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(eds):

Comparative Approaches to Nordic and European Modernisms

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Since 1998, a group of literary scholars from across the Nordic countries and Britain has investigated the characteristics, scope and limits of Modernism in the Nordic region. So far, this has resulted in three major collections of articles, all of them published by Norvik Press. The fourth and present volume, *Comparative Approaches to Nordic and European Modernisms*, edited by four of the central contributors to the project, has now been brought out in an attractively designed volume by Palmenia (Helsinki University Press).

The book very much continues the general approach of the second volume, with a strong focus on the multifarious relationships and interactions between Modernism in the Nordic countries and what could be called the more mainstream and far more thoroughly debated Modernism of the Continent, Britain and the United States. Thus the altogether eleven contributions cover a range of cross-national connections powerfully confirming not only the truly international nature of the Modernist movement, but also – as reflected in the title – the usefulness of the plural form of the word: modernisms. There is also here

an element often sadly ignored in literary studies, of the significant connections and mutual fertilisation between literature and other art forms.

The volume appropriately begins with two contextualising contributions, which consider the term Modernism and its feasibility from an international perspective. Ástráður Eysteinnsson concludes that there are major variations between American, European and Nordic Modernisms, and that the latter stands out from the rest by being confined primarily to the period after rather than before the Second World War. Karen-Margrethe Simonsen poses subtle questions about the ways in which Modernism has become an established and normative artistic standard by which we almost unwittingly judge and evaluate works of art, even outside the realm of Modernism itself.

Whereas Simonsen focuses on the applicability of Modernist standards for contemporary literature, Riikka Rossi takes one step back and discusses the relationship between Naturalism and Modernism, exemplified by the theme of 'the fallen woman' as represented in texts by such different writers as Émile Zola, Teuvo Pakkala, Alexander Kielland and Stephen Crane.

Another Finnish contribution, by Hanna Korsberg, investigates the role of the writer Arvi Kivimaa, and his role in bringing an urban, Modernist and international culture into a dialogue with Finnish culture in the 1920s and 30s. Steen Klitgård Povlsen examines more manifest international influences by considering the effects of the German occupation during the War on Danish and Norwegian literature.

Per Bäckström studies two Danish poetological texts from the 1980s and 90s by Søren Ulrich Thomson and Pia Tafdrup, linking them to such European figures as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Mallarmé and Celan. Jakob Lothe, also concerned with genre, moves to the highly distinctive world of the German-British writer W. G. Sebald, whose work *Austerlitz* (2001) explores and encapsulates the European twentieth-century past through text as well as photographs, thus indirectly debating the world of European Modernism.

A more theoretical and systematic approach to the relationship between word art and pictorial art is found in Mats Jansson's discussion of the concept of *ekphrasis*, which he then applies to two poems by the Swedish writers Werner Aspenström and Göran Tunström, both of them with references to works by the French painter Henri Rousseau.

Kai Mikkonen calls attention to the role of travel writing for Nordic Modernism by comparing 1930s texts from and about Africa by the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela and the Danish writer Karen Blixen, and by analysing them within the context of postcolonial studies. In Gallen-Kallela's case, the travel journal provides interesting similarities

between Finland and Africa with regard to the question of independence from colonial suppression.

Herman Rapaport addresses the complex issue of empathy in the field of fiction, distinguishing between four different types. Being a central element in human communication, empathy plays an important role in Modernist writing, and Rapaport includes a discussion of poems by the Finnish writer Marja-Liisa Vartio and the Finno-Swedish poet Edith Södergran.

Finally, Janna Kantola and H. K. Riikonen focus on the role of translations for the diffusion of literary ideas. The authors show how, in the Finnish context, central Modernist texts remained untranslated, while priority was given to the classics. As a result, a range of international cultural impulses were delayed, as mentioned above, until after the Second World War.

Comparative Approaches to Nordic and European Modernisms serves as yet another useful reminder of the complex and fascinating interplay of impulses within the Nordic countries as well as between the Nordic countries and the rest of the world. Modernism being a truly many-sided phenomenon – a movement of movements – it is only by accepting this complexity that we can continue to learn more about the critical phase of our history during which cultures which had long been centred around a celebration of monolithic, nationalist traditions, were gradually exposed to the world outside and forced to accommodate the strange and the foreign. There is a boldness about many of the Modernist departures, and perhaps the Nordic countries, being more culturally homogenous than many of the continental nations, simply needed more time to digest impulses that were often perceived as challenging and provocative.

The initiators of this rather loosely organised but highly productive project are to be commended for their efforts in bringing together these studies of Nordic Modernisms and their relationships to the wider cultural scene. If there are plans to continue the series, which is very much to be hoped, it would be tempting to recommend that it be devoted to the theme suggested by Kantola and Riikonen's article above, namely that of translation and its significance for the dissemination of ideas. A systematic study of translations from and into the Nordic languages of central Modernist works does not seem to have been conducted, and would probably provide useful information about the exchange of ideas during the first half of the twentieth century.

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