5. Shooting Tuonela's Swan: Modern Myths and Artistic Convergence in Finnish Symbolism

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Symbolism as a movement in music, the visual arts, and literature gained ground in the Nordic countries, especially in the 1890s, when many artists who had begun their careers as realists or naturalists turned to the new style and to new ideas. The appeal to suggestive imagery and a new sensibility for mystery replaced the cartography of everyday life and the social structures that had characterized the first wave of what has been called the 'Modern Breakthrough' in Nordic literature. As an antagonistic reaction not only to realism but also to technologically and scientifically-orientated modernity, symbolism – as an alternative 'modernity' – claimed to return to primordial wisdom, universal truths, and unconscious impulses. This meant a new appreciation of myth. Although, according to symbolist tenets, any object could become a symbol,[1] it was tempting to turn to myths and legends that seemingly suggested a reservoir of primordial archetypes.[2] At the same time, using myths brought different art forms together and brought composers, poets, and artists into interaction with one another.

[1] See, for example, Baudelaire's, *Journaux intimes*: 'Dans certains états de l'âme presque surnaturels, la profondeur de la vie se révèle tout entière dans le spectacle, si ordinaire qu'il soit, qu'on a sous les yeux. Il en deviant le symbole' [In certain almost supernatural states of mind, the profundity of life is revealed in its entirety in the spectacle, however commonplace it might be, which we see before us. It becomes the symbol of it]. Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes I* (Paris, 1975), 659.

[2] The ideas which C. G. Jung later presented in his version of psychoanalysis were already in circulation not only in symbolist literary texts, but also in *fin-de-siècle* (pseudo)scientific literature.

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This chapter focuses on an exemplary case in which a composer, a poet, and an artist each used the same national 'myth' to create a symbolist artwork. The *Lemminkäinen Suite* (1896) by Jean Sibelius, the painting *Lemminkäinen's Mother* by Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1897), and the lyric drama *Swan of Tuonela* (written in 1896 and published in 1898) by Eino Leino, which the poet himself characterized as 'a wonderful dramatic poem *à la Sibelius*',[3] demonstrate the uses of the same source of symbols in the three art forms in question and are the result of the fruitful interaction and intermedial interests of the three creators involved. Their results illustrate the processes of refining the golden ore from the supposed national mythology found in the *Kalevala* into modern symbols and a modernized mythology.[4] The symbolic imagery created around the story of Lemminkäinen's journey to Tuonela to shoot the Swan of Tuonela (or the Swan on the River of Death) parallels *fin-de-siècle* concerns, while reaching for allegedly primordial symbols.

1. Symbolism from a Nationalist angle

In symbolism, ancient myths were reinterpreted and remade to serve as vehicles 'suggesting' psychological givens and 'eternal' ideas.[5] The supposedly universal, however, also reflected

[3] Eino Leino, in a letter to Maila Talvio and J. J. Mikkola, 22 December 1896, cited in Pirjo Lyytikäinen, introduction to Eino Leino, *Tuonelan joutsen. Sota Valosta. Väinämöisen kosinta. Karjalan kuningas* (Helsinki, 1999), p. viii.

[4] The term borrows freely from Steven Levine's notion 'modernized myth', taken from the subtitle of his *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection: The Modernized Myth of the Self* (Chicago, 1994).

[5] The Neo-Platonic tendencies added to the Schopenhauerian updating of Plato's ideas competed with more psychological interpretations, as in, for example, the work of Stéphane Mallarmé (see Peter Dayan, 'Mallarmé and the "siècle finissant"', Patrick McGuinness (ed.), *Symbolism, Decadence and the fin de siècle: French and European perspectives* (Oxford: 2000), 19-26 (pp. 21-24. The artistic programme of symbolism emphasized that artworks were to evoke states of mind (*états d'âme*) by creating symbols or symbolic imagery or, in other

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the concerns of the age and the negative reaction to what was seen as the banal effects of social, economic, and technological modernity. Myths were used to express the modern mindset of these 'antimoderns' or champions of an alternative modernity.[6] Philosophically, this mindset was based on Arthur Schopenhauer's and (later) Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas of the 'world as will', which emphasized 'becoming': the flow and the processes of all nature and the ongoing flow of experiences (*élan vital*, to use the expression later coined by Henri Bergson) instead of rational concepts and conscious human strivings. This philosophy of life thus prepared the way for the appreciation of unconscious impulses, intuition, and emotions or affects.

Using myths and creating modernized mythologies was also connected with the desire to rethink the relations between different art forms. This reassessment derived from Charles Baudelaire's Swedenborgian 'correspondences', Schopenhauer's philosophy, and Richard Wagner's aesthetic thinking. Visual arts, music, and poetry were all supposed to have a common goal in suggesting what were considered the basic truths of human life and the whole universe. This idea reinforced the exploration of links between art forms and even resulted in bizarre experiments.[7] A highly important inspiration for this exploration stemmed from the cult of Wagner and his ideas about music. His operas realized a certain synthesis of

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words, a kind of indirect language of ideas and emotions. Mallarmé's idea, expressed in his 'Sur l'évolution littéraire' of 1891, that poetry should aim at suggestion rather than description or direct expression of emotions and thoughts was the guideline for symbolist poetics and was not only central to symbolist poetry, but also inspirational to symbolistically-orientated pictorial arts. See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poésies, Anecdotes ou Poèmes. Pages diverses*, ed. Daniel Leuwers (Paris, 1977), 265.

