

Lustrous Flowers, Rotten Soil, and Someone to Make the Tea

THE QUEER IN EARLY FINNISH WORKING-CLASS LITERATURE

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Queer studies in Finnish literature is a small but vibrant field. In recent years, studies have been written on the queer approach as a political reading practice (Karkulehto 2007), on the entanglement of sexual and narrative ambivalence (Haasjoki 2012), and on the spatio-temporality of male gay sexuality (Carlson 2014), to name just a few topics. However, as yet the queer studies perspective has not posed an explicit challenge to the writing of Finnish literary history at any systematic level. The latest attempts at dismantling the heteronormative way our literary history is both taught and written about date from the 1990s; they represent the paradigm of gay and lesbian studies and stem from an interest in identity politics, concentrating primarily on locating early representations of gay and lesbian identities (Pakkanen 1996; Mustola 1996). One emblematic outcome of this phase was the rediscovery of Aino Malmberg's short story "Ystävyyttä?" [Friendship?] from 1903 and its naming as the first ever lesbian short story in the Finnish literary history (Mustola 2000).

However, as energising and interesting as such discoveries are, a risk remains that the identity-bound research focuses excessively on what

is represented, that is to say on an identity as a historical construction, and works of literature are found interesting only inasmuch they carry characters that can be argued to represent or reflect that extra-literary construction (cf. Elfenben 1999, 165). What this approach is in danger of missing are other traits of the queer, the kinds that have little or nothing to do with a fictional character's identity: the queer as an unsettling current under the surface of a normative text that tries to present itself as non-selfcontradictory. In this article, I try to work my way around the traps of representative thinking by reading the queer in literature as a textual force rather than a depiction of any presumed reality outside literature, "[T]he excess of something always unassimilable that troubles the relentlessly totalizing impulse informing normativity," to quote Lee Edelman's formulation in the famous 2007 roundtable that since has become one of the founding texts of what is now known as the queer temporality studies (Dinshaw et al. 2007, 189). Thought this way, the queer is sexual in nature but not collapsible with any particular sexual identity, and therefore any literary guise it may assume serves more to suggest that there is an outside to normalcy rather than to illustrate that outside itself.

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In this article, I return to the subject material of my earlier monograph (Hyttinen 2012), the oeuvre of one of the very first working-class women writers in Finland, Elvira Willman (1875–1925), to discuss a phenomenon I touched upon but did not concentrate on in the study: the surprising reliance on the queer in Willman’s work in constituting the working-class literature, even if the area of the queer gets the dubious honour of serving as everything the working class is not. The discovery is surprising because no history of the Finnish working-class literature acknowledges the presence of any queer forces in literature from the early 20th century, not even in Willman’s case, even if her fictional worlds to a fundamental degree need and require both the homosexual man and the possibility and threat of the queer as the opposite of the preferred social order. This I will demonstrate, in what follows, by reading two of Willman’s plays, *Kellarikerroksessa* [Below the Street Level] (1907) and *Vallankumouksen vyöryssä* [In the Turmoils of Revolution] (1917) and its namesake novella *Vallankumouksen vyöryssä* [In the Turmoils of Revolution] (1918). I trust Willman’s uses of the queer to constitute an interesting case in itself, but I wish also to make a more general argument regarding literary history and queer analysis: what I am hoping to show here is that a queer analysis does not mean only discussing themes and characters that merely have consequences on how we understand sexuality or certain sexual subcultures. Rather, it has the potential to challenge the way the majority and the mainstream understands its genealogy, by illustrating what kind of forces remain unacknowledged when the normative tries to represent itself as the only version of reality there is (see Hyttinen 2014a, 35–38).

