



LIEVEN AMEEL

# Helsinki in Early Twentieth-Century Literature

*Urban Experiences in Finnish Prose Fiction 1890–1940*

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*To the inhabitants of Helsinki,  
past, present and future*

# Prologue

To date, Helsinki and its literature have received surprisingly little attention. In the traditional view of Finnish literary history as a slow descent from the forest to the city, the late arrival of urban landscapes in literature seemed to be not more than logical. Literary Helsinki has been described, in the words of V. A. Koskenniemi, Maila Talvio and others, as a Cinderella, a young girl without respectable history, an eternal parvenu.

This study proves such negative views of literary Helsinki wrong, and demonstrates that complex and fascinating experiences of Helsinki have been present in prose literature written in Finnish from the very beginning. In the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a varied literature of the city appears that has set the tone for the future. The rich variety of themes and generic perspectives in Helsinki literature developed in dialogue with international contemporary traditions and age-old images of the city, and was also defined by events typical of Helsinki's own history.

The literature of Helsinki is examined here in the first place through the experiences of literary characters, rather than as a set of immobile images. Particular attention is paid to descriptions of movement through public space. The analyzed corpus consists of more than sixty novels, collections of short stories and novellas, several of whom have received little attention until now. This study offers also new insights into more canonized literary works thematizing the Finnish capital. The close reading of these Helsinki novels and short stories provides a naturally evolving story of the development of city experiences, from the arrival in the disconcerting metropolis to feelings of deep attachments to the urban environment. This study, the first monograph that examines Helsinki in literature written in Finnish, is based on my doctoral dissertation *Moved by the City: Experiences of Helsinki in Finnish Prose Fiction 1889–1941* (Ameel 2013a). Readers interested in the more detailed theoretical and methodological frameworks of my analysis of literary Helsinki are referred to this doctoral dissertation.

Helsinki, February 2014

# 1. Introduction

and the city takes a breath, stony and pitiless,  
on her barren peninsula,  
embraced by the open sea and the pale sky  
(Waltari 1936: 234)<sup>1</sup>

## *An Eternal Cinderella?*

Helsinki has long been defined by what it seems to be lacking. It has been claimed that it has little or no history, that it is an artificial construction that is not representative of the Finnish nation and its culture.<sup>2</sup> In the narrative of Finnish literary history, the Finnish capital has long been relegated to a marginal role. As late as the 1990s, it has been claimed that “there are hardly any significant Finnish novels that are set in Helsinki”.<sup>3</sup> The idea of Finnish literature as largely lacking a rich imagination on the city would recur time and again throughout the twentieth century, most explicitly in Kai Laitinen’s essay “Metsästä kaupunkiin” (“From the Forest to the City”), which reduced the “grand tradition” of Finnish prose literature to a journey from the forest to the city (Laitinen 1973). This evolution logically emphasized the “unnatural” character of the city in the Finnish cultural context, and the late arrival of a complex urban imagination in literary representations. This study demonstrates that complex and fascinating experiences of Helsinki have, on the contrary, been present in prose literature written in Finnish from the very beginning: they appear only a few decades after the first prose works written in Finnish began to be published.

Typical for the negative tone which was long predominant in describing Helsinki’s literature is V. A. Koskenniemi’s 1914 essay on Helsinki’s literary representations in the book *Runon kaupunkija* (“Literary Cities”). His text presents Helsinki side by side with the likes of Bruges, Weimar and Verona, but comparing unfavourably to such well-established literary cities:

Stockholm has Strindberg, St. Petersburg has Dostoevsky, Berlin has Kretzer, Hamburg has Frenssen, Oulu has Pakkala and Rauma has Nortamo – but who is Helsinki’s poet? Who has claimed for Helsinki the admission ticket into the society of literary cities?<sup>4</sup>