[6] See Antoine Compagnon, *Les Antimoderns: de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris, 2005).

[7] E.g. René Ghil's group, whose members called themselves 'Symbolistes-Instrumentalistes'. On this and other attempts to connect music and poetry, see Joseph Acquisto, *French Symbolist Poetry and the Idea of Music* (Aldershot, 2006), 1-4.

visual, poetic, and musical elements but, at least for symbolist poets, his written ideas, especially in the article 'Lettre sur la musique' ('Letter on music', 1861) were especially crucial.[8] Wagner's theories also inspired 'returning to the origins of aesthetic experience' as well as the primordial sources of music in (Germanic) myths.[9]

But symbolism did not remain an elusive premonition of primordial truths. In countries like Ireland and Finland, symbolism also served nationalists goals. Glenda Dawn Goss formulates the particular stakes for Finns: 'For Finns struggling to formulate a national profile without isolating themselves from the vitalizing stream of contemporary thought, Symbolism presented an exquisite solution: an international rationale for nationalistic thought. Symbolism showed how their nationalism served a higher purpose.'[10] The creation and recreation of national myths promoted the nationalist strivings of the 'young' nations and would-be nations. In Finland, a country still under Russian rule, symbolism was used to consolidate national identity and create a 'national soul' in a way that did not openly provoke the Russian authorities. Symbolist language even offered a channel for political allegory: it made the national movement's political agenda elusive and thus able to avoid Russian censorship.[11]

Turning to national mythology and the natural environment of the North, Nordic symbolists created powerful syntheses of national and international, as well as personal and collective impulses. In Finland, the national epic *Kalevala* and its lyric sister-work *Kanteletar*

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[8] Ibid., 9, 14

[9] Ibid.

[10] Glenda Dawn Goss, *Sibelius: A Composer's Life and the Awakening of Finland* (Chicago and London, 2009), 163.

[11] This is particularly clear in Leino's second symbolist lyrical drama *Sota valosta* (Battle of the Light, 1900) based on the *Kalevala*, where mythical, historical and contemporary elements mix in a multilayered allegory.

were goldmines for finding nationally significant 'suggestive' images. The enthusiasm with which this enterprise was embraced was expressed by the Finnish artist Eero Järnefelt as follows:

> During that time of great enthusiasm we young artists rushed like explorers … to seek subject matter for our paintings from our own people and landscapes: and like youth always, we believed we had found the Finnish nation and its landscapes, the Kalevala and Kanteletar completely anew. They were for us like an untouched wilderness mysteriously lighted.[12]

The symbols that emerged were modern adaptations and transformations of these national resources; they were destined to convey modern sensibilities through traditional images. In the mystifying thinking of the age, however, the emphasis was put on the capacity that these symbols had to evoke universal ideas, following the guidelines of symbolist poetics, while attaching to the local and national. It was not only that the artists strived to reach 'through the national to the all-European',[13] which was one of the slogans of the time: they claimed to reach, via the *Kalevala*, to the universal as well. The ambivalence and multilayered qualities that characterized symbolist poetics permitted this amalgam.

From the point of view of historical time, this blend was Janus-faced. Although in some ways a look back at the archaic past, the powerful exploration of national myths was, at least implicitly, strongly orientated towards the future. Rewriting myths was combined with liberal, internationalist, and anticlerical European thinking. Finnish symbolists demanded

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[12] Translated and quoted in William Wilson, 'Sibelius, the *Kalevala*, and Karelianism', in *The Sibelius Companion*, ed. Glenda Dawn Goss (Westport, CN, and London, 1996), 43–60 (57).

[13] Goss, *Sibelius*, 136.

more power for the people and more public education and imagined offering art to all by promoting Finnish language and literature.[14] Thus, their symbolism with its mythical, even esoteric elements and aesthetic and philosophical considerations did not prevent them from pursuing quite practical and political goals nor from believing that they might promote these goals through their art.

The shared enthusiasm for *Kalevala* mythology and the idea that the same symbols could be conveyed by all art forms, together with common national, cultural, and political interests, stimulated fruitful interactions among some of the leading Finnish artists, composers, and poets. The most illustrative and central group which, for some time, gathered to discuss these issues in the restaurants and cafés of Helsinki featured Sibelius, Gallen-Kallela, and Leino as its most famous members. Within the cultural elite in what was then a quite small city of Helsinki, it was natural that the writers and poets socialized with painters and composers, but the fraternity around a symbolist conception of art was a special circle, known as the Symposion.[15] This circle of the early 1890s united artists from different fields in common political and aesthetic goals.[16] The not-so-sober evenings are depicted in Gallen-Kallela's (scandalous) painting of 1894 called *Symposion* (or, alternatively *Probleemi*; 'the

[14] See, for instance, ibid., 135–137.

[15] The leading figure seems to have been the older composer Robert Kajanus, but Gallen-Kallela was the 'dynamo' of ideas and the one first and most deeply involved with symbolism, although Sibelius also imbibed influences from paintings (e.g. such as those of Arnold Böcklin who was much in vogue in symbolist circles) and from musical performances during his long stays in European centers (see Erik Tawaststjerna, *Jean Sibelius II* (Helsinki, 1989), 45-53).

[16] The circle was formed in 1892, but its members had previously gathered together in the Young Fennoman group.

