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Seekers of Secret Worlds in Finland's Early Twentieth Century Literature

Etsijä

Etsin, etsin suurta tulta
kautta kirjavan elämän.

Näin ma monta valkeaista,
liekkiä lepattavaista
ihmissielujen sysissä.
Hetken hehkuja olivat,
ajan aarnivalkeoita,
niinkuin itse ihminenkin,
punahiilien himoa
tunti ennen tummumista.

Etsin, etsin suurta tulta.
Itsekö elämä oisit
tuli suuri tummumaton,
valkea iän-ikuinen?!

L. Onerva, *Runoja*, 1908, pp. 114-115.

I L. Onerva, "The Seeker". "I was seeking, I was seeking the great fire / throughout iridescent life. / I have seen a lot of blazes, / fluttering flames / deep in human souls. / They were just the glow of the moment / will o' the wisps of the time / just like the human being him/herself, / cravings of embers / an hour before extinction. // I was seeking, I was seeking a great fire. / Would you be, life, yourself / the great inextinguishable fire / the eternal blaze?" [Unless otherwise stated, all translations of the quotes are mine].

Manalan karjat

Lasketaan laitumelle Manalan karjat...
 Saapuvat, tulvivat ihmisten ylle
 vaikeiden hetkien sakeat sarjat.

Lentävät, leijiuvat surujen perhot...
 Kukasta kukkaan, rinnasta rintaan
 painuvat halla-yön valkeat verhot.

Nousevat notkoista rauhatonten haamut:
 laulavat, loihtivat etsijän tielle
 ikävät illat ja apeat aamut.²

L. Onerva, *Särjetyt jumalat*, 1910, p. 19.

The poems by the Finnish writer L. Onerva³ show a typical fusion of seemingly contradictory elements: pessimist, Decadent moods with ecstatic overtones and hints at other worlds, be it cosmic ones, Platonic ones or the secret inner worlds of a human being. This putative discrepancy between feelings of melancholy and images of ecstatic seeking, rather typical of *fin de siècle* literature and art, acquires various forms depending on the context and artistic temperament in question. The image of a seeker appears as one of the key motifs, as it is also in the poem by L. Onerva's close friend, the

2 L. Onerva, "The Cattle of Hades": "The cattle of Hades is being let out... / Thick chains of difficult moments / Are coming, flooding over people's heads. // The butterflies of sorrow / are flying, floating ... / From flower to flower, from breast to breast / White shades of the frosty night are falling. // Ghosts of the restless ones are rising from hollows: / They are singing, conjuring up bad evenings and melancholic mornings / on the seeker's path."

3 L. Onerva, or Hilja Onerva Lehtinen (1882-1972) was a versatile Finnish author – a poet, prose writer, playwright, critic and editor, translator and cultural mediator, active mostly in bringing French art and literature to Finland. She was talented also in visual arts and music. L. Onerva divorced her first husband and in 1918, she married the Finnish composer Leevi Madetoja, with whom she had lived for more than five years by then. "L. Onerva" is not an abbreviation of her first name followed by her surname, but a pen name (meaning Lehtinen Onerva, i. e. Lehtinen's Onerva) she would use throughout her writing career.

versatile literary figure of the *fin de siècle*, Eino Leino.⁴ In his poem "Totuuden etsijä" [1912, The Seeker of Truth], Leino describes a seeker's journey throughout various religious land- and mindscapes, alluding to Indian, Jewish, Egyptian and other religions and belief systems. None of them gives the seeker a final answer, which can be found only in the depths of his/her own soul.

In this article, I give some background to the trend of *seekership* in *fin de siècle* Finnish culture and literature. Then I bring up some ways in which Leino employed *seekership* and drew inspiration from European and Finnish literary and mythical or folk traditions in his oeuvre. I juxtapose Leino's take on the subject to that of L. Onerva's, on which I elaborate most, since, to my knowledge, this aspect of her work has not yet been analysed.⁵ I refer mostly to her texts from ca. 1915 on, a period in her work which has not received recent attention. I frame L. Onerva's and Leino's literary output in the wider context of Finnish cultural life, reading their texts against the backdrop of their work in the weekly journal *Sunnuntai* (Sunday, 1915-1918).

