

## **A New Approach to Language – Volter Kilpi’s *Alastalon Salissa* (1933)**

Kaisa Kurikka

### **Abstract**

Finnish literary criticism has faced difficulties in situating Volter Kilpi’s (1874–1939) novel *Alastalon salissa* (In the Parlour of Alastalo, 1933) in any literary current or tradition. Ever since its publication the novel has been linked to several categorisations, varying from modernism to surrealism and dada to epic or historical prose. This essay discusses the reception of Kilpi’s novel from the 1930s to the present day by focusing mainly on writings that connect the novel to avant-garde traditions. The reception of Kilpi’s novel seems to emphasise either the modernist character of the novel or its avant-garde quality. Rather than situating *Alastalon salissa* strictly at one or the other of these poles, this essay suggests that the novel can actually be seen as moving in between them. The essay also suggests that the avant-garde quality of the novel is mainly a matter of its verbal expression.

At one point in the late 1930s Volter Kilpi (1874–1939), the author of the novel *Alastalon salissa* (In the Parlour of Alastalo, 1933), made a remark that turned out to be a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. For PR purposes Kilpi’s publisher had asked him to define what kind of readers the novel could be recommended for, and his reply was stern: “To future generations of Finnish readers” (cited in Tarkka 1980: 459). At the time of its publication *Alastalon salissa* was not a commercial success, selling only a few hundred copies. The book was considered difficult and strange because of its style and language. And above all, it was thought to be too long.

In this essay my aim is to discuss *Alastalon salissa* in connection with the novel’s reception, focusing mainly on writings that explicitly link the novel to avant-garde traditions. By discussing these writings and their cultural and aesthetic conditions, the essay aims to show not only the changes in the reception of Kilpi’s novel but also the changing paradigms of the avant-garde within Finnish literary criticism. The discursive net surrounding Kilpi’s novel seems to oscillate between two poles – one emphasising the modernist character of the novel, the other arguing for its avant-garde quality. Rather than situating *Alastalon salissa* strictly at one or the other of

these poles, this essay suggests that the novel can actually be read as moving between the two of them. Furthermore, I suggest that the avant-garde quality of the novel rests mostly on its verbal expression. Kilpi's prose makes Finnish sound like a foreign language even to the ears of native speakers. In its ways of using language and verbal expression *Alastalon salissa* exceeds modernism, offering a new approach to language even for today's readers.

In 1992, almost sixty years after its first publication, *Alastalon salissa* was hailed as the best Finnish novel published since independence in 1917. The newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* had asked several artists, academics and critics to vote for the best three Finnish novels of all times. Kilpi's novel won the vote clearly. Second place was shared by Mika Waltari's *Sinuhe Egyptiläinen* (The Egyptian, 1945) and Väinö Linnas's two novels *Tuntematon sotilas* (The Unknown Soldier, 1954) and *Täällä Pohjantähden alla* (Under the North Star, 1959). The success of Kilpi's novel came as a huge surprise, since *Alastalon salissa* was regarded merely as a curiosity of the past, known and read only by a handful of devoted readers at the time of the vote (see Tarkka 1992). Some of the voters explained their choice by defining Kilpi's novel as being both fully European and yet strangely Finnish. Based on the reasoning of the voters, one could argue that the early 1990s represent the era when Finnish readers no longer felt the need to separate national literature off from the rest of Europe or the world, as was customary at the time when *Alastalon salissa* was published.

Kilpi's remark about writing for future generations echoes avant-garde impulses. However, Finnish literary criticism and especially studies (the few that exist) of the Finnish literary avant-garde have rarely named *Alastalon salissa* as an avant-garde novel. A detailed study of the novel as a representative of the Finnish avant-garde is still waiting for future generations of literary critics. Before the first decade of the twenty-first century only a few of them called *Alastalon salissa* an avant-garde novel;<sup>1</sup> indeed, literary criticism has had difficulties in situating the novel in any one literary current or genre.