Problem').[17] Despite the decadent flavour attributed to the circle by this painting, the circle itself was intellectually vigorous. Its participants initiated common projects and spread ideas that inspired individual artworks and helped to form a language of common symbols, which sometimes remained mysterious to outsiders but which, through familiar national aspects and their emotional charge, nevertheless made an impact on Finnish audiences.

Ideas about the unity or the analogies and correspondences of different art forms reached Finnish artistic circles in the 1880s, probably via echoes from sources such as Wagner's 'Letter' and Baudelaire's essay on Wagner,[18] as well as through the more general discussions that Wagner's music provoked in many countries.[19] For Sibelius, direct contacts with Wagner's music were also decisive. Sibelius joined the Wagner Society in 1892 and visited Bayreuth in 1894 where *Parsifal* made the greatest impression on him.[20] Although he later maintained that Wagner had no impact on him, his famous biographer Erik Tawaststjerna has shown how his love-hate relationship with Wagner influenced his music.[21] Sibelius certainly brought home ideas that were then shared within the Symposion circle in Helsinki. Nevertheless, it was not Wagnerian opera as a synthesis of music and visual and

[17] There are two versions of the painting, but the first one (with more draft-like "modernist" qualities) is the more provocative and the one that caused a scandal, that ended the Symposion circle. The art historian Salme Sarajas-Korte characterizes the painting 'as a pictorial representation of the symbols and mysteries that were discussed often till the dawn'. See Salme Sarajas-Korte, 'Maalaustaide 1890-luvulla - mystiikkaa vai kansallisromantiikkaa', in Salme Sarajas-Korte (ed.), *Ars - Suomen taide* (Helsinki, 1989), 255-287 (269).

[18] Baudelaire "Richard Wagner" in *Revue européenne;* modified as *Richard Wagner et "Tannhäuser" à Paris* (published by Dentu) 1861.

[19] Salme Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet. Tutkielma Suomen maalaustaiteesta 1891–1895* (Helsinki, 1966).

[20] Eero Tarasti, 'Sibelius and Wagner', in Goss (ed). *The Sibelius Companion*, 61–75.

[21] Tawaststjerna, *Jean Sibelius II*, 31–35, 38–45.

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poetical elements that was important, although Sibelius, in 1893, had conceived a plan of composing an opera on the *Kalevala's* hero Väinämöinen, but he abandoned the idea in 1894 after hearing Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*.[22] Nor were any collective works, which would combine the respective fields of the Symposion members, considered. Instead, the inspiring idea was to explore how each art form could approach the others or at least one other art form. In this sense, both Sibelius and Leino were inspired to realize their own versions of 'synthetic' art. If Wagner emphasized the predominance of music while incorporating visual and poetic material in his operas, Sibelius found the genre of the symphonic poem (and Franz Liszt) to be a response to his desire to add poetry and painting to music. Sibelius wrote, 'I have, I think, found myself again, musically speaking. … I think that I'm really a music painter and poet'.[23] The genre was associated with advancing nationalism and was thus also the ideal vehicle for conveying wordless nationalist aspirations, as Glenda Dawn Goss remarks.[24] Also the potential of the tone poem for conveying the experience of innermost being so important in symbolist works had been recognized.[25] Goss refers to the genre's background:

> In no other type of music do music and poetry come as close to Symbolist ideals as in tone poems, which evoke correspondences only hinted at, achieve 'fluidity,' and

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[22] Ibid., 40–41.

[23] Letter to Aino Sibelius,19 August 1894, cited (in English translation) in Goss, *Sibelius*, 192. See also ibid. 180–181.

[24] Goss, *Sibelius*, 193.

[25] David Haas, 'Sibelius's Second Symphony and the Legacy of Symphonic Lyricism', in Goss (ed.), *The Sibelius Companion,* 77–94.

> mingle the separate experiences of the senses in 'perceptible surfaces created to represent their esoteric affinities with the primordial ideas.'[26]

Leino's lyrics in turn were inspired by music and the visual arts. The writer tried to create a visually vigorous music of poetry which, while incorporating vivid symbolic images, emphasized the rhythmic and sound-like qualities of poetry in the footsteps of Paul Verlaine.[27] But 'musical poetry' could also signify appealing to the sentiments rather than to the intellect. Wagner, in his above-mentioned essay, saw music as 'a universal organ' that 'resolves ideas in sentiments',[28] and expressed his opinion of the alternatives to poetry in the following way:

> It was [thought] necessary for poetry to pass entirely into the field of abstraction, of the pure combination of ideas, of the representation of the world by means of the logical laws of thought. Instead, this office belongs to philosophy, and not to poetry; or rather, poetry was to combine intimately with music […].[29]

Kommentoinut [MO-1]: The meaning of French 'or' is 'BUT' EXPRESSING THAT WHAT WAS SAID BEFORE IS NOT ACCEPTED OR NOT TRUE. Because Wagner thinks that the first way of making poetry (Mallarméan?) is false, he insists that THE FIELD OF ABSTRACTION IS PROPER TO PHILOSOPHY AND NOT TO POETRY. I don't think that Furthermore is the right translation?? Even this 'it was necessary' does not convey the whole sense of 'il fallait'

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'Blending with music' by emphasizing the rhythmic (and auditory) elements, poetry achieves the same effect as music, resolving ideas into sentiments. Wagner's aesthetic ideal seems to

[26] Goss, *Sibelius*, 193, citing Jean Moréas, whose manifesto *Le symbolisme* appear in *Le Figaro*, 18 September 1886.