Set Your Own Rules, but Abide by Them

Elvira Willman personifies many controversies of her times: she was bourgeois by birth, but on the side of the oppressed by conviction. Her

political views shifted from liberal to socialist to communist to anarchist and back, and her writings always in some way touched upon the ‘woman question’ (Haataja 2013; Hyttinen 2014b). In quite a number of her texts, she vigorously attacks the concept of the individual, showing how women, especially from the lower classes, had no possibility of inhabiting the position of an individual: a supposedly universal human condition, in Willman’s oeuvre individuality is repeatedly revealed as very class and gender specific. (Hyttinen 2014b.) Willman debuted as a playwright with great success at the Finnish National theatre in 1903, failed with her second play in 1904, and soon after lost her connections to the National Theatre. In the 1918 Civil War, she was on the side of the reds, writing short stories and small features for socialist newspapers. Because of these undertakings, she saw it best to flee the country at the end of the war and emigrate to Soviet Russia. In Russia, she was eventually executed in 1925 by Russian officials as the result of violent political intrigues amongst Finnish red émigrés (Paastela 2003, 120, 183–84; Lahti-Argentina 2001, 571; Hyttinen 2012, 155–56).

When Willman began her career, there was no working-class literature in Finland to speak of. The 19th century literary sphere had been largely dominated by nationalist tendencies, so much so that the literary institution of the era is often referred to in the singular (Palmgren 1966; Roininen 1993), as it formed an ideologically uniform area with the notion of national revival at its core (cf. Haapala 1999, 214–16; Lahtinen 2006, 150–54; Nieminen 2006, 160). Only at the turn of the century did this uniformity start showing fractures parallel to other manifestations of the modernisation of the society, such as the replacement of the old estate system in 1907 with a modern parliament. It has been claimed that around these years, the working man (at last) emerged on the literary field (Roininen 1993, 1; Roininen 1999). However, if working-class subjects are argued to just emerge at a particular stage of history, it is implicit

in the phrasing of the argument that the subject is supposed to be self-identical from the start. In the worst case, we might end up believing that the emerging figure was male and heterosexual just because, well, nature made him so. From my queer perspective I am inclined to think that the topos of emerging, in previous research, has an ideological dimension that actually serves to hide a process of figuration, the outcome of which was essentially unknown and unknowable at the time.

Firstly, the working-class man did not, then, for the first time claim the position of producer of literature. In fact, quite a number of writers who took and had taken part in the creation of the 19th century bourgeois literary field were actually from the lower classes (Hyttinen 2014b, Rojola 2009). Conversely, many of the writers involved in the creation of Finnish working-class literature were not working class by birth: they had political motivations for wanting to work on a field of culture aiming at dismantling the bourgeois cultural hegemony (Palmgren 1966, 178). Willman is a prime example of the latter case. She came from a family of ship owners, and had even attended the university in Helsinki before embarking on a career in the theatre (Vallinharju 1967, 367–70; Palmgren 1966, 213–15). Secondly, as subjects of literature, working-class men and women did not simply emerge either, however much we'd like to think of them as products of history and social changes instead of language. As any other literary figures, they had to be imagined. I see the rise of working-class literary culture in early 19th century Finland as resulting from an increased interest in doing literature differently from the bourgeois or the mainstream literature, so that the act of engaging with literature, either as a reader or as a writer, would not require adopting the values and ideological commitments of the educated class (Hyttinen 2012, 9–11, 52–53).

So, if nobody was emerging, there is no referent to guarantee the stability of the signifier, so to say. This, in turn, means that there were no self-evident rules as to how to write differently, in a way that would not be

interpreted simply a variation of the norms of the mainstream but as a radical breaking of them. In the texts I have chosen to analyse here, Elvira Willman employs the queer in articulating the working-class existence in her fictional worlds. The interesting thing is that it worked: Willman did, through these and other writings, manage to come across as a producer of working-class literature, and was publicly accepted as such, though the queer impulses in early Finnish working-class literature subsequently remained unrecognised for decades.