Who is the poet of Helsinki? The answer, in Koskenniemi’s opinion, was disheartening: Finnish literature had not yet produced a “synthetic literary work about Helsinki, a novel or an epic, in which this Northern capital would live in its totality with all those characteristics which nature, race and culture have bestowed upon her” (Koskenniemi 1914: 89).<sup>5</sup> In his view, Helsinki lacked as yet a writer who could capture its particular nature and characteristics, and a poetical work that would present this vision. It is

a vision of Helsinki and its literature that is as old as it is persistent: the image of an eternal Cinderella, forever under age, waiting to be allowed to go to the ball.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the literary representation of turn-of-the-century Helsinki did not live up to the expectations of contemporaries, but a close look at the rich material available reveals a surprisingly manifold variety. In the two centuries since 1812, when Helsinki became the capital of Finland, and in particular from the late 1880s onwards, when Finnish prose literature came into bloom, the city has spawned a complex literary imagination, which as yet remains largely unstudied. An extensive analysis of how Helsinki is experienced in Finnish literature is not available, and addressing this hiatus is the main aim of this book.

How does Helsinki appear in Finnish literature? What kinds of experiences has it evoked and provoked? Through what processes was this literary city constructed, in terms of both its relationship to international urban discourses, genre and period conventions, and its particular social, political and also military history? What kinds of relationships are formed between Helsinki and the fictional characters in these novels and short stories? Or, to phrase one overall question that informs all of the above: how is the experience of urban public space rendered in Finnish prose literature from the late 1880s until the beginning of the Second World War?

The experience of public space and representations of mobility hold the key to the experience of the city in Helsinki literature. Questions of mobility, both social and physical, define the experience of the city in this period, and they lie at the core of the research questions tackled in this study. The turn of the century and the decades that followed have not without reason been called the “vertigo years” (Blom 2008), years defined by an ever-increasing, dizzy-making speed, acceleration, and expansion. Finland was no exception: situated at the fringes of Europe, and as a country that had a long way to catch up on technological, industrial and urban innovations, the all-embracing changes of the age were arguably even more tangibly felt here than elsewhere, since they were so much more condensed in time and space. In addition to the burgeoning technological and urban developments visible in the Finnish capital, Helsinki’s cityscape witnessed a number of far-reaching social and political disruptions that infused the literary descriptions of (public) urban space with an added sense of tension and urgency: the 1905 General Strike, the 1906 rebellion of the Russian soldiers at the fortress of Viapori/Suomenlinna, the 1918 Civil War, the Prohibition during the 1920s, and the depression and political radicalism of the 1930s.

This book makes a contribution, first of all, to the field of Finnish literary studies, in which the city as cultural artefact and generator of literary images has received relatively little attention. Contrary to the deprecating view presented by Koskenniemi and others, Helsinki emerges around the turn of the twentieth century as a complex literary space in Finnish literature, combining the strong echoes of a wide range of international discourses of the city. In a more international context, this study makes a contribution to research on literary cities in general, especially as a reminder of how powerful the images and experiences evoked by smaller cities and

capitals on the margins of the Western literary field can be. By analysing a relatively small capital on the fringes of Europe, it becomes possible to add fresh insights to the research of urban space in literature, which has been mostly concerned with a small group of metropolises. Whereas much of the ever-more expanding literature on the classical literary cities (Paris, London, New York, L. A.) seems to merely add to an idiosyncratic debate, the study of smaller cities and peripheral urban centres can make, in my opinion, real and tangible contributions to an understanding of the potential inherent to city discourses and images. These may be used as sources to energize and revitalize everyday living spaces, to establish a sense of community and belonging, and to foster liveable neighbourhoods and urban environments. Literary scholars are particularly well placed to analyse and gauge the potential for images and discourses of the city, and to contribute to how these can be brought to bear on the actual city in everyday contexts, both through recent trends in city (and neighbourhood) branding, and at the grass-roots level of individual streets and building blocks. Studies on such issues, which have been largely monopolized by cultural geography and urban studies, can be greatly invigorated by added insights from literary studies. A more concerted cross-insemination from all relevant academic disciplines has been called for by such social geographers as David Harvey, who has stressed that “[t]he geographical imagination is far too pervasive and important a facet of intellectual life to be left alone to geographers” (Harvey 1995: 161).