[27] These ideas and their realization in poetry or as poetry are already present in *Poèmes saturniens* (1866).

[28] Cited in Acquisto, *French Symbolist Poetry and the Idea of Music*, 19–20.

[29] Cited in ibid., 21. The original French reads as follows: 'Il fallait que [la poésie] passât d'une manière complète dans le champ de l'abstraction, de la pure combinaison des idées, de la représentation du monde au moyen des lois logiques de la pensée ; or cette œuvre est celle de la philosophie et non de la poésie; ou bien elle devait se fonder intimement avec la musique'.

imply that all arts should convey sentiments rather than represent things or express ideas. By connecting this to Schopenhauer's ideas about the universal will expressible only through music (whereas the other art forms strive to represent Platonic ideas, which, in Schopenhauer's philosophy are the objectifications of the will), we come to the core of symbolist aesthetics. Art is to evoke foundational truths by bypassing the laws of logic and, ultimately by 'feeling' the universal, the metaphysical truths. But even if music conveys the 'flow' of life, the return to myths reaches the objectifications, the ideas, in a suggestive and affect-laden way without reducing itself to philosophy which Wagner claimed to be the alternative to 'blending with music'. Mythical symbolism thus negotiates between feeling and ideas.

2. The Swan on the River of Death

We may ask what incited the Symposion participants to choose the Lemminkäinen saga and especially the episode relating his journey to the River of Death. Already before their common venture on the story of Lemminkäinen and his trip to Tuonela to shoot the swan, Sibelius, Leino, and Gallen-Kallela had all ventured into *Kalevala* territory with other myths and hero figures: Sibelius with his *Kullervo* symphony, Leino with many poems with *Kalevala* themes, and Gallen-Kallela with his more realistic *Kalevala* paintings such as *Aino* and *Forging of the Sampo*. The painter, then seduced by symbolist currents, painted important works in that style from 1894 on; in the same years he was part of the Symposion he was also trying out the new style with *Kalevala* topics. For Leino, the *Swan of Tuonela* was his first venture into what was clearly literary symbolism.

The appeal of Lemminkäinen's story and his encounter with the Swan of Tuonela can be explained by many background factors, but it is clear that the tale provided each artist an interface with the most up-to-date trends of the time in international symbolism.

Lemminkäinen as a symbolic figure combined Don Juan (or Don Giovanni), interpreted as a sort of erotic Faust figure,[30] and Christ, as an artist saviour figure attempting to 'liberate' humankind from death through art.[31] Lemminkäinen's descent to Tuonela parallels Christ's descent to the underworld (after his death on the Cross), while also being an Orphic topic. The Swan of Tuonela, which is Lemminkäinen's targeted prey, becomes a symbol of death to be conquered or the mystery of life to be solved. This emblematic swan resonates, in an original way, with the swan imagery central to international symbolism, which connected swans with beauty and poetry and swan songs with the fate of poets.[32] But its association with the realm of the dead also echoes the symbolist fascination with death and a sense of endings.

The overall scheme of the swan episode in the *Kalevala* is as follows: Lemminkäinen is required to shoot the beautiful Swan of Tuonela, which swims on the death-dark sacred river, using one shot and one arrow. This task is given to Lemminkäinen by Louhi, the queen of the Northland, in the hope that he should not succeed: it is a type of impossible fairytale undertaken to win a bride (the daughter of the queen), and Lemminkäinen is not the chosen bride-groom. Indeed, Lemminkäinen fails: instead of shooting the swan, he is killed by a denizen of the Northland who wants revenge on Lemminkäinen because he has killed other men of the same realm. Lemminkäinen's body is thrown into the River of Tuonela and torn

[30] Søren Kierkegaard's influential essay on Mozart's opera Don Giovanni (in *Either/Or*) provided the background. Later other symbolist authors were inspired by this text and created Don Juan figures as well as Lemminkäinen figures in this vein: the prime example in Finnish symbolism is Volter Kilpi's early stories.

[31] These Christ artists relate to Parsifal figures inspired by Wagner's opera; e.g. Volter Kilpi's lyric novella *Parsifal* (1902).

[32] See Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi: Minä ja Toinen vuosisadanvaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (Helsinki, 1997), 50–51, 62 and 64–69. The myth that swans only sing they die was connected with the symbolic 'death' required for artistic creation.

into pieces. But his mother, who learns of his fate, travels to Tuonela, rakes the pieces of his body from the river, gathers them all and puts them back together. Then she miraculously resurrects him with the help of heavenly honey fetched by a honeybee. The swan itself figures in the story only as the target of Lemminkäinen's quest, which leads him to Tuonela, and it is mainly the enthusiasm with swans and death in international symbolism that explains the swan's prominent place in the symbolist works related to the Lemminkäinen saga. Wagner's opera *Parsifal* adds some elements as well: its protagonist, a fool who has lost his memory, shoots a swan while wandering in the lands of the Holy Grail (Act 1, scene 1).[33] This episode is not, in itself, central to the opera, although the swan is holy and Parsifal is reproached for having killed it; more relevant is Parsifal himself, the 'pure knight', who also has Christ-like qualities. In the *Kalevala*, Lemminkäinen, though a resurrected hero like Christ, is not associated with any kind of Redeemer. The warrior hero is not altered by his deadly adventure and returns home only to set out again for new wars and adventures. But in the symbolist works of the Finnish trio studied here, the connection with Christ is established and made explicit, at least in Gallen-Kallela's painting and Leino's poem. Instead of inspiring religious reflections, however, the figure illustrates how art and artistic works were sanctified by the symbolists.