As impressive as this way of framing the working-class and its outside is, Willman could not, of course, decide on her own that this would now count as that new kind of writing: the working-class literature. As Pierre Bourdieu (1996, *passim*) has convincingly argued, it is the literary field that eventually decides what counts as literature. Fields are historically specific, governed by a set of rules that serve to draw their limits, and an individual's access to a field is dependent on the approval by its gatekeepers (Bourdieu 1985, 105; Bourdieu 1996; Mäkinen 2001, 27; Hyttinen 2012, 25). Willman's career coincides with the formation of a new literary field in Finland, a working-class field with its own media, publishing houses, theatre groups and primary audience (Roininen 1993, 1–5). In Bourdieu's thinking, the linguistic choices of a writer would only affect their positioning within a field inasmuch as the gatekeepers and their decisions are affected by them. In other words, unlike the formalists he despises, Bourdieu wants to keep the linguistic and the social separate (cf. Butler 1999, 113). Judith Butler has criticised Bourdieu for always presupposing a stable field, always presupposing authorities available for authoring or denying accesses to that field (Butler 1999, 124–125).¹ And

1 The structure of the critique is similar to Jacques Derrida's critique of J. L. Austin's speech-act theory. Austin sees power as invested in speech from somewhere outside it. Derrida claims that the power of language to act lies in the very citationality of language itself (Derrida 1972).

indeed, Willman would be uncomfortably placed in a Bourdieusian field, as the working-class literary field was only in the process of constituting itself by the time Willman built her career, she herself serving as much as a candidate seeking entry as a gatekeeper guarding the borders as a writer who also, notably, directed some of her own plays, put together her own theatre groups and sat on juries for play-writing competitions (Seppälä 2007, 389). Rather than following any rules given from the outside, becoming a working-class writer meant for her, thus, setting her own rules and then following them. However, one must not think of this setting of rules as infinite liberty or freedom from constrictions. As Judith Butler's work suggests, repetition becomes a serious process precisely when there is no outside force to judge it, when the obeying of rules and their constitution merge in the process of one's becoming legible (Butler 1997, 133–135).

To become a working-class writer, then, Willman had to obey by the rules of the working-class literary field, even though there was no rulebook to consult and even if the rules were to a remarkable extent made up as they were implemented. In what follows, we will see that one of the rules governing her writing is that the working-class subject should be essentially depicted as pure – and here Willman needs the queer, this time personified as one of the characters, but also serving as a container for all those things the pure working-class subject essentially is not. By the laws of heredity introduced to world literature through the work of Emile Zola and the naturalists (Rossi 2007, 11–19, 217), all bad things tend in Willman's work to be attributed to the decaying, modern, capitalist society: even the bad in working-class people. Were the system overthrown, a healthier man would rise from below the street level. To embody the argument, Willman invokes a new sexological figure, the invert, as the Other for the working-class subject.

Case 1: The Invert, or, the Queer Man As the Other

In *Kellarikerroksessa* [Below Street Level], Willman's play from 1907, a curious disease is spreading. The sickness turns healthy working-class men overly fat or sickly pale, eventually rendering its victims demented. The malady draws strength from the contaminated soils of Christian nationalism, and is particularly contagious in close contact with a certain proponent of the ideology, Master Vikstedt².

MIKKO

Vikstedt was so meagre – and his friend so fat. –

TAUBE

Well, I can see now why Vikstedt was such good friends with Annala. Opposites attract. – Annala was innocent as a nursing baby and Vikstedt a lustrous flower of 20th century civilisation.

HISINGER

Annala was nurtured fat by the rotten black soil of the Homeland.

LIISI

Well, he's better off than Viki Soininen, who in the service of homeland and chastity grew paler and paler – and is now deranged and locked in an asylum. (Willman 1907, 152)³

The 'homeland' mentioned above refers to two things simultaneously. Firstly, with a capital H, it refers to a newspaper whose headquarters stand across the road from the turn-of-the-century urban inner yard that serves as the central milieu of the play. In that sense, Homeland with a capital H reads as a metonym for the visible yet, for the protagonists, unreachable

2 Mr Vikstedt is repeatedly referred to with his academic credentials, as was customary in Finland at the turn-of-the-century with people of a higher-class status and education.