---

<sup>1</sup> The hesitant attitude towards the avant-garde nature of Kilpi's novel can be seen in a call for papers to participate in the "Layers of the Avant-Garde in Finland" symposium in the autumn of 2008. The invitation asked, for example, whether Volter Kilpi represented the avant-garde of his time (see Sarje (ed.) 2009: 3). On the other hand, Antti Salminen (2008: 117) shows no hesitancy, when he writes that: "for example *Alastalon salissa* by Volter Kilpi, can be regarded with good reason as a classic of the avant-garde also from an international point of view" (all translations, unless otherwise stated, are done by me).

The nomination as the best novel written in Finnish was, nevertheless, a huge breakthrough for *Alastalon salissa* in the early 1990s. Ever since the announcement, new editions of the novel have been printed – even paperback editions. The vote brought about not only an awareness of the novel’s existence among a wider reading public outside academic circles. It also led to a kind of literary relay; literature lovers, bloggers, study circles and reading groups began to challenge each other to read the novel. As a token of having read Kilpi’s novel, a T-shirt with the text “I have read *Alastalon salissa*” is nowadays not just available but actually worn by many people. It seems that in the community of Finnish readers the novel has travelled through a curious and ambiguous path from negligence to a kind of literary “cult”.<sup>2</sup>

Volter Kilpi is famous for his so-called *Archipelago* series, beginning with *Alastalon salissa* and followed by *Pitäjän pienempiä* (Lesser Parishioners, 1934) and *Kirkolle* (To the Church, 1937). He began his literary career with three novels – *Bathseba* (1900), *Parsifal* (1902) and *Antinous* (1903) – that belong to Finnish symbolism of the early twentieth century. Their themes are taken from the Bible, the ancient world and medieval chivalry, and the novels focus on problematic processes of selfhood.

*Alastalon salissa* is Kilpi’s magnum opus, though. The novel’s narrative is situated in the past, some time in the mid-1860s, on a particular Thursday afternoon in October. The time span of the novel covers only six hours, but the original edition of the book (divided into two volumes) totals over 900 pages. In the novel a group of rich landowners from the west coast of Finland gather in the parlour of Alastalo to negotiate and to sign an agreement to build a three-masted ship. The novel concentrates on presenting the movements of these men’s minds, their thoughts, perceptions and affections.

Because the novel focuses on the past, it has been categorised as a historical novel, although not in an ordinary sense, since it lacks some of the typical features of this genre (Heikkinen 2013: 110). Despite its historical accuracy, many critics prefer to call the book simply either an epic or a novel without any detailed definition. The location and timing of the novel refer to agricultural society, and from

---

<sup>2</sup> Kustavi, the birthplace of Volter Kilpi, has arranged a literary festival dedicated to the author every summer since 1999. Every July the “Volter Kilpi Kustavissa” literary week (“Volter Kilpi in Kustavi”) offers an event filled with lectures and theatre performances based on Kilpi’s writings. The festival also arranges events during the winter. In November 2016 an unofficial world record was achieved when sixty-two people read *Alastalon salissa* aloud in the yard of a local grocery shop. The festival has had a considerable impact on tourism in Kustavi (see *Kritiikin Uutiset* 4.10.2013).

this point of view it seems anti- or pre-modern. However, when the characters discuss the agreement to build the new boat, they talk constantly about economic issues. Signs of modernity enter the novel through the capitalist worldview of the characters, in which one can also discern the uncertainty associated with the processes of modernisation in Finnish society (see Rojola 1993).

*Alastalon salissa* is anti-narrational, since there are few external events in the novel. Instead the emphasis lies on experiments with expanding the ways of narrating the inner life of the characters. Interior monologues by all the men fill the novel, making it extremely slow-paced. The lack of events and the scarcity of outspoken dialogue led to Kilpi being characterised as the “most courageous experimentalist reformer of the epic form in our literature” as early as in 1937 (Viljanen 1937: 181).