Let us now turn to the case study itself and examine the three artworks in question more closely, beginning with Sibelius's music, which was published first and which inspired Leino, at least, in his work. Gallen-Kallela, however, may have been the instigator who brought the Lemminkäinen saga to the attention of the others. As early as 1894 he had shown a sketch of his *Lemminkäinen's Mother* to the Symposion members, and his draft book

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[33] See also Lohengrin (echoed at the start of Sibelius's tone poem), who arrives on board a swan in Wagner's opera.

contains a description of the central elements, such as the dead hero in his mother's arms and the swan 'near black water', where it swims away with 'its neck scornfully bent'.[34]

3. Lemminkäinen and the Swan in Sibelius and Gallen-Kallela

It appeared that Sibelius could use some musical as well as topical elements of his abandoned opera project on Väinämöinen when he began working with the younger and more virile hero Lemminkäinen.[35] Sibelius's suite of symphonic poems focuses on four 'moments' in the *Kalevala* story of Lemminkäinen, indicated by the titles of Sibelius's four 'legends':

> *Lemminkäinen and the Maidens of the Island* (runo 29)
> *Lemminkäinen in Tuonela* (runos 14–15)
> *Swan of Tuonela* (runo 14, 329–336)
> *Lemminkäinen's Return* (runos 29 and 30)

The first legend does not relate to Lemminkäinen's journey to Tuonela, but to another earlier episode in his life, while many other episodes – such as his two other heroic deeds in his efforts to win a bride – are omitted. The focus on Tuonela is conspicuous but, apparently, needs the first, erotically laden part for effects of contrast that were typical in symbolist arts. This episode evokes the adventures of the hero amongst the maidens and wives of an island where he seduces all the women and relates to the sort of erotic bravado that was common

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[34] Tawaststjerna 1989, 65. We may conclude that the central elements of the final version are already present in the description. However, as Goss has pointed out, Karl Flodin had suggested in *Nya Pressen* that Sibelius compose something on Lemminkäinen already in 1892 (see Goss, *Sibelius*, 210-211.)

[35] The Lohengrin-influenced prelude of this project, for example, served as the foundation for *Swan of Tuonela*. See Tawaststjerna *Jean Sibelius II*, 65–67. See too Goss, *Sibelius*, 221.

currency in symbolist circles.[36] Sibelius also had an immediate predecessor in Strauss's *Don Juan* (1888). Lemminkäinen's vain quest to the Northland is illustrated by the two middle legends, whereas the fourth legend refers to the hero's resurrection and his return to home as if nothing had happened. Sibelius's music, in fact, seems to convey the story as the return of a superman, a man who does not bend under disasters but proudly proceeds with new adventures: no remorse, no humility but a superior nonchalance.[37]

The two middle legends with the core focus on the events in the realm of the dead touch upon themes highly significant for symbolists. *Lemminkäinen in Tuonela* evokes the land of the dead, which, according to Tawaststjerna is 'Inferno-like' and not inspired by the *Kalevala* where Tuonela bears no traces of doom or punishment.[38] The forces of hell fight with the mother, the shaman-like saviour of her son. Musically speaking, the *Swan of Tuonela* is perhaps the heart of Sibelius's suite, but it is also the 'legend' that has almost no counterpart in the epic story of Lemminkäinen. Even in the music's first performance, this movement lacked any form of extra-musical explanation, whereas the audience was guided to the world of the other legends by quotations of verses from the *Kalevala*. The programme text indicated the lines which Sibelius related to his legends, but none were provided for the *Swan of Tuonela*. Nevertheless, a draft version of the programme texts includes four lines for the Swan:

In the murk of Death's black river
In the sacred river's whirlpool
Vigorous bird, passing lightly

[36] See Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi*, 177–182.

[37] Tawaststjerna, *Jean Sibelius II*, 77–80.

[38] Ibid. 74–77.

Swan of Tuonela gliding.

This refers to the characterization of the challenge that Louhi, the mother of the would-be bride, gives when she assigns the task to Lemminkäinen (runo 15, 329-336) and this is all that is said about the swan itself in the *Kalevala*. This tells us what the music also indicates: the legend about the swan has no 'narrative' elements, rather the swan 'gliding' on the river as a symbol of death and the flow of the river are the central elements. The bird can be imagined as a majestic and mysterious presence dominating the flowing water, while the music evokes a meditative, ecstatic state and a melancholy mood. As such, it also figures in Gallen-Kallela's painting and Leino's poem.[39]

Symbolism in music, however, always operates at another level than symbolism in poetry and painting. The national importance of the suite has much if not everything to do with the titles and the programme. The fact that this music was inspired by national mythology as if born from the springs of the national soul and that the audiences who knew their *Kalevala* could vividly imagine what was going on in the music was what entranced nationally-minded listeners. The question of how the music itself was "Finnish", however, was debated by the critics after its first performance 1896.[40] Other than pictorial and language-bound symbols, musical symbols seem to float freely from one context to another, but even in visual arts and literature, *fin-de-siècle* symbolism balanced between 'universal' and national significance.