3 All translations of Willman's work in this article are mine. Page numbers refer to Finnish originals given in the bibliography.

world of the affluent and educated, the bourgeoisie. Master Vikstedt edits the newspaper alongside his other duties of advancing the causes of Christianity, chastity and nationalism – hence the second meaning of homeland with a lower-case H⁴ – and as the leader of a temperance organisation. All the causes that Vikstedt champions were viable channels for political activism in early 20th century Finland, and would have, in real life, too, brought together people from different class backgrounds. However, these people would not have worked side by side as the agenda would have been set by those higher up the social hierarchy, the working class serving mostly as objects of various attempts at their improvement, as citizens as well as Christian souls. But in the play something has gone amiss. Master Vikstedt's impact on the working-class men with whom he comes into close contact is undeniable, but it seems perilous rather than beneficial. Something curiously queer seems to be going on here, as the text suggests a connection between Christian nationalism and fat man-babies, pale madmen, and lustrous flowers.

Oscar Wilde had been sentenced to jail in 1895 after being found guilty of gross indecency. The Oscar Wilde case was closely followed by the press all over the world, Finland being no exception. Some Finnish papers wrote in unspecified terms that Wilde was charged with having violated decency, others, *Hufvudstadsbladet* being a case in point, more explicitly that he had bought sexual services from lower-class men (Mäkinen 2001,

4 In 1907, Finland was part of the Russian empire, albeit an autonomous duchy. That very year the first modern Finnish parliament replaced the old estate system and turned all mature Finns, men and women equally, into citizens with the right to vote and to run for parliament, though most important decision-making was still to the purview of the tsar. 'Homeland' here thus refers to a political fantasy as well as a lived, quotidian experience of being from somewhere, not to an independent nation-state.

47–48).⁵ Master Vikstedt clearly bears features introduced to the Finnish public sphere through these writings.

Wilde was a paragon of the decadent gentleman: educated, eloquent and artistically talented. However, there was a side to this sophistication that his contemporaries interpreted as a sign of the sickly decay of the human race (Sorainen 1999, 67–70). The man flowering – lustrously – in overripe bloom just before collapsing into sickness was a central figure in Wildean aesthetics, and had its counterparts in Finnish decadent literature as well (Lyytikäinen 1998, 7–10). The manner in which Vikstedt is described as a lustrous flower of 20th century civilisation places him on this continuum. However, the working-class characters describing him seem to have a rather carnevalistic take on decadent aesthetics. Instead of contemplating the beauty of the flower that they claim Vikstedt is, they move on to talk about the soil feeding the blossom. Vikstedt is not a decadent flower of exceptional beauty; he is the worthless fruit of putrid soil. To depict his inverted desire this way marks him as a naturalist figure rather than a decadent one, a sign of decay without the beauty glorifying it.

But not only does the text attribute several decadent traits and metaphors to Vikstedt, such as calling him a lustrous flower. The contemporary audience also had the possibility, should they be able to read the codes, to diagnose Master Vikstedt as an invert, and the disease he was spreading, indecency of the male-on-male kind. Vikstedt must be one of the very

5 Sorainen notes, however, that in the court case the emphasis was on gender and morals, not sexual acts. The court discussed indecency and decadence rather than inverted desire: Wilde's crime was that he did not restrain his sexual urges as a decent gentleman should. The court did not address the queerness or normalcy of his sexuality as such (Sorainen 2006, 19–20). In this sense, Wilde stands on a conceptual watershed: he himself might have known of the new sexological figure of the homosexual, but the judicial system did not yet recognise it (ibid, 20–21).

first modern, recognisably homosexual characters in Finnish literature – recognisable in the sense that he is not just an effeminate man, as many characters pertaining to the decadent aesthetic sphere were, but one about whom is quite bluntly suggested that he shares his bed with a same-sex companion: “Who is going to be sleeping with Master Vikstedt?” asks Siiri, the female protagonist of *Below Street Level*, employed at the time of posing this question as a cleaning lady on a steamship. “His travelling companion, one of the members of [a temperance organisation] Morning Glory.” (Willman 1907, 200.) A few lines later we discover that the companion in question is none other than Aku Annala of whom gossip was spread in the citation above. And indeed, naming the sleeping arrangements here serves to verify the rumours. Vikstedt and Annala are not just acquaintances: they are companions and sleep together.