### *Selected Material*

The prose literature which constitutes the corpus for this study consists of a selection of books and short stories published in Finnish between the late 1880s and the beginning of the Second World War. This period constitutes what is in effect the first half century of literary representations of Helsinki in literature written in Finnish, starting with the very first texts thematizing the Finnish capital (Juhani Aho’s “Helsinkiin” [“To Helsinki”; 1889], and some of Aho’s other short prose) and ending with the disruption caused by the Second World War. This is the period in which the foundations of literary Helsinki were laid, constructing a varied literature that has set the tone for later descriptions.

A number of potentially interesting prose texts were excluded. Popular literature (crime novels, for example) and children’s literature will not be referred to, or only in passing.<sup>7</sup> Historical novels published during these years but set in an earlier period have also been excluded, unless as background material.<sup>8</sup> Theatre plays and works of poetry are largely excluded. For a number of reasons, Finnish literature written in Swedish was not included.<sup>9</sup>

I chose to include prose texts from a relatively long time frame, spanning the period of the turn of the twentieth century as well as the inter-war period. Many of the earlier studies on Finnish texts foregrounding the city in this period have focused on placing them in their immediate frame of genre

and period, which has tended to obscure the continuous development of the literary images of Helsinki. Analysing literary texts from a more extensive corpus makes it possible to re-appraise the thematics and importance of individual novels in the light of a continuity that would otherwise remain less clearly visible. In total, some sixty novels, collections of short stories and individual short stories were selected. Some authors, such as Mika Waltari and Maila Talvio, are present with as many as half a dozen texts or more, while other authors, such as Hilda Tihlä, are included with just one.

### *Earlier Writings on Helsinki in Finnish Literature*

In 2000, Helsinki celebrated its 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and an overview of recent publications featuring the Finnish capital appeared under the slightly laconic title “450 vuotta – entä sitten? Korkea pino kirjoja” (“450 years – and then what? A big pile of books”; Laurila 2001). The article listed a wide range of texts celebrating, evoking and studying Helsinki: collections of poetry, photo books, anthologies, novels, city guides, historical works and academic contributions. No comprehensive study of how Helsinki appeared in literature, however, featured on the list. This had not changed by 2012, when celebrations related to the bicentenary anniversary of Helsinki as the capital of Finland caused a new outpour of Helsinki-related publications.<sup>10</sup> Finnish literary history has generally shown little interest in city thematics (see also Laine 2011: 155). Compared to other capitals within Europe in general, or Helsinki’s most immediate large neighbours, Stockholm and St. Petersburg, there are remarkably few articles and monographs on literary Helsinki.

To date, the most important study on Helsinki in Finnish literature is arguably still Raoul Palmgren’s *Kaupunki ja tekniikka Suomen kirjallisuudessa* (“The City and Technology in Finnish Literature”; 1989), a book which aims to provide an overview of all relevant references to cities and technology from the very beginnings of Finnish literature to the date of its appearance. The only recent monographs dealing with literary Helsinki, Arne Toftegaard Pedersen’s evocative *Urbana odysseer* (“Urban Odysseys”; 2007) and Alessandro Bassini’s 2012 doctoral dissertation *Notes from the Suburb: the Image of Helsinki in the works by Kjell Westö* (Bassini 2012), focus on Helsinki in Finland-Swedish prose in the 1910s and in the work of one author – Kjell Westö – respectively. They mention texts written in Finnish only tangentially.

In the course of the last century, a small number of articles have appeared on Helsinki representations in literature. A small set of articles was published in connection with, or closely following, the centenary anniversary of Helsinki as the capital of Finland in 1912 (Schildt 1912; Koskeniemi 1914; Saarenheimo 1916). Compared to Koskeniemi’s and Schildt’s engaged and insightful contributions, many of the later articles devoted to the literary representations of Helsinki were content with enumerating plots and extensive quotations of descriptive passages. This is the case, in particular, for the fairly general studies that appeared in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s (Castrén 1947; Anttila 1956; Liuttu 1963; Havu 1965).