The background of Gallen-Kallela's painting is equally important. The painted scene illustrates one particular moment in the Lemminkäinen story – the hero's mother resurrecting

[39] Tawaststjerna (*Jean Sibelius II*, 71–73) refers to the song of the swan – evoked by the English horn – as a central element of the music.

[40] Ibid., 63–64.

the body of her dead son as she kneels beside his corpse – that is essential for its interpretation, while the painting, of course, also presupposes that the viewers know the whole story from the *Kalevala*. Its realization, however, was destined to make the painting pregnant with allusions to the *pietà* tradition in Western painting. It thus brings in the universal aspect of the symbol: the *interpictorial* allusions guide the viewer to connect Lemminkäinen with Christ as a figure whose death also signifies the renewal of life and redemption. While the central figures are associated with the dead Jesus and the mourning Virgin Mary in the gloomy landscape of the land of death, they also depict a decisive moment in the *Kalevala* story. At the same time, the scene is imbued with *fin-de-siècle* ideas and allusions. The swan that Lemminkäinen failed to kill is present: Gallen-Kallela's swan remains in the background and can be interpreted as a majestic figure symbolizing the triumph of death rather than promising resurrection. Although according to the saga in the *Kalevala* Lemminkäinen's mother succeeds in bringing her son back to life, the moment chosen for the painting shows us the Christ-like hero who is still dead, although his body is intact. It represents the moment when Lemminkäinen's mother has gathered the pieces of her son from the river to resurrect him with the help of the ointment brought by a honeybee. The bee is depicted, but the resurrection, with its possible allusion to the Finnish national situation, is still impending.[41] Lemminkäinen – who, for the symbolists, as a Don Juan-figure, symbolizes vitality or the force of life – is lying dead in the painting.[42] And the swan is observing. Even if it seems to have, in the final painting, a smaller role than initially planned,

[41] The allegories which refer to the precarious and threatening atmosphere in a Finland under more and more oppressive Russian rule are quasi ubiquitous in Finnish symbolist works.

[42] In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard saw in this figure an emblem of never-bending life energy. See Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi*, 178–179.

its importance is suggested by the symbolist context: as an emblem of death and its majesty, the scornful bird parallels many other *fin de siècle* death-symbols.

We may presume that the painting fuses Christian iconography with the *Kalevala* story in order to create a variant of a universal myth of death and resurrection, which in symbolism most often functioned as an allegory of artistic creation. That the national, political allegory is one possible reading does not exclude this more symbolist interpretation. The resurrection *in spe* could be a symbol for a renaissance at various levels and with various meanings. The suggestive ambiguity typical of symbolist artworks is illustrated by this uncertainty.

4. Eino Leino's dramatic poem *Swan of Tuonela*

The poet Eino Leino continued the enterprise inaugurated by his friends with his dramatic poem, the title of which already emphasizes the symbolic role of the Swan in the text. By writing this poem, he inaugurated symbolism in Finnish literature. This dramatic poem was his first experiment with symbolist poetics and inter-artistic synergy. As Leino himself predicted in a letter to his friends, its manifold symbolism remained obscure to his contemporaries, not least because it tried to inaugurate a new form of visionary lyric drama.[43] The work could also qualify as an experimental play (despite the fact that it has never been performed on stage), which challenged the traditional understandings of drama and emphasized the visual and musical instead of the dramatic plot. The vivid poetic imagery suggests a rich fantasy world and an atmosphere of melancholic mystery with ambivalent meanings. From an international point of view, it was quite up-to-date and even avant-garde,

[43] Quoted in note 3.

comparable to symbolist plays by Maurice Maeterlinck and the worlds of Wagnerian opera. Seen in that context, Leino was perfectly in line with European symbolist endeavours and, at the same time, a radical modernizer of what had become the Finnish national mythology. Leino radically reinterprets the story of the *Kalevala* for his own symbolic purposes. His symbolism, however, did not find a favourable audience: as Leino himself predicted (in his above mentioned letter) his poem was not understood. Its symbolism was too radical and difficult, and the time of its publication was not fortunate: the national hopes in Finland were at a very low point under the pressure of Russification, and a modernized story of Lemminkäinen who, unlike the Kalevala hero, does not even return from Tuonela but dies, was not what was expected from Leino.

Lemminkäinen's trek to Tuonela with the unsuccessful attempt to shoot the swan and its subsequent events function as the hypotext of Leino's poem, but he changes the *Kalevala* story in a very significant way. His Lemminkäinen is a modern man with changing moods who is undecided in his quest. The beginning of the poem presents his melancholy dispositions, his contradictory dreams and destructive impulses, which, strangely, mix with imagining how he would live an idyllic life with his mother after having wiped out sinful humankind from the earth. He arrives at the River of Tuonela seemingly forgetful of his mission, pre-occupied instead with these various musings. There he meets the Maiden of Tuonela, the Kharon-figure of the *Kalevala* and, surprisingly, the two engage in flirting.[44] He is almost seduced by this maiden of death (who symbolizes material forces, including earthly love) and is fortified to pursue his quest once again only by a heavenly vision of the Maiden of the Northland. Leino's Lemminkäinen sees an Ideal in this figure, who is here associated with the Virgin Mary and the purity of the world of ideas. Only this heavenly love, which

[44] There seem to be echoes of Wagner's *Parsifal* and *Tannhäuser*, although Leino's connections to Wagner's operas have not been investigated.

symbolizes the hero's spiritual goal, awakens him, and makes him defy not only the seduction of earthly love but also the warnings given by the Maiden of Tuonela: shooting the swan is a lethal enterprise doomed to fail.