Vikstedt might be an invert, but he is definitely insincere, which in the world of the play is a far greater sin. It is quite clearly suggested that it is easy for him to preach abstention and chastity between men and women, as he himself has a sexual outlet in lower-class men. Also, his position as a supporter of all good causes produces a hierarchical power relation between him and the other characters, an imbalance he is also depicted to exploit in search of male company. This is illustrated through Vikstedt’s abuse of the discourse of chastity in destroying the only intimate relationship in the play not grounded on exploitation and deprivation.

Erkki works as a tram conductor and Nanna struggles to leave a life of prostitution behind her. They dream of a future together, but lack the money to build a home. For extra income, Erkki acts as one of the trustees of Morning Glory. One day, however, Vikstedt asks to see him. Vikstedt opens the scene by stating that a temperance movement cannot employ a man associated with women of the *demi-monde*. However, there is a strong sexual undercurrent to the conversation. Something is being negotiated here that neither party verbalises.

VIKSTEDT

It has been suggested that you might no longer be suitable for selling the Homeland nor serving as the trustee of Morning Glory, for both the paper in question and the organisation have sworn to propagate absolute sobriety and chastity. It might therefore be best if you stopped giving reason to gossip.

ERKKI

What should I do?

VIKSTEDT

Break up with that woman. – (Pause.)

ERKKI

Never. –

VIKSTEDT

In that case I am left with no alternative but to demand that you find yourself a new place of employment as of this very moment, for the doors to Morning Glory are closed to men living like you do. You must forgive me. – I have to be firm. Have you seen Mr Annala? Now there’s a man who has given no reason for complaints.

ERKKI

No. –

(Willman 1907, 107–108.)

What is Vikstedt actually saying when he first demands that Erkki leave his fiancée, then brings up the subject of Annala? Is he hinting to Erkki that there might be another way for him to get back into his good books, through some form of intimate interaction? It is quite likely that the audience is expected to interpret the conversation this way, at least Erkki’s explanation to Nanna of the reasons for his firing one page later strongly suggest this:

ERKKI

See, I cannot marry you yet, for I have been dismissed as a trustee of Morning Glory.

NANNA

But why? –

ERKKI

Because I did not approve of Master Vikstedt's low way of life. – Try to be sensible if you want us to be happy one day. (Willman 1907, 109)

Had Erkki behaved like Annala, he might have saved his job. Erkki here talks of Master Vikstedt's "low way of life", referring rather to Vikstedt's actions than to his identity. Interestingly, this highlights the tensions building up in the figure of the homosexual at the crossroads of different discourses on sexuality at the turn of the century. Homosexual deeds were sanctioned by Finnish law in 1894 (Sorainen 1999, 67). However, sodomy was no longer understood solely as being about volitional acts between same-sex partners. A new figure was making its way into the general knowledge, that of the *homosexual* with an inverted sexual drive. The invert was a new identity, resulting from 19th-century sexology and psychology. The body and psyche of the homosexual were ill matched, for the inverted man had a woman's soul, and the woman, a man's. Previously, same-sex sexual acts had generally been understood as deeds that anyone could commit, given the circumstances. During the 19th century, developments in medicine led to a completely new way of judging sexuality on the scale of normal–abnormal and, consequently, to a new conceptualisation of homosexuality as an inborn feature in an individual. (Kekki 2003, 26–28).⁶

