle to acquire the language they are studying, but they also have to read difficult works in other foreign languages too, striving at the same time to learn to work within three traditions of scholarly discourse (the domestic, the Finnish – including Finland-Swedish – and the English). This is not only time-consuming, but also stands at odds with the basic intellectual curiosity that motivates their work, foreign students usually being interested in Finland and not that much in the discursive networks that connect Finland with the wider world (which, however, are constitutive of Finland). It also imposes difficult choices. A PhD student has to decide in some way or other whether a thesis should be more connected to the Finnish research tradition or to the domestic one, whether it seeks to contribute to the former or the latter. In most cases, the first option may seem more reasonable, given that more publications and expertise often exist in Finland. But in career terms, the second option may be better, the domestic research tradition

being in most of the cases the determining factor when positions are filled. Finnish studies, if such a thing existed as an international tradition and academic community, could provide a mediating field bridging Finland and the different national contexts.

The question of the perception of Finland's literature is complex within comparative literature too. *Kalevala* stands alone as the uncontested Finnish contribution to the international canon; other works do not seem to make their way into students' reading curricula. The recent interest in 'world literature' has hardly changed the situation. Paradoxically, Finland is too peripheral and exotic to play a role in traditional Western-centred research and too European and not exotic enough to gain in importance when the paradigm is changed in favour of a global approach. It may also be that the new global perspective is less anti-hegemonic than sometimes is pretended. 'World literature' certainly questions the leading role of the Western canon and the economic and political structures upon which it is based. The alternative readings and evaluations it has proposed have however been unevenly distributed this far, promoting either the literature of new political and economic powers such as China and India or of the formerly (and in some cases still) colonial peoples. Finland falls into the limbo between the earlier dominant perception and its challenger.

All this may seem perplexing: Finland's literature dissipates and re-emerges in new forms when inserted into different academic traditions abroad. The many characteristics – and critical questionings – which researchers in Finland take for granted are simply not pertinent when seen from another institutional setting. It would be tempting to put Finland and the Finnish research community at the centre of this image. However, to do so would be short-sighted and inimical to the opportunities of learning offered by foreign contacts. Instead of adhering to a discourse of truth and authenticity where only Finnish scholars have access to a deeper understanding of the subject, we should rather see the perplexing multiplicity as an opportunity, the variety of perceptions and traditions opening up a space for dialogue that can be extremely interesting and rewarding. Literature is, after all, a linguistically mediated encounter between the self and the other. It reveals something of both at the same time, but not of one without the other.

## Author

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