### **From Modernism to Surrealism**

The result of the vote held by *Helsingin Sanomat* is not surprising in relation to the early reception of Kilpi’s novel. In 1933 *Alastalon salissa* received the State Award for Literature, and for the main part reviews of the novel were positive in newspapers published both in Finnish and Swedish. In several newspaper reviews of the 1930s the novel was also linked to such diverse names as Homer, Marcel Proust, the Bible and Aleksis Kivi (1832–1872), who was among the first people to write a novel in Finnish (Apo 1977: 18). One of the most important advocates of Kilpi’s novel was Elmer Diktonius, the Swedish-speaking Finnish avant-garde author whom Kilpi asked to translate the novel into Swedish (see Tidigs in Vol. 1). Because of funding difficulties and especially the “untranslatable” nature of the novel’s Finnish, the plan was never brought to fruition (Tarkka 1990).<sup>3</sup> Kilpi and Diktonius knew each other personally, but links can also be seen between their artistic works. Vesa Haapala has linked Diktonius’s novel *Janne Kubik* (1932) to Kilpi by claiming that the impact of Kilpi’s radical prose on Finnish modernism is perhaps comparable only to that of Diktonius’s novel on Swedish-language modernism in Finland (Haapala 2007: 284).

Diktonius was one of the early commentators to compare *Alastalon salissa* to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (see Diktonius 1936), and through this comparison a link was made between Kilpi’s novel and international modernist literature. It seems that Finnish literary historians have had some difficulty in situating *Alastalon salissa* within this tradition. In *Suomen Kirjallisuushistoria* (The History of

---

<sup>3</sup> A Swedish translation of the novel by Thomas Warburton was finally published in 1997.

Finnish Literature), published as late as 1999, Kilpi's novel is depicted as one of the novels published in the 1930s "that can be regarded as modernism although no proper 'stream of consciousness' was developed" (Koskela 1999: 340).<sup>4</sup> It has usually been claimed that modernist prose fiction (written in Finnish) emerged as a dominant literary style during the post-war era (e.g., Rojola 1999: 188): from this point of view Kilpi's novel is in the vanguard of Finnish modernism, a radical and revolutionary work of art ahead of its time.

Another kind of a comparison, pointing in a different direction, was made by the essayist and author Tatu Vaaskivi as early as 1937. In his long review of *Kirkolle* (To the Church), the third part of Kilpi's *Archipelago* series, Vaaskivi discusses Kilpi's authorship and style in more general terms. The review, titled "Volter Kilven ongelma" (The Problem of Volter Kilpi), links Kilpi to André Breton and Philippe Soupault and their co-creation of "the surrealist novel, whose stylistic structure resembles Volter Kilpi in a scary manner" (Vaaskivi 1937). According to Vaaskivi "the depiction of everything, the micro-photography of everything", typical of Breton, Soupault and Kilpi, produces "unfruitful curiosities". The most problematic and negative aspect in Kilpi's work is the way he uses language: "No ...! A poet is *not* justified in creating a language, which is spoken only in his books and nowhere else", Vaaskivi writes (1937; emphasis in the original; translation by KK). The only other Finnish novel Vaaskivi mentions in his review is *Harhama* (1909), the massive 1,803-page-long first novel by Irmari Rantamala, one of the pseudonyms of Algot Untola (1848–1918). To Vaaskivi both *Harhama* and Kilpi's works are the result of an obscure wish to understand new forms and previously unknown expressions. "This 'understanding' welcomed dadaism with great joy. It welcomed surrealism", Vaaskivi writes. For Vaaskivi, Kilpi appears as a surrealist who performs experiments with language based on theoretical considerations, and he doubts whether "this kind of form-sensation is real". Whereas Diktonius welcomed the international aspects of Kilpi's novel, Vaaskivi objected to the connections to the European avant-garde and its aesthetics, which in his view could not describe reality in a true sense because of their experiments with form and language. In 1938 Vaaskivi published a collection of essays with the title *Huomispäivän varjo* (Tomorrow's Shadow), in which he also discussed Italian futurism, functionalism, Neue Sachlichkeit, dada, surrealism and primitivism, among other

---

<sup>4</sup> The most recent history of Finnish-language prose, however, names Kilpi's novel as the beginning of Finnish modernism (Eskelinen 2016: 359). The remark referring to the "lack of proper stream of consciousness" presents in itself, however, a very narrow definition of modernism.

things. To Vaaskivi all these different currents were testimony to the fact that Europeans had become tired of intellectuality and longed for more primitive instincts (see Vaaskivi 1938: 24–82). To Vaaskivi the various avant-garde movements were not *aesthetic* movements but rather worldviews; they were born as pessimistic reactions in the aftermath of World War I.