The 1990s witnessed the appearance of a handful of articles on Helsinki (and Finnish cities in general) in literature, pointing at new vistas of research and a renewed interest in the study of literary space, in part inspired by innovative approaches from other academic disciplines (Karkama 1998; Karjalainen & Paasi 1994).<sup>11</sup> In addition to these contributions, a number of articles have traced Helsinki representations in the work of one specific author, text or context (see, for, example Nieminen 1974; Laurila 1982a; Envall 1992; Riikonen 1994; Karjalainen 1995; Korsberg 2008). Scattered references to city representations in Finnish fiction can also be found in a number of monographs on specific themes or authors (see Envall 1994: 11–44; Hapuli 1995; Nummi 2002: 253–293). The recent dissertation by Silja Laine on the question of skyscrapers and urban architecture in Helsinki in the 1920s features an extensive overview of some of the central developments concerning the image of Helsinki in literature, but with a special focus on representations of architecture and high buildings (Laine 2011: 137–183).

### *Real and Imagined Cities*

The strong link between historical cities and their literature is so obvious and forceful that it has sometimes obscured how complex the relation is between imagined and “real” cities. We can go on a literary walk in Dostoevsky’s St. Petersburg; Paris is evoked by the writings of Zola, Balzac and Proust; Prague markets itself as the city of Kafka, and Lisbon is packed with Pessoa paraphernalia. The practice of inflating an author’s image of a city with the geographical city of the same name has been criticized from various perspectives, and any study on city representations would be well informed to position clearly what is, in fact, the prime object of the study involved. Is this the actual, historical city as reflected in the “mirror” of literary representation, or the imagined city as a semi-autonomous cultural artefact, or any of the various ways in which the actual city and its literary representation interact with each other and with other literary city representations? This question was taken up by Virginia Woolf in her first review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, entitled “Literary Geography” (1905). In Woolf’s words: “to insist that it [a writer’s city] has any counterpart in the cities of the earth is to rob it of half its charm” (Woolf 1905/1986: 35; see also Johnson 2000: 199). There is indeed something profoundly reductionist in equating the literary city with its geographically locatable counterpart, and I would agree with Burton Pike’s claim that “Dickens’ London and London, England, are located in two different countries” (Pike 1981: 13). But, like most scholars, I would also agree with Marco Polo’s assertion in Calvino’s *The Invisible Cities* that, while “the city must never be confused with the words that describe it”, nevertheless “between the one and the other there is a connection” (1972/1997: 61).

Scholars studying the literary city can be roughly divided into two groups, with the extreme sides of the axis insisting on either a direct relation between the “actual” and “fictional” city, or treating the literary city as a completely independent world. William Sharpe calls these opposing

poles respectively “formalists” and “historicists” (Sharpe 1990: xii), and insists that, despite heated debates, “the study of the city and its art is not a matter of ‘either/or,’ of embracing one approach to the exclusion of others” (ibid.). More to the point, the difference between these perspectives reflects different kinds of research interests in the literary city. After all, there are a great many things a literary text can “do”, and all of these can be legitimate objects of study.

In order to analyse the urban experiences in a given novel, it will be necessary to look at the processes involved in the creation, or “making” of a particular literary city. Building on Nelson Goodman’s theory of world-making (see Goodman 1978; Nünning 2010: 216–217), one can say that in order to “make” an imagined city world, a literary text will draw on a whole variety of pre-existing cities, and recycle prefiguring material as the plot evolves. In the case of the literary city of Helsinki in a particular prose text, the narration will combine at least some of the following elements in its “citymaking”: architectural and historical fragments from the “actual” city of Helsinki; a wide range of images belonging to other literary cities (such as Paris, London, or St. Petersburg); conventions of genre and period; and archetypal images of the city. The imagined city of Helsinki in literature appears, then, as a variety of different possible cities, with their own particular value systems. It is these cities that are at the focus of this study.

