

EZRA POUND AS A PERSONA
FOR MODERN FINNISH POETRY

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The present paper on Pound's Finnish reception has two parts. It begins with an introduction to Finnish poetry and its relation to European currents in Pound's time. After this, I will consider Ezra Pound's significance in Finland during a specific period in Finnish poetry. In this context, I will take a closer look at Pound's translators in Finland as well as at those who otherwise had a say in introducing him. I will then, finally, discuss two Poundian poems written by a major 20th-century Finnish poet, Pentti Saarikoski. The point of departure for this presentation is the idea that the translator, a man or a woman "made of words," always, in giving life to a foreign text in his or her own language, wears a mask, or, as in the case of translating Pound, a double mask, lending a voice not only to Pound but also to those masks and voices that Pound himself had invented.

In Finland, modernism appeared several times, at first in Swedish, especially in works by Edith Södergran (1892-1923), shortly after World War I. She did – as did Finnish Swedes Gunnar Björling (1887-1960) and Elmer Diktonius (1896-1961) – the same kind of pioneering work on poetry

written in Swedish, that Pound and Eliot did on poetry written in English, and at the same time. In the 1920s, chic European movements such as cubism, futurism, and expressionism, arrived in Finland almost without delay. New kinds of experiments in Finnish were undertaken by poets Aaro Hellaakoski (1896-1952) and Katri Vala (1901-44), and by essayist and pamphleteer Olavi Paavolainen (1903-64). In a bigger way, modernism, and the modern world, was brought to Finland by a group called *Tulenkantajat*, The Firebearers who in their manifesto of 1928 declared the sacredness of art and life as well as called for openness towards Europe and its fashionable topics. In addition, an extreme openness towards the English language was put forward especially in the group's journal *Tulenkantajat*. The very first Pound translation, of the poem "Salutation" (1916), was published in this journal, 5/1933. The poem – "Tervehdys" in Finnish – was translated by Katri Vala.

The third, and for many Finns *the* modernist period in Finland, begins in the 1950s. This very late modernism drew its inspiration from various sources and literatures, equally Eastern and Western, and it was characterized by an extensive use of figurative language and powerful images. These modernist features continued to flourish over several decades. The major and the best known poets of this period beginning in the 1950s are, without question, Paavo Haavikko (b. 1931), Eeva-Liisa Manner (1921-1995) and Pentti Saarikoski (1937-1983). It was during the latter period of Finnish modernism that Pound was introduced, more extensively, to the Finnish audience. This was of course done through translation, that has always played an important role in a small linguistic community like Finland.

The translation in the early *Tulenkantajat* magazine escaped wider attention, and thus Pound's poems kept their novelty value for decades to come in Finland. An anthology of Western poetry from the 11th to the 20th century, *Tuhat*

laulujen vuotta, was published in 1957 in Aale Tynni's translation. Six poems by Pound were included: "Ballatetta," "The Altar," "In a Station of the Metro," "Embankment," an excerpt from "Canto 81" and "E. P. Ode pour l'Élection de son Sépulchre". Although the anthology is bilingual – always including the original poem, whether Greek, Italian, Danish, English, etc. – Tynni is, however, very timorous in her decisions, and constantly explains more than would perhaps have been necessary. The first book entirely by Pound to be published in Finland was *ABC of Reading*, in Finnish *Lukemisen aakkoset* (1967), and it was translated by critic Hannu Launonen and poet Lassi Saastamoinen. The book was published by Otava Publishing Company in which Tuomas Anhava (1927-2001), the future translator of Pound's poems, had been influential. *Personae: valikoima runoja vuosilta 1908–1919* was published in Anhava's translation as late as 1976. It was based – according to the title – on Pound's collected *Personae*. The Finnish translation was, however, much more concise than the original. *Cantos I–XXX* had been translated into Swedish in 1969, and this probably had an impact on Anhava's work as he was fluent in Swedish.