Vaaskivi's objections to Kilpi and surrealism are understandable in the context of the decade. The worldwide economic depression of the 1930s, the threat of a new world war and the restlessness of Finnish society, materialising in extreme populist and political movements, also affected literature and its reception. The general atmosphere of the decade led to a resurgence of nationalism, and demands were made for authors to return to "genuine" Finnishness, realistic depictions of rural people and local history. Vaaskivi, however, was a liberal thinker and not a representative of extreme nationalism (see Pynttäre 2011). Despite the negative tones of Vaaskivi's essay, his way of juxtaposing *Alastalon salissa* with surrealism and dada is remarkable in another sense. In Finnish literary history and criticism early avant-garde literature is usually discussed only in connection with other authors writing in Swedish, or the Tulenkantajat (Torchbearers) of the 1920s, and thus the link made by Vaaskivi is important.<sup>5</sup>

The word "surrealism" comes up briefly in Pirjo Lyytikäinen's study, which is dedicated to Kilpi's novel and its narrative structures and thematic issues. Lyytikäinen's study was published in 1992, at a time when many Finnish literary critics were focusing on narratology. In Lyytikäinen's study *Alastalon salissa* is treated as a modernist novel, but one that differs greatly from Joyce's *Ulysses*, the main point of comparison to the critics of the 1930s. Lyytikäinen also discusses *Alastalon salissa* and its ways of focusing on the minutely detailed descriptions or "micro-photography", to quote Vaaskivi's words. Lyytikäinen analyses how the novel depicts the settings, furniture, ornaments and various artefacts of Alastalo's parlour and the "reality effect" these depictions achieve. Lyytikäinen sees a connection between Dutch paintings of the 1600s, their "still-life" nature and Kilpi's novel. According to Lyytikäinen (1992: 135), the realism of *Stilleben* in Kilpi's novel might be "too realistic, *surrealism*, pointing towards allegory". This short reference to surrealism is the only place

---

<sup>5</sup> A decade earlier Olavi Paavolainen, a member of Tulenkantajat, discussed various avant-garde movements in a totally different tone, almost the opposite of Vaaskivi. To Paavolainen they were mainly aesthetic movements actively trying to find new ways of artistic expression (Paavolainen 2002 [1929]: 15–120) (see Kaunonen in this section).

where Lyytikäinen connects Kilpi's novel to the avant-garde – which is understandable in the context of Lyytikäinen's study. Lyytikäinen, however, uses the word "surrealism" not in connection to the avant-garde but rather in a more literal sense: things and objects become surreal; they go beyond realistic means of description, because of the way Kilpi takes depiction of things to extremes by describing them in a detailed manner.

### **Pure Dada?**

During the 1960s many experimental and (neo-)avant-garde novels and poems were written and published in Finland. In this context it is not surprising that *Alastalon salissa* was also mentioned among avant-garde works of art, since in some literary circles authors were turning to the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century for inspiration. In an essay entitled "Loruista lettrismiin" (From Lore to Lettrism), originally published in *Parnasso*, in 1963, the surrealist Finnish poet Väinö Kirstinä concentrates on dadaist sound poetry and analyses Kurt Schwitters's poems and various other writings by dadaists. Kirstinä focuses on the auditory qualities of dadaist poetry, on the various definitions of non-sense and on describing the new methods of writing poetry introduced by the dadaists (such as bruitism, simultaneity, collage, aleatoricism). In his essay Kirstinä also discusses dada in the Finnish context, finding links between the sound poetry of the dadaists and some Finnish authors. Kirstinä declares Gunnar Björling to be the "mainstream dada" of Finland. Johan Ludvig Runeberg and Jaakko Juteini are named as "pre-dada". According to Kirstinä, "if there exists any other dada in Finland, they have been too modest to say it aloud". Right after this sentence Kirstinä, however, mentions Kilpi as an example of "other [forms of] dada" and especially his experiments with "a language of his own" (Kirstinä 1977: 179). For Kirstinä, Kilpi's language has affinities with dada because of the ways in which it concentrates on the rhythms and sounds of words, on the phonetic qualities of Finnish language. Kirstinä regards dada not as a monolithic aesthetic movement, although he stresses that dada attempts to "deform" language in order to break with prevailing aesthetic norms and find new means of literary expression.