The complex relation between the literary city and the “actual”, geographically locatable city is one of the reasons why no existing maps of the historical city of Helsinki during this period are included in this study. To facilitate the readability for readers unacquainted with Helsinki, two tailor-made maps of the Helsinki peninsula were added. These provide information on places and districts that are thematized in literature in this period, and are not intended as scientific maps of historical Helsinki. The first map, depicting Helsinki around 1900, can be found on page 29, immediately preceding Chapter 3. The second map, depicting Helsinki around 1930, can be found on page 114, preceding Chapter 6.<sup>12</sup>

## Outline

The most important research subject in the present study is not so much the *city* itself, or even images of the city, but the *experience* of the city in literary texts. In the chapter “Ways of Writing and Reading the City”, I will introduce the theoretical perspectives on the city in literature most relevant for this study. The analysis of city experiences in literature will require a methodology or what one might call a poetics of movement. Such a tentative poetics of movement, drawing on the thinking of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, but also on more recent thinkers such as Michel de Certeau, will serve as a theoretical framework with which to investigate urban trajectories through space and narrative.

The analysis of the selected corpus is divided into five chapters, loosely following a chronological order, and structured thematically. The first three chapters focus on literature from the turn of the century, extending into the

1910s, while the fourth and fifth analysis chapters analyse experiences of the city in novels published in the 1920s and the 1930s. In every chapter, one key text will be used as a window from which to approach particular thematics. Using a key text to approach the material provides the opportunity to contextualize one author and text in more detail, and to present a more thorough reading of at least one particular text than otherwise would have been possible. In the course of the respective chapters, additional relevant primary texts will be linked to the themes taken up in discussing the key text.

The third chapter, entitled “The Shock of Arrival”, traces the first experiences of literary Helsinki in Finnish prose texts, focusing on arrival in the city. The key text in this chapter is Juhani Aho’s novella, *Helsinkiin* (“To Helsinki”; 1889).

The fourth chapter, entitled “The Fateful Esplanade”, studies literary experiences and images connected to the Esplanade, concentrating on representations of walking and moving through urban public space. It reveals the profound stratification of urban public space, in particular from the perspective of gendered space, taking into account the notions of socially, politically and linguistically divided space. The key novel in this chapter is Eino Leino’s *Jaana Rönty* (“Jaana Rönty”; 1907).

While the third chapter examines the first experiences of people moving to the capital, and the fourth chapter follows the footsteps of literary characters roaming the streets of Helsinki, Chapter 5, “Experiences of a Metropolis in Motion”, analyses how developments in the built environment have their effects on literary characters’ experiences. This chapter, in which Arvid Järnefelt’s *Venehöjalaiset* (“The Family Venehöja”; 1909) will be treated as a key novel, examines how literary Helsinki appears as a rapidly transforming city, in which the accelerating processes of modernity become responsible not only for (re)generating, but also for erasing parts of the cityscape.

The sixth chapter, entitled “Aestheticizing the City”, discusses the internalization and aestheticization of the city experience in Finnish literature from the late 1920s and 1930s. I will use Mika Waltari’s cult novel *Suuri illuusioni* (“The Great Illusion”; 1928) to approach these thematics, and to analyse how, during these years, the city experience was also described through new stylistic features and techniques. In addition to *Suuri illuusioni*, one other novel obtains a more privileged position in this chapter: Helvi Hämäläinen’s *Säädyllinen murhenäytelmä* (“A Respectable Tragedy”; 1941).

The seventh and final chapter, “Towards the Margins”, examines how, in particular during the 1930s, but starting in the late 1910s, a parallel writing on the city develops at the fringes of the city. The key novel in this chapter is Joel Lehtonen’s *Henkien taistelu* (“Battle of the Spirits”; 1933). Particular attention will be given to how characters’ movement through the city is described as inhibited by the characters’ social (and/or gendered) background. Even though the novels discussed in this chapter repeatedly describe (sub)urban spatial environments and particular characters’ movement through the city in terms of deformity, the socially marginalized protagonists in these prose texts are often profoundly at home in the city, and express feelings of strong attachment, in particular in relation to their local neighbourhoods.

Literary Helsinki: a city of leisure and light, divided along the fault lines of gender, class and language; a dizzying and dazzling threshold of modernity; alienating, mesmerizing and endearing.

This first monograph to examine experiences of Helsinki in literature written in Finnish shows that rich descriptions of urban life have formed an integral part of Finnish literature from the late nineteenth century onward. Based on an analysis of more than sixty novels and collections of short stories, it tells the naturally evolving story of how Helsinki was experienced in literature.

Lieven Ameel is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki.



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