What is conspicuous in Leino's poem is that, although its elements are taken from the *Kalevala* and its metre even imitates that of the *Kalevala*, it contains no nationalist symbolism. Leino explained his allegory as follows:

> Lemminkäinen has become a Titan, *a hero of faith*, who plunges through all dangers into the river of the Underworld, torch in hand […]. The Swan has become the queen of death, *symbolizing the mystery of the hereafter*. Lemminkäinen wants to shoot the Swan with his bow of ideals and win peace for himself and a message of joy for suffering humanity. […] He is just about to shoot when an arrow aimed by the Herdsman of Pohja, representing his own misdeeds, strikes him. […] The man who can shoot the Swan of Tuonela must be free from sin (Jesus).[45]

Leino's symbolist artist-hero thus travels to Tuonela in search of redemption from death, which is identified as the source of his melancholy.[46] The swan, the ultimate secret of life, is

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[45] Letter to Maila Talvio and J. J. Mikkola 22 December 1898; translation from the English summary of Salme Sarajas-Korte, 'Om Axel Galléns Kalevalmystik', *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History*, 41 (1-4) (1972), 43–54.

[46] The complex relationship of the thirst for immortality, art and melancholy is spelled out by Baudelaire in his essay 'Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe' (1857): 'Our unquenchable thirst for all that lies beyond, and that life reveals, is the liveliest proof of our immortality. It is both by poetry and *through* poetry, by music and *through* music, that the soul glimpses the splendors beyond the tomb; and when an exquisite poem brings tears to our eyes, those tears are not the proof of an excess of bliss; they bear witness rather to an aggravated melancholy, an appeal from our nerves, our nature exiled in imperfection, which desires to enter into immediate possession,

found only in the Underworld, and redemption requires killing the swan and hearing its death song. The reference to the ancient myth of the exquisite death song of swans is used here as a symbol for revealing the secret of death, a revelation that is supposed to bring victory over death, not only to the hero who kills the swan but also to humanity. But a symbolist artist cannot be successful as a Redeemer in the sense of conquering death. Leino says as much in the letter: only a man free from sin could kill the swan. Nevertheless, even Leino's Lemminkäinen is presented as a Christ-like figure.

The idea of Lemminkäinen as an ambivalent (mortal) Christ figure who is transformed into a typical symbolist artist-hero is foregrounded in Leino's poem and is comparable to Gallen-Kallela's association of Lemminkäinen with Christ. The idea of artists as modern Christ figures fascinated symbolists and decadents, whose spiritual yearnings and faith were transposed from the realm of religion to the realm of aesthetics. Christ as an incarnated God, both man and God, and 'the Son of Man' was an ambivalent figure to their taste, as Ellis Hanson has shown.[47] Leino, however, distinguishes his sinful hero from Christ, the pure hero.[48] His Lemminkäinen meets death and is not resurrected like the hero of the *Kalevala*. But death is made sweet: Leino denies resurrection to his artist-warrior, but allows him to die in his mother's arms. In Leino's version it is the *dead* mother (who also symbolizes Mother Earth) who receives her son in the realm of death. This is what the chorus of the immortal, golden-winged Dragonflies repeatedly predicts: the 'earth-winged', or the humans, are destined to become Earth. The poem both begins and ends with the song of the

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while still on this earth, of a revealed paradise'. Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1976), cited in Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1997), 4.

[47] Ibid., 178.

[48] Nor is Leino's hero a *reine Tor* (a pure fool) like Wagner's Parsifal who succeeds. Rather he is more like Wagner's Tannhäuser.

Dragonflies, and the song, which always has the same beginning and ending, is repeated several times in between. Here we have another ambivalent symbolic animal taken from the symbolist repertoire – especially used in visual arts and even the jewellery of the time. Dragonflies combine a disgusting insect, monster and figure of evil to brilliant beauty (elf-wings and brilliant colours); the earth-bound to heavenly flight. Yet, in Leino's poem they seem to represent the heavenly creatures unbothered by death and mortality unlike Lemminkäinen; reminding us of the dragonfly of Oscar Levertin's poem, which Sibelius later set to music as a song (1904).

Kommentoinut [MO-2]: Am I right to correct this by omitting on?

poisti: on

Both Leino and Gallen-Kallela represent the swan as the victorious, untouchable enigma of death. In Leino's poem, the swan is the invincible queen of death and the guardian of the mystery into which the artist-hero cannot penetrate. In the play, another chorus (Leino uses several), that of the Water lilies, sings in praise of their queen, gliding on the dark river, white as the water lilies and associated with them. The swan in symbolism was intimately connected with the water lily, another pregnant image in the international movement. It was important for the conception of art by Stéphane Mallarmé in particular.[49] These flowers, which have roots in muddy lake bottoms yet raise their pure blooms to the surface, symbolize the roots of human ideas in the darkness of the unconscious and the intertwining of the dark side of the human psyche with its highest spiritual desires and achievements. The chorus of water lilies in Leino's play sings how their roots lie at the muddy bottom of sin and matter, and yet they raise their white flowers to the surface. They create beauty, purity, and light out of the darkness of vile matter. The ideas are born from this night:

Dark are the whirls

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[49] Mallarmé evokes the emptiness of the perfect form of the water lilies, which bears the fullness of dreams, while this whiteness hides the darkness of lust. See Levine *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection*, 132.