*Alastalon salissa* and dada were linked a couple of years ago, in 2013, when the contemporary author and literary critic Laura Lindstedt (2013: 70) stated that some parts of the novel are "pure dada". Like Kirstinä, Lindstedt uses the word "dada" to refer to the ways in which Kilpi uses and abuses the Finnish language. Among Finnish contemporary authors Lindstedt is the one who has called for the need to discuss the art of prose literature not in terms of topics but

rather in terms of literary expression and language (Lindstedt 2010). The impulse to connect *Alastalon salissa* to dada both in the early 1960s and today stems also from the fact that more and more examples of experimental and avant-garde literature have been entering the Finnish literary scene. To relate older works of literature to more recent perspectives in culture and society, as well as to recent critical paradigms, means to write literary and cultural history anew.

It is fairly easy to follow Kirstinā and Lindstedt in describing the language of *Alastalon salissa* as echoing dadaist poetics, if this is understood more generally as referring to sound poetry, non-sense and an almost irrational choice of words. The following citation is untranslatable and hardly comprehensible even for a native Finnish-speaker. Some of the words resemble words written in the dialect of the south-west, or they come from Swedish, but otherwise the words might remain non-sense for a Finnish reader unfamiliar with this particular dialect or the special vocabulary of sailing.

Kielis-sliipis, kuivas tokas, triivattin-krapattin, puntattin-mönjättin: asti ko seul, ny ko muna, vaikke ole muna; vuas ko saapas, ny pita kon pata, vaikke ol pata [...] seili plikis, trossi plissi, tāk o tervat, puam o öljätt, riki tämmis, raakpuu tällis.  
(Kilpi 2014: 394)

Kilpi's language is not communicative in a traditional sense, since he avoids "conceptual" language. Kilpi has described his method of writing by saying that he himself has no chance to choose his language. He does not choose his words, but they choose him as a mediator. Language for Kilpi is energy, rising to the surface from the depths of his unconscious. As a form of mediator, Kilpi is waiting in an anxious state of mind for words, and the tension is relieved in the verbal experience of putting them down on paper (Lyytikäinen (ed.) 1993: 191). The emphasis is on the rhythm of words and sentences, the musicality of language, which is also apparent in the way Kilpi constantly uses repetition. He not only repeats words but also uses repetition at the level of syllables, thus making allusions to the metre of the epic of *Kalevala*. Sometimes his sentences sprawl over several pages. Kilpi uses neologisms but also words borrowed from the Bible and technical maritime terms belonging to sailing. He also modifies Swedish loanwords and the dialect of the south-west. His language ignores grammatical rules, and he constantly experiments with ways of making sense. By taking all these features to excess, *Alastalon salissa* offers a new dimension of language, avant-garde at its time and perhaps still today. By connecting *Alastalon salissa* to avant-garde aesthetics rather than to historical depictions of the Finnish past, a new understanding of the novel is opened up. It becomes a work of



literature filled with the playful joy of finding unconventional ways to express and experiment with the possibilities of language. Reading *Alastalon salissa* in the context of the avant-garde also affects how Finnish literary history is read; it may indicate that the history of the Finnish literary avant-garde is possibly longer than usually assumed. This history, however, still remains unwritten today.