The concept of *seekership*, which is central to my analysis, comes originally from the sociology of religion. It has been introduced into the *fin de siècle* Finnish context by Nina Kokkinen (2019) in her recent study on the manifestations of the *mélange* of esoteric, mystic and occult trends in *fin de siècle* visual art in Finland.⁶ While the concept has been used in negative ways, especially when referring to the twentieth-century seekers of religious alternatives, *seekership* can point, more or less broadly, to a form of personal religion regarding "religious experience as a valid expression of [that] uni-

4 Eino Leino (Armas Einar Leopold Lönnbohm, 1878-1926) was the most visible figure of Finnish *fin de siècle* literary life. He was an extremely prolific poet, prose writer, playwright and editor, translator and essayist, canonised already during his lifetime. He was a life-long partner and close friend of L. Onerva, though they were never married; Leino himself was married three times.

5 Leino's case has not been analysed in depth either, though there exist accounts of these aspects of his work see e.g. Gullman 1991 and numerous studies and biographies.

6 For the earlier study on the subject, see Sarajas-Korte 1966a, b. For the recent research, see Lahelma 2018.

versal religious consciousness that is based in the ultimate divine ground” (Campbell 1998: 123). Kokkinen’s research originated from the project *Seekers of the New (Esotericism and Religious Transformation in Finland during the Era of Modernisation, 1880-1940)*,⁷ whose work has been ground-breaking vis-à-vis Finland’s cultural history of the decades around the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Within the project, considerable attention has been paid to the gender aspects of Finland’s modern esotericism. Thus, paper engages with recent scholarship on Finland’s *fin de siècle* literary women and their relationship to esotericism and seekership.⁸

7 This multidisciplinary research project (2018–) explores the cultural history of esotericism in Finland from the 1880s to the 1940s. It is led by Dr Maarit Leskelä-Kärki and funded by the KONE Foundation. See <https://uudenetsijat.com/english/the-project/>. Apart from Nina Kokkinen’s dissertation, the project has produced valuable publications as thematic issues on esotericism of the journals *Historiallinen aikakauskirja* (2/2017) and *Approaching Religion* (1/2018).

8 The classic Finnish-language author Minna Canth (1844-1897) was interested in these issues beforehand (e.g. Harmainen & Leskelä-Kärki 2017: 133). Pioneering work has been done by Maarit Leskelä-Kärki’s (2006) in her research on Helmi Krohn (1871-1967), the key figure of the spiritualist movement in Finland. Krohn followed the religious, Christian line of spiritualism (keeping the basis of her Protestant, Lutheran religion, see Leskelä-Kärki 2006: 259, 266), enchanted with the idea of equality of all people, human beings’ possibility and striving for spiritual growth (ivi: 258). Marjo Kaartinen (2017, 2018) has worked on the versatile cultural personality of Vera Hjelt (1857-1947), a theosophist active also socially and politically. Mikko Kemppainen (2017) has explored the links between esotericism, namely theosophy and socialism, in the work of the writer Hilda Tihlä (1870-1944). Kersti Bergroth (1886-1975), an international and multilingual personality, was the key figure of anthroposophy in Finland during the interwar period (Mahlamäki 2017, 2018). Older research on women’s literary engagement with anthroposophy concentrated mostly on the figurations of the New Woman, shaped by the poetry of the outstanding Finland Swedish modernist, Edith Södergran (1892-1923), who produced a distinctive mixture of thoughts and images inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche and Rudolf Steiner, spiced with her personal version of Christianity (see e.g. Branch & Jones 1992).

***Fin de siècle* Finland, the Esoteric and Seekership**

Fin de siècle in Finland’s literature (and culture in general) is characterised, as in many other countries in Europe, by a “revival of interest in mysticism and mystery traditions of all kinds”, turning to the “heterodox spirituality of occultism, with its animistic sense of a living universe and broad range of teachings drawn from sources as diverse as those of mystical Christianity the Hermetic traditions of the West, and the religions of the East” (Owen 2004: 4). This “new spiritualism” or “new occultism”, offering “a spiritual alternative to religious orthodoxy” as well as to the beliefs in positivism and the strictly secular rationalism (ivi: 12) comprised a wide range of components and was intertwined with the budding psychoanalysis and interest in human subjectivity, as well as with the worship of the aesthetic and (the) art(s). For quite some writers and artists, various forms of esotericism helped to reconcile the discrepancies between the Decadent sense of ending and decay and the belief in (new) humanity and progress, at least the progress of the individual (see Pynsent 1989: 217). The idea of the New Human Being, which acquired many faces at the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, was central to theosophy and other forms of the esoteric (see Jalava 2005: 275-285).