One of the leading modernists of Finnish poetry in 1950, working within the tradition of Pound and Eliot, Tuomas Anhava, had at the time the most prominent role in making Pound news in Finland. Besides being known for his own writing, he made his mark as a critic, a publisher and a translator. He himself thought more highly of the translations than of his own poetry (Liukkonen 220). He wrote poetry for fourteen years, from 1952 to 1966, five volumes and collected poems that appeared in 1967. Anhava was a perfectionist in his own writing, and interested in others, and consequently in the aesthetics of modern poetry. He translated twenty volumes and published plentiful translations in literary magazines. Before the influential Pound volume of 1976, he had published the contents in literary magazines. From 1966 to

1979, Anhava was the editor in chief for *Parnasso*, a journal with a powerful impact on Finnish literary life. Even though Anhava has in Finland gained a reputation as a great Anglophile, and especially as a translator, in fact he did not translate much English or American literature (Laitinen). The connection to Pound was perhaps related to – or at least strengthened by – a shared interest in Eastern literature. A *Parnasso* special issue of 1959 on Japanese literature included a cycle of tankas translated by Anhava with introductory essays. This issue also contained a short story, “Tokio,” by Fumiko Hayashi. The source text for the translator had been Pound’s translations, as well as a cycle including contemporary Japanese poetry (Laitinen).

One of Anhava’s disciples was Pentti Saarikoski, who became one of the most important translators in Finland, translating over seventy works of ancient and modern literature including the *Odyssey* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. He never translated Pound, but Pound had an impact on his poetry, and in what follows I’d like to show two examples of this impact. In 1961 Saarikoski published his third collection *Maailmasta* (“Of the world”). This collection included a poem called “Autolla ajoa öiseen aikaan” (“Car driving through the night”) that according to Saarikoski was “almost a rip-off” of Pound’s famous haiku “In a Station of the Metro.” This statement is interesting because Saarikoski’s poem does not really echo Pound’s poem. This is how the poem goes in Finnish:

Ajettiin hillitöntä vauhtia pimeää tietä pitkin
keltavästäräkki käveli mustan oksan päästä päähän. (14)

We were driving at a cracking pace along a dark road,
a yellow wagtail walked a black bough, from end to end.

When compared to Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough,” it is obvious that instead of the immobility so apparent

in Pound's poem, movement is accentuated in Saarikoski. This, *mutatis mutandis*, might then serve as an outcome of the experiments Pound suggested in *ABC of Reading*. Saarikoski's poem shares, however, some obvious similarities with Pound's haiku. Like "In a Station of the Metro," "Autolla ajoa öiseen aikaan" is composed of two juxtaposed lines, each including an image of its own. Put together, these images naturally comment and explain each other. With Saarikoski's poem the images get even more points of comparison, as Pound's poem is activated not only by Saarikoski's own claim of plagiarizing Pound's poem, but also by the use of a shared detail, the image of a "black bough." Thus the whole poem can be seen as commenting on Pound's poem. In the following poems in the collection, Saarikoski is not, however, faithful to Pound's style, nor to the maxim "DICHTEN = CONDENSARE." On the contrary, the collection is otherwise written in a verbose style. This then accentuates even more the strange detail, the "plagiarized" poem. "Autolla ajoa öiseen aikaan" and "In the Station of the Metro" run nonetheless as a thread and as a point of departure through several poems of Saarikoski's collection. The poem "Metsät" ("Forests"), which is the second of the third section in the collection, is connected to the "plagiarized poem" and to Pound's poem. The detail in "Metsät" that activates the earlier poem is "pimeä tie" ("the dark road") in the opening line "Avoautossa koko konstellaatio pimeällä tiellä, / meluisa seurue" ("In a convertible the whole constellation on the dark road, / the noisy party of people") that also "explains" the Pound-like poem. As the poem proceeds, the connection to Pound's famous haiku becomes explicit:

Valaistu auto
 on pimeällä tiellä lintu mustalla oksalla,
 tai ihminen seisoo valoisassa metsässä
 eikä hänellä ole kädessä kukkaa,
 ei kukaan
 ehdi keksiä oikeaa vertauskuvaa.