## WORKS CITED

- Apo, Satu. 1977. "Volter Kilpi ja 1930-luvun kritiikki", *Kirjallisuudentutkijain Seuran vuosikirja* 30: 15–26.
- Diktonius, Elmer. 1936. "Volter Kilpi – en man i Åbo", *Dagens Nyheter* (18 April).
- Eskelinen, Markku. 2016. *Raukoilla rajoilla. Suomenkielisen proosakirjallisuuden historiaa*. Helsinki: Siltala.
- Haapala, Vesa. 2007. "Kokeellinen kirjallisuus ja kirjallinen vastarinta Suomessa – kiintopisteenä 1960-luku", in Sakari Katajamäki and Harri Veivo (eds.). *Kirjallisuuden avantgarde ja kokeellisuus*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus: 277–304.
- Heikkinen, Sakari. 2013. "Kustavi ja kapitalismin henki. Talous ja historia Volter Kilven *Alastalon salissa*-romaanissa", in Vesa Haapala and Juhani Sipilä (eds.). *Kiviaholinna. Suomalainen romaani*. Helsinki: Avain: 110–124.
- Kilpi, Volter. 2014. *Alastalon salissa. Kuvaus saaristosta*. 6th edn. Helsinki: Otava.
- Kirstinä, Väinö. 1977. *Kirjarovioiden valot*. Helsinki: Tammi.
- Koskela, Lasse. 1999. "Nykyajan lumous särky", in Lea Rojola (ed.). *Suomen kirjallisuushistoria*. Vol. 2. *Järkiuskosta vaistojen kapinaan*. Helsinki: SKS: 310–344.
- Kritiikin Uutiset*. 4.10.2013. "Kritiikin punnukset 2013". <https://www.kritiikinuutiset.fi/2013/10/04/kritiikin-punnukset-2013/>
- Lindstedt, Laura. 2010. "Puhutaanpas proosaa", *Nuori voima* 5: 10–14.
- . 2013. "'Kuta vietävämmin rapsii, sitä vietävämmin kutii' – sananahne *Alastalon salissa*. Seitsemän huomiota romaanitaiteesta", *Nuori voima Kritiikki* 9: 59–73.
- Lyytikäinen, Pirjo. 1992. *Mielen meri, elämän pidot. Volter Kilven Alastalon salissa*. Helsinki: SKS.
- (ed.). 1993. *Vieras, vieras minä olen kaikille. Volter Kilven ja Vilho Suomen kirjeenvaihto 1937–1939 ja muita kirjeitä*. Helsinki: SKS.
- Paavolainen, Olavi. 2002 [1929]. *Nykyaikaa etsimässä. Esseitä ja pakinoita*. 5th edn. Helsinki: Otava.
- Pynttari, Veli-Matti. 2011. "Vain tämä menettelytapa tuntuu tulokselliselta ..." *Psykoanalyysi modernin aikakauden myyttinä T. Vaaskiven kulttuurikritiikissä*. Turku: Turun yliopisto.
- Rojola, Lea. 1993. *Varmuuden vuoksi. Modernin representaatio Volter Kilven Saaristosarjassa*. Helsinki: SKS.
- . 1999. "Kirjallisten virtausten kirjo", in Lea Rojola (ed.). *Suomen kirjallisuushistoria*. Vol. 2. *Järkiuskosta vaistojen kapinaan*. Helsinki: SKS: 184–189.
- Salminen, Antti. 2008. "Avantgarden vuosisata", *niin&näin* 8: 116–117.
- Sarje, Kimmo (ed.). 2009. *Synteesi* 2 (special issue: *Avant-Garde*).
- Tarkka, Pekka. 1980. *Otavan historia. Toinen osa 1918–1940*. Helsinki: Otava.
- . 1990. "Volter Kilpi och Elmer Diktonius", *Nya Argus* 7: 166–170.
- . 1992. "Kirjallisuuden kaanon on vakaa ja vaihtuva", *Helsingin Sanomat* (6 December 1992).
- Vaaskivi, Tatu. 1937. "Volter Kilven ongelma", *Uusi Suomi* (23 May).
- . 1938. *Huomispäivän varjo. Länsimaiden tragedia*. Helsinki: Gummerus.
- Viljanen, Lauri. 1937. "Kolme mestaria", *Valvoja-Aika* 2: 180–183.