Willman surrounds Master Vikstedt with a thick network of rumours, suggestions, gossip and remarks, as if to make sure that the audience sees his queerness. At least with the more educated part of the audience she succeeded, too: in the only piece of criticism written about the play after it was published as a book in 1907, Hilja Pärssinen (1908) states

⁶ Antu Sorainen (1999, 61–63) has suggested that this birth of an identity might have more to do with a metanarrative crafted by scholarship afterwards than any sudden change in reality itself.

laconically that Vikstedt's "unnatural way of life" does not remain a secret. This resonates with Sedgwick's understanding of the epistemology of the closet as a public secret, as a cultural phenomenon that circulates precisely through the practices of not talking about it (Sedgwick 1990) and Foucault's central idea in *The History of Sexuality* that it is characteristic of the modern era that sex was produced through seemingly repressive discursive practices as our core, as the truth about the true nature of human beings (Foucault 1980).

Vikstedt's sexuality, in its queerness, was no doubt fascinating to the contemporary audience. Despite its shock value, inverted sexuality, however, is not the play's central theme. The play has strong naturalistic features and presents most of the central characters as somehow sick: there is a demented girl who, it is explained, has lost her mind after being raped; a young man dying of inherited alcoholism in the third generation; and there is Vikstedt with his inverted sexual drive. The play's message is that the world is sick, made sick by the economics of exploitation, and the only way to reverse this entropy is for the poor and the sick to unite and force things to change. If only the likes of Vikstedt do not get to them first.

Case 2: Constitutive Outside and Quite an Unnecessary Dialogue in Bed

In 1917, Willman wrote a play called *Vallankumouksen vyöryssä*, 'In The Turmoils of Revolution', and the following year she published a novella with the same title. These were among Willman's very last writings in Finland before she emigrated to Soviet Russia. Despite the names, one is not an adaptation of the other. The play is a revolutionary-romantic depiction of Helsinki high society after the first Russian revolution of 1917, with a ghost [sic!] from 1906 as one of its central characters. The novella,

in turn, is a fragmentary and somewhat incoherent story about a woman's life from childhood in a small coastal town at the end of the 19th century to the Helsinki socialist scene of 1910s. A good part of the novella's pages are devoted to depicting something called 'Viaporin kapina', a rebellion in a Helsinki military fortress in 1906 during which Russian soldiers turned against the Tsarist regime and in which some of the Finnish Reds took part. The novella ends in 1918 with the protagonist thinking that the spirit of the 1906 rebellion had finally been set free. The only thing the two works share are the centrality of the 1906 rebellion, depicted as a manifestation of pure idealism, and the casting of Arkadj Petrovitsj Jemeljanoff⁷, one of the leaders of the Russian rebels, as the authentic idealist subject.

Unlike Master Vikstedt in Willman's early play, Jemeljanoff represents all things good and valuable. Quite remarkably, Jemeljanoff's radicalism is never given any specific features: his politics are not determined, he is never depicted as making any decisions of real political or even everyday nature. In this manner, he is rendered almost divinely pure. He is masculine, charismatic, politically active, and a radical who at the end of the rebellion dies for his beliefs. However, he also functions as a character through whom the question of the sexual order of an ideal future society is posed and, then, answered. Jemeljanoff is a hero admired by women and men alike, and it is repeatedly made clear to the reader that men, too, are attracted to his charm. However, every time this attraction is admitted in the play, it is immediately cancelled.

In the play, a coachman called Vasja reminisces of how Jemeljanoff had no time for love affairs with women for he, in his own words, had so many loved-ones in his regiment. This, of course, was not meant to hint at any indecency or romance between the lieutenant and his soldiers, but to prove the degree of his dedication, as Vasja testifies: "He meant us, his soldiers,

7 I will use Willman's spelling of the Russian name throughout.

whom he taught how to become happier and better, for until then we had been so unhappy and quarrelsome." (Willman 1917, 13). Tight bonds between men are thus an essential feature in this tale of revolutionary romantics. However, the closeness between men requires the explicit denial of the possibility of sexual desire between them. In Sedgwickian parlance, the homosocial closeness is built on banning the homosexual (Sedgwick 1985, 1–4). But even if Jemeljanoff were almost messianic in his purity, on numerous occasions, as the difference in the kinds of bonds possible between men and those between men and women is stressed, the queer possibility returns to haunt him.

