

Abstract

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Alkukantaisuus ja tunteet. Primitivismi 1900-luvun alun suomalaisessa kirjallisuudessa
(‘*The Primitive and Emotions: Primitivism in early nineteenth-century Finnish literature*’)

The study opens up new insights on Finnish literary history by exploring distinct manifestations of literary primitivism in early nineteenth-century Finnish prose fiction. In the light of four case studies of works by Joel Lehtonen, Juhani Aho, Maria Jotuni, and F. E. Sillanpää, the study tracks how the ambivalent notion of the primitive was inscribed in the poetics of the Finnish novel. The study shows how in Finnish literature the agrarian classes became essential to imagining the “primitive in us” and to narrating a nation on the edge of modernity. Rural people were compared to exotic tribes or seen as archaic remnants in a civilization where the primitive was still observable in its full vitality.

Looking at literary primitivism from the perspective of interdisciplinary emotion studies, the study revisits the concept of literary primitivism by analysing the depiction and triggering of emotions and feelings in primitivistic literature, such as anger, shame, fear, love, ecstasy, and disgust. The study argues that primitivism’s return to nature manifested itself as a return to emotions and feelings, which were thought to represent the pure origins and unspoilt nature of human beings. As a counter-reaction to the new scientific worldview and civilized ideals of rationality and progress, primitivism fostered sensitivity to untamed emotions and spiritual feelings of merging with primordial life forces. At the same time, emotions manifest themselves not only as blind passions, but are tied to the seeking of new knowledge. Particular attention is paid to the critical and de-colonial potential of primitivism: the Finnish primitivism analysed in the study in many respects represents “emphatic primitivism”, which discovers discontentment with civilization from the perspective of the primitive and “feels with” the

primitive. While primitivism is an ambivalent concept that has been employed to legitimize various ideological and political views, the narratives of the primitive frequently express a critical stance towards the civilization they escape and challenge the hierarchies and attitudes of the social domination they depict.