CHAPTER 11

A Journey to the Bottom of the Sea. Water Myths and Risk Society in Veronica Pimenoff’s Risteilijät

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Abstract

At the turn of the millennium growing fears of environmental crisis started to influence Finnish literature. Ecological dystopias, environmental terrorism and globalization became popular themes, especially in Finnish thrillers and science fiction. In many of these catastrophe scenarios water—as an element of constant change—presents a threat for modern risk societies that depend on high technology and world wide networks. This chapter focuses on literary representations of water as an uncontrollable force of nature, analyzing Veronica Pimenoff’s novel Risteilijät (1995, Cruisers), one of the earliest Finnish novels about late-modern risk societies and climate change. The novel reflects collective ecological and technological fears that were intensified by the expansion of the European Union. More importantly, the analysis shows how contemporary Western literature (and cinema), as an essential part of the environmental imagination, relies on myths to convey ecological catastrophes.

“It was a coincidence that the Titanic sank,” Matias said, “Think about it: those people were going to America. Some were going home and others were heading to their Promised Land. Their whole lives were supposed to change. It was a dream, do you understand? They’d yearned for it for so long, and finally they dared. They reached out and were going to be a part of the land of their dreams. But this is just a cruise. We aren’t going anywhere. We aren’t heading towards the fulfilment of a dream. This is just a trip. We aren’t pursuing anything by being on this ship.”

“Then what are we doing here?” Vanessa asked silently and closed her book.

“We cruise. And eventually attack each other or destroy the ship,” Matias laughed. (pp. 108–109)
Risteilijät, (1995, henceforth referred to as *Cruisers*) by Finnish author Veronica Pimenoff (born 1949), tells the tale of an unnamed cruise liner that is sailing an unknown ocean, destined to return to its port of departure. During this mysterious cruise, the passengers in first class spend their time eating, drinking and arguing about the past and the future of Western civilization. This allegorical story is based on conventional metaphors of “the sea of life” and “ship of fools,” but it is also a structurally complex narrative with a particularly rich use of myths and historical analogies. Depicting the aimless odyssey of a ship seemingly on course for a disastrous foundering, the novel criticizes not only the self-indulgence and vanity of the Western world but also late modern societies’ hubris and carelessness about technological dangers.

Veronica Pimenoff’s works have often been categorized as thesis novels—works that ponder ethical and theoretical dilemmas. Most of her critically acclaimed and highly intellectual novels deal with gender, capitalism and technology, and they are heavily critical of European culture. Finland joined the European Union in the same year that *Cruisers* was published. At the time, many Eurosceptics regarded the European Union as akin to the Roman Empire; it was a giant doomed to fall. *Cruisers* builds an analogy of this nature between the West and ancient Rome, but it does not convey the nationalistic ideology typical of many Eurosceptic movements. On the contrary, the novel presents Western societies as selfish and cruel allies whose welfare is based on a global and economical imbalance where poorer countries are deliberately denied the rich and wealthy life that Western societies take for granted. Since *Cruisers*, Pimenoff has continued to write about global poverty, most notably in her critically acclaimed novel *Maa ilman vettä* (1998, *A World without Water*), which was selected for the Unesco Collection of Representative Works in 2004.

After Finland joined the European Union, Pimenoff was one of the first Finnish writers to depict this critical period, but *Cruisers*, which adapts the story of the *Titanic*, can be linked to international literary trends as well. After the wreck of the *Titanic* was found in 1985, numerous fictive novels were written about the famous ship, and *Cruisers* preceded James Cameron’s staggering global success with the blockbuster film *Titanic* (1997), a romantic melodrama based on the motif of the “Ship of Dreams” (see Womack 85; Sydney-Smith 185). Whereas most of the novels inspired by the sudden

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1 All the quotations are from *Cruisers*. There is no published English translation: all translations are by the author.