The urge to investigate “secret worlds” was also a main preoccupation of artists in Finland: the true reality was not the visible, let alone material, world, but the worlds within or beyond. New forms of traditional religion mingled with spiritualism, theosophy and, later on, anthroposophy. However, especially when discussing the role of the occult in the work and thought of authors like L. Onerva or Eino Leino, it is more viable to speak broadly about modern Western esotericism, which comprised elements from various sources (cf. e.g. Harmainen 2010; Harmainen & Leskelä-Kärki 2017); or, as indicated above, about seekership.⁹

Fin de siècle literature and art in Finland embraced trends such as Aestheticism, Symbolism, Decadence and Art Nouveau. In the

9 About the complex relationship between concepts and terms see e.g. Harmainen & Leskelä-Kärki 2017: 132-134 and Mahlamäki & Leskelä-Kärki 2018: 2-4.

Nordic countries, these used to be grouped under the umbrella of Neoromanticism, which, until the 1990s, obscured the respective artistic and philosophical trends absorbed from abroad (see e.g. Lyytikäinen 1997); on the other hand, as Pirjo Lyytikäinen (*ibidem*) has shown, Symbolism and Decadence in Finland can be described as two sides of the same coin. In the nineteenth century, Finland existed as an Autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, not as an independent state; since the mid-nineteenth century, Finnish patriotism was based on Finnish-language culture,¹⁰ which meant the central role of folk poetry in Finnish dialects. The Finnish patriot Elias Lönnrot gave the world the Finnish “national epic”, that is, a compilation of fragments of (mostly epic) folk poetry, arranged into an epic form, showing the richness and vigour of the Finnish language, and, later on, serving to legitimise the idea of the Finnish nation by inventing its glorious past, the mythic *Heroenzeit* (see e.g. Branch 1998). The *Kalevala* (the first version, the “Old Kalevala”, was published in 1835, the “New Kalevala” in 1849) was based on a mixture of pre-Christian and Christian material, with various layers manifesting common features with nineteenth-century mystic and esoteric teachings.

In nineteenth-century Finland, Christianity meant Lutheranism (with the exception of the Orthodox minority, mainly in Eastern Finland); the Lutheran religion played a special – gendered – role in the nationalist ideology (see e.g. Sulkunen 1999; Markkola 2015). “Nordic-Lutheran semantics” was a key element of the “Nordic identity”, according to which the “Finnish self” was shaped in the nineteenth century; as Klinge points out, “only in the Nordic countries has the Lutheran church survived in the form it took during the Reformation” (Klinge 1990: 10). Esoteric trends developed in a complex

¹⁰ Previously an eastern province of the Swedish realm (from ca. the mid-twelfth century till 1809), Finland then became a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, keeping its Swedish-like social system and the Lutheran religion. The Finnish language was put on an equal footing with Swedish in 1863 and was becoming the main language of the cultural life of the Grand Duchy at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time, the Swedish speaking population, or “Finland Swedes”, began to develop a distinctive identity as a minority in Finland. In December 1917, Finland gained independence, becoming a republic.

relationship with the official Lutheran Church, complicated by the activities of various revivalist movements within it, some of which manifested elements of mysticism.¹¹ As far as Roman Catholicism was concerned, the official relationship to Catholic religion, including Catholic mysticism, was mostly negative (cf. the exclusion of “all that was Latin and Catholic” in Denmark and other Nordic countries, the direction being “away from Rome” – Klinge 1990: 16); however, around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Catholic mysticism fascinated many writers and artists and mingled with other sources of inspiration.

One of the most visible trends of seekership was theosophy. The major figure of Finnish esoteric life of the *fin de siècle*, Pekka Ervast (1875-1934), called a kind of incarnation of Finnish theosophy (Harmainen 2010: 12), joined the Scandinavian section¹² of the Theosophical Society in 1895 and, later on, became the moving spirit of developing theosophical teachings in the Finnish language. Ervast was very interested in the *Kalevala* and discussed it in his works (Ervast 1916; Carlson 2008).

¹¹ The revival, collecting and publishing of folk poetry was severely criticised by Finnish religious revivalist movements, i.e. reformed movements within the Lutheran Church which began to be organised during the nineteenth century. They were connected to Pietism (which reached the territory of Finland in the late 1600s) and to Evangelical Christianity. Some of them comprised mystical spiritualism which, later on, intermingled with mystical trends from other sources. Many revivalist trends exercised their influence within the Lutheran Church, others gathered in various outside groups (see e.g. Markkola 2015).

¹² Ervast was originally Swedish speaking (though educated in Finnish). The importance of the Swedish-language culture and its protagonists (both those in Sweden proper and those on the territory of Finland) for the spread of theosophy in Finland has to be foregrounded (see e.g. Granholm 2016a: 564). In 1907, Ervast was elected the first general secretary of the newly founded Finnish Section of the Theosophical Society, in charge of the theosophical publishing house and book trade. The Society tried to recruit its members from various social strata, including the working class, and it was one of the manifestations of the trend within modern Western esotericism of establishing public associations (e.g. Harmainen & Leskelä-Kärki 2017: 133).