Of Tuonela's waves

Gloomy the whirlpools

Of sin and matter.

The lily emerged

From under the waves

From the night rose

The power of ideas.[50]

muotoili: englanti (Yhdysvallat)

In other words, Leino connects the Mallarméan symbol for the artwork with the Swan of Tuonela in order to foreground the heroism of the symbolist artist: even if for Leino the concept of a hero/titan included humanity's great heroes of all kinds, it is clear that symbolist (and national) poets are counted amongst the "titans".

Kommentoinut [MO-3]: Is this clear without the addition I suggest? I felt uncertain about this

This idea of the necessity of mining the depths for attaining what is highest took different forms in *fin-de-siècle* writings. Hanson describes how, for English decadents, the uncanny union of matter and spirit or flesh and Word was integrated in the figure of Christ himself: 'In the Crucifixion they found the suffering of a great criminal and individualist.[51] In this world, grace inhabits the depths of shame, while sainthood presumes sin. Walter Pater's essay on Dante Gabriel Rossetti spells out the idea that was central throughout symbolism in a Catholic vein:

[50] Leino, *Tuonelan joutsen*, 30 (my translation). The original Finnish reads as follows: 'Tummat on vyörtehet / Tuonelan laineen, / synkät on pyörtehet / synnin ja aineen, / ulpu se sousi / aaltojen alta, / yöstä se nousi / aattehen valta.'

[51] Hansen, *Decadence and Catholicism*, 7.

> Spirit and matter, indeed, have been for the most part opposed, with a false contrast or antagonism by schoolmen, whose artificial creation those abstractions really are. In our actual concrete experience, the two trains of phenomena which the words *matter* and *spirit* do but roughly distinguish, play inextricably into each other. Practically, the church of the Middle Ages by its aesthetic worship, its sacramentalism, its real faith in the resurrection of the flesh, had set itself against that Manichean opposition of spirit and matter, and it results in men's way of taking life.[52]

Leino distinguishes his hero from Christ, who remains pure for him, but associates his hero with sinful individualists and criminals. Nevertheless, he elevates the mythical but quite earthly warrior and murderer Lemminkäinen to a Redeemer, who cannot succeed in his impossible task, yet by struggling for the ideal, by attempting something that elevates him above mere earthly (non-spiritual) pursuits, achieves, in that sense, a form of redemption. Life in a struggle for beautiful ideals is the end in itself for symbolist-decadent heroes who live in a world where beauty can be achieved only by accepting its foundation in matter, its generation from dark forces within the human psyche itself.

Thus, even if Lemminkäinen cannot succeed because of his guilt, his sins or his human condition as a sinner, his death and his struggle are significant. His doomed quest is what, in the play, is deemed to be the mission of a hero and a symbolist poet. In the melancholy world of mortal souls, the struggle itself is what redeems. For the ancients, the only 'immortality' to be achieved was the fame of heroic deeds, but this does not seem to play an essential role in symbolism. The Faustian quest is an end in itself. And, in the modern world, the act of writing poetry or creating artworks – and, on a larger scale,

[52] Cited in ibid., 177.

generating artistic culture that attains the spiritual – matter most. The aesthetic is a realm that transcends death, at least in the sense given to Platonic ideas by Schopenhauer. But, unlike Schopenhauer's thinking, reaching for the spiritual and creating artworks that fulfil this qualification, in symbolist thinking, presupposes the world of 'sin' or 'matter'. In Leino's play, the descent to Tuonela is the way to spiritual truth, and Lemminkäinen's death is a symbolic death that the symbolist artist undertakes to arrive at pure art. The connection of the swan to the water lilies in Leino's play reveals the symbolist poetics that Leino illustrates within the frame of the Lemminkäinen story.

Conclusion

Finnish audiences did not respond favourably to Leino's dramatic poem, which was not only obscure but did not manage to satisfy the nationalist needs of his day. Whereas Sibelius's music seemed to spring from the national soul with the force of the mere titles of his tone poems, the symbolism of Leino's *Swan of Tuonela* should have conveyed national meanings through its text as well. Instead, he actively reworked the Lemminkäinen myth to avoid allusions to nationally burning issues, and his text remained strange and elusive according to all criteria. It was in his more directly political poems that Leino appealed to his nation and with the later collections of *Helkavirsiä* ('Whitsongs'), which renewed the *Kalevala* metre and contained ballads and legends more easily decipherable by readers, that he attained the kind of national significance that Sibelius and Gallen-Kallela achieved with their works on Lemminkäinen and the Swan. Nevertheless, the beautiful mystery of Leino's *Swan of Tuonela* is an impressive attempt to introduce modern ideas by way of rewriting national myths, and the complex symbolism connected with the figure of Lemminkäinen and the Swan spells out the intricate network of associations and correspondences that gave birth to this modernized mythology around the most volatile and morally questionable hero of the

national epic. Leino's poem perhaps also reveals the esoteric quality that lurks behind Sibelius's and Gallen-Kallela's Lemminkäinen works. Symbols evoke many ideas, but remain ambivalent and fluid. As such, however, their suggestive power lends itself to many uses. The imaginative rewritings of the *Kalevala* myths thus were potent weapons in the national struggle for Finnish independence while the symbolic images continue to appeal by their beauty and universally human significance.