(18)

The car in a spotlight
 is on the dark road a bird on a black bough
 or a man stands in a forest full of light
 not holding a flower in his hand,
 and nobody
 figures out a fitting metaphor fast enough.

The poem questions the imagist ideas of clarity and precision by the use of denial, as in the end of the quotation. This denying is then opening doors for alternative paths, for the “yes”, such as the final image of the non-existing “fitting metaphor”.

As is well known, Pound used a great deal of foreign words and expressions in his poems. Equally known is that he was not at all precise in these citations. Saarikoski, a polyglot and a translator of classical languages, exploited strangeness to some extent in a like manner. Even though he opposed the academicians, the professor-translators as he called the verbally less gifted classicists, he was quite a pedant in the use of foreign languages. As a translator, he was quite the opposite; the Finnish translators even connect a certain type of high-handedness in translation to a Saarikoski-related term (siepparisyndroomab – the word derives from Saarikoski’s well known translation of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*). Like Pound, Saarikoski used a lot of exotic or ancient names, to give a bit of a magic or ambiguity to the whole. A fine example of name dropping Saarikoski-style, is poem XI in the collection *Tanssiinkutsu*, “Invitation to the dance,” from 1980. The poem is interesting in context, since Pound makes an actual appearance in it. I quote Anselm Hollo’s translation:

Here, Ez
 a comfortable rock for you to sit on
 next to an apple tree
 and pine
 they just keep growing there

cats jump into your lap
the sun sets
the blackberry leaf
when you study its veins
close up
smells like papyrus
and you could give some extra homework to Eliot
and all of us (Saarikoski, *Trilogy* 100)

The translation is even chattier than the original as the “Ez” in the translation stands for “Ezra” in the original. What, then, is Saarikoski doing in the poem, chatting in such an amiable way with “Ezra”? First of all, the speaker – I’m tempted to call the speaker by the poets’ name – is of greater importance than the distinctly referred to “Ezra” and “Eliot.” It might seem that due to the use of names the speaker actually beclouds the very distinctness of his own voice. But this is only apparent: by using names Saarikoski is rather accentuating the content of his utterance. Rather than identifying with his predecessors, Saarikoski distances himself distinctly from Pound through his tranquil way of chatting, as if just expressing thoughts that happened to flash through his mind. The chatty style is in apparent contrast with Pound, and with Pound’s maxim “dichten=condensare,” especially in the very beginning of the poem. Pound’s style is however slightly touched upon after the middle of the poem when the speaker picks a blackberry leaf and examines its veins with care. Further, the “scent of papyrus,” which the leaf gives off, reminds one of Pound’s “Papyrus,” and its way of alluding to, or rather citing, a fragment by Sappho. This is interesting not only because Pound in his *ABC of reading* tells young people to read Sappho, but also because Saarikoski, as a young man, had himself translated Sappho’s fragments into Finnish. Saarikoski was not, however, a thorough pupil of Pound, given that he later introduced a counter-argument to Pound’s

maxim in *Tanssilattia vuorella* (20) where the speaker states that “runous on neuvonpitoa”, that is, dichten = negotiating. This was done only a year after Anhava’s collection of Pound’s poems in Finnish; perhaps as a wink to both influential men.

After the attention that Anhava and Saarikoski had paid to Pound, it took yet another sixteen years for a new Pound translation to be published on a wider scale. In 1992, one of the most significant publishing houses in Finland, Werner Söderström Incorporated, published an impressive selection of North-American poetry, *Tähtien väri. Valikoima amerikkalaista runoutta*, edited by Ville Repo, himself an influential figure in Finnish publishing. The collection portrayed eight North American poets: Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Vachel Lindsay, Marianne Moore, T.S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, and Ezra Pound. The section on Pound is remarkable, and it includes cantos 17, 45, 47, and excerpts from *The Pisan Cantos*. However, this anthology did not take Finland by storm.

As some kind of a conclusion, it could be said that Pound – and Eliot – with a little help from their friends, those who translated them, showed that new ways of writing were possible in the Finnish language. Pound always remained the poet that poets read and appreciate, more than Eliot who has, so far, enjoyed a wider readerships in Finland.

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