The Great Tradition, the Little Tradition, and Eino Leino's Seekership

The spirit of nationalist revival, like in many other (especially “Euro-peripheric”, see Töttösy 2012) countries, was reaching its peak at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The relationship between the national project and esoteric trends (namely theosophy), was famously complex: on the one hand, esoterics were oriented internationally, but on the other hand, folk beliefs and folklore material offered them much inspiration (see e.g. Sarajas-Korte 1966: 284-287). Inspiration by folk poetry was often, though not always, filtered by the *Kalevala* and its lyric counterpart, the *Kanteletar* (1840) and it played a major role in the work of central figures in Finnish *fin de siècle* culture like Eino Leino, who called the *fin de siècle* period in Finnish art “National Neoromanticism” (*kansallinen uusromantiikka*), highlighting the importance of the national element in the “Golden Age of Finnish Art”.

For his concern with the national, fusing with the interest in a kind of (neo-)romantic mysticism, Leino has been often likened to the Irish poet and playwright W. B. Yeats, “the famous initiate” of the “secret, hermetic order of the Golden Dawn” (Owen 2004: 3). As Michael Branch (1978: 7) states,

both Leino and Yeats spoke of themselves as ‘the last Romantics’: [...] in smaller countries like Finland in the east and Ireland in the west Romanticism was predominantly the voice of national aspiration, even when these cultures were touched by the most sophisticated influences. But this is not to say that the Finnish Neo-Romanticism, with its trolls and folklore, was conservative and parochial: [Jean] Sibelius was exploring his own ideas of organic form, and [Elie] Saarinen and his colleagues were employing techniques they had acquired through extensive travel. In literature too, and especially in the work of Leino, we see a national tradition which succeeds in being both modern and universal while remaining uniquely itself.

When discussing the mingling of contemporary aesthetic trends coming to Finland mostly from Western and Southern Europe with

inspiration by the local folk tradition, Branch uses Robert Redfield's concept of “little” and “great” traditions:

[a] ‘little’ tradition of the ordinary people – folk songs and folk tales, the popular culture of the non-learned and unlettered, best known to the outside world through the songs of the *Kalevala* – and a ‘great’ tradition, which was handed down by education and which in terms of its genres and movements followed closely, even if a short step behind, what was happening elsewhere in Europe (ivi: 7-8).

In other words, as Kai Laitinen paraphrases, the little tradition “is Finland's own, national tradition, whose roots go down to folk poetry, on which it depends for subject matter”, while the great tradition, stemming “from the literature of classical antiquity and European literature, introduces new subject matter and forms” (Laitinen 1985/1994: 29).

It is easy to notice that *fin de siècle* Symbolist teachings, which draw so strongly on the “great tradition” of European cultural heritage and began to inspire Finnish thinkers and artists in the 1890s, offered a form of expression that “had a remarkable affinity with some of the poetry of the little tradition” (Branch 1978: 11). The importance of the form of Symbolism developed by the Danish poet Johannes Jørgensen at the beginning of the 1890s has often been brought up (e.g. Sarajas 1961; Sarajas 1962; Sarajas-Korte 1966a, b; Branch 1978: 11). It is a kind of pantheist mysticism, “a secret world in which the artist's or poet's soul is one with the soul of nature” (Branch 1979: 11). Branch foregrounds how pantheist Symbolist theory appeared, in a way, parallel to “the ancient Finnish concepts of an existence in which the living and the dead were part of the same whole, interdependent and able to communicate through the medium of the shaman” (ibidem). The richness of symbols and metaphors, accumulated in folk poetry and changing its ritual functions throughout maybe thousands of years, also provided fertile soil for the *fin de siècle* pursuits of Finnish artists and writers.

The culmination of these pursuits in literature written in Finnish was definitely Leino's collection of poems, *Helkavirsiä* (*Whitsongs*, 1903), written in the form of Finnish folk poetry (an unrhymed,

non-strophic metre reminding one of trochaic tetrameter, often referred to as the “Kalevala metre”). Using the backdrop of folk customs performed at Whitsun (*helka*), based on old rites for ensuring fertility and given Christian meaning much later, Leino picked up a framework which, as such, comprised many layers of pre-Christian and Christian rituals. Within this framework, he composed six ballads and six legends, using a wide range of elements from the Baltic-Finnish folk poetry, Classical Antiquity, medieval legends and, of course, much inspiration from the “great tradition”, ranging from Dante (whose *Divine Comedy* came out in Leino’s translation in 1912) to *fin de siècle* authors, notably Friedrich Nietzsche (see e.g. Tanner 1960: 71-75; Peltonen 1975; Branch 1978; Oksala 1986, esp. 86-93). The omnipresent theme of death and the Otherworld is combined with the search for ultimate knowledge; responsibility towards both the living beloved and dead ancestors; guilt, purification and salvation. All this shows Leino’s strong preoccupation with these issues, his versatile kind of seekership.

