The Finland-Swedish Avant-Garde Moments

Fredrik Hertzberg, Vesa Haapala and Janna Kantola

Finland-Swedish modernism emerged in 1916 “unsolicited”, as the literary historian Clas Zilliacus puts it in a dictionary presentation of Finland-Swedish modernist poetry (Zilliacus, 2000: 80). This breakthrough was both prior to and more drastic than its counterparts in other Nordic countries. Although Finland-Swedish modernism was often seen as a kind of home-bred Expressionism – which pinpoints some of its formal features and certain aspects of its “spirit” – it emerged within a much wider international and more complex aesthetic context. The poet Henry Parland, addressing the German public on the topic of the newest Scandinavian literature, characterised the Finland-Swedish avant-garde movement as “ein kubistisch stilisierter Expressionismus” – a cubistically stylised expressionism (Parland, 1970: 137). It is perhaps preferable to speak of avant-garde moments – the momentary is inherent in the very concept of the ‘avant-garde’, just as avant-garde is part of the more general, less radical concept of ‘modernism’. If 1916 marked the birth of Finland-Swedish modernism, since it was the year in which Edith Södergran and Hagar Olsson made their debuts, its defining moments as a movement came in 1922 and in 1928-1929, with the publication of the journals Ultra and Quosego.

On the Margins of the Finland-Swedish Semiosphere
That Finland-Swedish literature was at the forefront of Scandinavian modernism in the 1920s is a fact that has puzzled scholars and critics, especially since the number of Swedish-speaking residents in Finland amounted to only 10 %, about 300,000, of the country’s population.
It may in part, however, be explained with reference to history and geography. One of the distinctive characteristics of the Finland-Swedish modernists was their multi-lingual background, which helped them gain access to multi-cultural influences. The Swedish scholar Lars Kleberg has used the semiotic concept of a ‘semiosphere’ to explain the originality of Finland-Swedish modernism: as bilin-gu-al/multilingual and “doubly peripheral” (both in relation to Finnish and to mainland Swedish) the Finland-Swedish poets achieved a kind of foreignness within the Swedish language. “What the avant-garde performed, situated on the margin of the Finland-Swedish semiosphere, was a special kind of cultural translation” (Kleberg 2003: 86). Until 1917 Finland had been a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. Under the Russian regime, Swedish had remained the language of governance and education in Finland. Although the Finland-Swedish avant-garde writers published their books in Swedish, Finland-Swedish modernism was not ‘Finland-Swedish’ in a narrow, national sense, but rather international or internationalist in its very essence. Edith Södergran’s *Dikter* (Poems), was the first collection of modernist poetry to be published in Finland. Born and bred in St. Petersburg, Södergran (1892-1923) had attended a German-speaking school. Her earliest poetry was written in German, Swedish, Russian and even French. Likewise, Södergran’s poetry, like that of Diktonius and Björling, reflects a strong influence from German philosophy, in particular from Friedrich Nietzsche and his poetic treatise *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, but also from German expressionism.

Elmer Diktonius (1896-1961) and Hagar Olsson (1893-1978) were bilingual and could choose between writing in Swedish and in Finnish. Parland (1908-1930) spoke mainly German, but also Russian at home and received most of his education in Finnish. Swedish was his fourth language. Despite having been brought up in St. Petersburg and moving to Helsinki after the outbreak of the Russian revolution, and later to Kaunas, Lithuania, Parland chose to write in Swedish, a language that he would remain somewhat uncomfortable with throughout his short life. Gunnar Björling (1887-1960) was the only monolingual ‘Finland-Swede’ in this circle of ‘avant-garde modernists’, but nevertheless he wrote in the most un-Swedish Swedish of them all. He was also the most pronounced outsider in relation to the Finland-Swedish cultural establishment, holding strongly ‘universalist’ and anti-nationalistic ideas about language.