Near the end of the play there is a scene in which Jemeljanoff – who only appears on stage as a ghost, as the play is set in 1917 and he died in the rebellions of 1906 – talks to Vasja:

"Listen, Vasjanka, sometimes I dream about a lovely creature who'd prepare the samovar – climb on my lap – and kiss me –". Vasja, somewhat abashed, suggests different possibilities: the young ladies of Viapori, the wives of other officers, female propagandists. None of these suit Jemeljanoff. After refusing all the samovar-makers that Vasja comes up with, Jemeljanoff notices that the water is already boiling and asks Vasja to prepare the tea himself. Vasja replies: "If I were a woman, I would helplessly fall in love with you, Arkadj Petrovitsj. You are such a sweet boy." (Willman 1917, 133.) But as Vasja is not a woman, no desire or affection is portrayed as possible in these scenes. For this is the logic of the play: homosexuality is not disapproved of or judged as somehow wrong or unhealthy, it is just not legible.

Complementary heterosexuality had been the central organising principle of the political epistème of 19th-century nationalism. In Hegelian-informed Finnish nationalism, the family was understood as the society's basic unit (Koivunen 1995, 241–242). Within that model, a woman's role was that

of the mother: her duty was to reproduce society in both ideological and material terms by bringing up new citizens. The man was a father and a provider: he earned money and decided upon how to spend it, he voted and in a variety of other ways took care of the family unit's economic, political and cultural exchange with the world (Häggman 1994, 136–141). The nation-as-family was a hermetically tight construction, and one that relied entirely on heteronormativity. Full citizenship was only achieved if men and women worked together; on their own, both sexes (and in this matrix there are only two) remained unfulfilled (Koivunen 1995, 241). However rebellious Willman might have been in many ways, she seems to have inherited this principle without a question. My understanding is that in Willman's oeuvre there are no political problems as such, they always have a gendered dimension. Willman seems to regard both politics and economics as spheres that locate subjects differently according to their gender. These locations she represents as binary and symmetrical: men need their counterparts from the other side of the sexual division, and vice versa. Even if Willman repeatedly returns both in her journalism and her fiction to the importance of women's independence, the most important political choice her female protagonists ever make is choosing the man they fall in love with. In Willman's worlds, men represent various ideologies and political orders, and women choose between different worldviews through recourse to romantic love, by choosing between men of different political engagements. (Hyttinen 2012, 136–137.) In order for this dual model of political agency to work, there cannot be any other options for subjects than to be either men and desire women as their counterparts and means of fulfilment, and vice versa. To secure this system, Willman invokes the queer possibility, if only for the purpose of explicitly denying it.

Unlike the two cases presented above, those of the invert and of the constitutive outside, the third case of queer figuration in Willman's oeuvre seems oddly to lack motivation. In the case of Master Vikstedt, it was fairly

obvious how the queerness associated with the character is supposed to render all his ideological commitments, as well as the ideologies to which he was committed, unnatural and corrupt. In the play *The Turmoil of Revolution*, the possibility of same-sex affection or desire was the constitutive outside that secured Willman's gendered view on political agency. But in the novel *The Turmoil of Revolution* (1918), a gesture of hinting at a queer possibility and immediately denying it, a gesture repeated many times in the play, is performed only once. More queer than either of the men sharing a bed in the following quote is the fact that the issue is brought up at all, as at the outset the scene seems rather redundant in the novella's context:

The friends lay together on the iron bed. In his sleep, Kohanski put his arm around Jemeljanoff and whispered.

– I feel so miserable I could cry, Arkadj.

Arkadj Petrovitsj gave a little laugh in the dark.

– Try to picture me as a beautiful girl.

Kohanski grunted laughing:

– Were that the case, I would not be able to rely on you, nor to trust in your hands the underground agitation among the marines. It's better you should be a man! (Willman 1918, 26–27)

Of course, as readers, we can interpret this as suggesting a melting of boundaries between the two literary works of the same name: this scene could implicate that the Jemeljanoff of the novella is essentially the same figure as the Jemeljanoff of the play, as this individual scene portraying the invocation and cancellation of affection between men makes more sense when connected to the similar gestures recurrent in the play. But read in isolation, without the taming intertextual frame of another literary work, this fragment is just, well, weird. And this weirdness, the inexplicability of the scene's function with regards to the actual work it belongs to, perhaps marks it as more queer than either of the previous cases: it is not in the

control of its author, there is no obvious message Willman could be argued to be sending through the invocation of the queer.

The queer impulse is simply present, barely discernible, in this almost innocent exchange of words. Unmotivated and superfluous, the words whispered echo on, leaving the reader queerly alert.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the uses of the queer in the oeuvre of Elvira Willman, an early 20th century author of working-class fiction. First of my analyses revealed that a certain Master Vikstedt, a character in a 1907 play *Kellarikerroksessa* [Below Street Level], had a significant part to play in the articulation of the ideological message of the play. In literature of the era, Christian nationalism and decadence are often seen as extreme opposites and as one another's counterforces. Here, in the character of Vikstedt, they merge into one single expression of what was unhealthy in the way civilisation had evolved. All the ideologies Vikstedt preached were thus rendered invalid: civilisation depicted as corrupted. The little hope that the human race has left lies with the uncorrupted, healthier sons and daughters of the working-class.

In a play written ten years later, *Vallankumouksen vyöryssä* [In the Turmoils of Revolution] (1917), Willman again resorts to the queer, this time through a double act of admitting and denying the possibility of desire between the play's male protagonist and other men surrounding him. I suggested that the explicit denial of the possibility of the queer is necessary for Willman to ground her understanding of political agency as gendered. Willman's political radicality relies entirely on heteronormativity, and acknowledging the possibility of men and women not necessarily needing each other in order to become whole as political agents would wreck the

very foundations of her politics. And finally, in the third text discussed above, the novella also called *Vallankumouksen vyöryssä*, from 1918, male-male attraction is again suggested and denied, this time only once and in a short scene that has no necessary connection with the novella's plot or central themes. This made me claim that this short section is perhaps the queerest thing Willman ever wrote, just precisely because it has no obvious function. It just is there, strangely unsettling the reader.

I have deliberately avoided posing such questions as whether the literary characters I discuss here really are representations of any extraliterary historical subject positions. Instead, I have chosen to focus on studying what kind of discourses around such vectors of power as sexuality, normalcy, bravery, Christianity or insincerity are articulated, in the textual fragments cited, with the queer, and what kind of hierarchies the binarism of healthy-queer builds between different agents in the texts. In this respect, my approach is thoroughly marked by deconstruction, it being the core notion of deconstruction that a thing and its outside (the something and the not-something) are inevitably tied to each other. Heteronormativity presumes and needs the queer, even if it tries to deny the very existence of such an outside (Sedgwick 1990, 9–11). The normal is defined through the abnormal, and it is precisely this mutual dependency that makes the power balance between the centre and the margin volatile.

Queer studies represent quite a recent phase in the humanities. However, as I hope the case studies analysed here demonstrate, asking queer questions from literature written well before our times does not mean anachronistically superimposing our late modern concepts on material radically outside their reach. The past might not be entirely queer, but it is certainly not entirely straight either. Paying attention to figurations of the queer in older literary works opens a perspective on the history of literature as an essentially open-ended negotiation of what a human being is and is

not, what reality is, is not, ought, and ought not to be. Literature can, of course, be made to testify on behalf of the trans-historical normalcy of the contemporary normal, but it can also, through a slight shift in perspective, give grounds to thinking that the queer was always already there, too.

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