Leino continued his pursuit by exploring the world of the *Kalevala*, as well as his knowledge of the “great tradition”, religious and belief systems in various parts of the world; with W. B. Yeats, he shared an interest in Indian and Bengali culture. In 1917, he translated Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali* with the help of L. Onerva, from the very version edited by Yeats. Two years earlier, also with L. Onerva, Leino founded the short-lived journal *Sunnuntai* which was meant to unite people regardless their political convictions or religious beliefs (*Sunnuntai* 2015, 5.12).¹³ It would be exaggeration to label it a “theosophical journal”, but the inclination to give space to texts about the esoteric in the broad sense of the word, sometimes directly theosophical and often with the emphasis on the concept of seekership, is clear (cf. Kunnas 1972: 302).

Sunnuntai: Theosophy and Seekership

The importance of seekership for *Sunnuntai* was emphasised in Leino’s first editorial, “Lukijalle” (To the reader, Leino 1915), in which he talks about the importance of personality that is “internally seeking and developing in tune with this process of seeking”. Leino would emphasise the need to spread knowledge, as popular enlightenment was of vital importance for the whole nation (here, we can see the tradition of Finnish nation-building rhetoric, where education and popular enlightenment was central), repeatedly highlighting the principle of seeking, that is, the personal choice people should have vis-à-vis their spiritual and intellectual development. The aim of the journal was to promote independent thinking and the personal dignity that everybody has to find on his or her own: *Sunnuntai* was to help its readers, regardless of their social status, in their search for truth (see Pollari 2006: 22).

The journal dealt with a very broad range of topics from religion to politics and culture, dedicating considerable space to literature, both that based on the “great tradition” as Shakespeare’s work and the “little tradition”, or, to be more precise, the fusion of both in the *Kalevala*.¹⁴ Leino’s lack of orthodoxy vis-à-vis various forms of esotericism is clear from his writings, in which he emphasises the common ground of various religions and beliefs. What was also clear, however, was the critical gaze on the Lutheran Church: the texts in *Sunnuntai* refuse the official church authority, emphasising the importance of the personal spiritual search (see *ivi*: 8, 17, 23).

As a close collaborator and friend, in *Sunnuntai* and in general, L. Onerva witnessed the development of Leino’s seekership. It has been pointed out that in her biography of Leino (*Eino Leino: Runoilija ja ihminen*, Eino Leino: A Poet and A Human Being, 1932), she dismisses his possible involvement in theosophy rather lightly (e.g. saying that “theosophical influence on Leino was definitely exaggerated”; L. Onerva 1932/1979: 470), which has influenced some later

¹³ The journal *Sunnuntai* has been recently digitised and is available in the Digital Collections of the National Library of Finland at <https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/aika-kausititles/fk01162?display=THUMB&year=1915>.

¹⁴ At the very beginning of the first issue of *Sunnuntai* in 1917, we find Leino’s long review of Pekka Ervast’s book *Kalevalan avain* (*The Key to the Kalevala*, 1916) – see Leino 1917.

interpretations of both Leino's personality and his work (see e.g. Harmainen 2010:12).¹⁵ However, she mentions various of Leino's ideas close to theosophical teachings. In summer 1915, Leino was pondering art and poetry, claiming to have understood "what poetry is": it is "great and sweet", it is the same as "swarming power" and "autocratic governing".¹⁶ The concept of literature or poetry as a mystic force is very much in tune with special relationship between literature and the occult, which so many *fin de siècle* artists and writers believed in, "arcane knowledge" being "held within texts, and words" taking on "new power when used as incantations that connect the speaker or reader with the mystical or magical entities or realms" (Condé & Gosling 2018: vi; Mantrant 2018). For Leino, "poetry is sacred" and "the sacred means the same as poetry" (L. Onerva 1932/1979: 453).¹⁷

L. Onerva (ivi: 452) stresses the importance of the idea of unity for Leino during the *Sunnuntai* period. According to her, in addition to all "practical reasons" (e.g. Leino's personal ties to Pekka Ervast), Leino considered theosophy a "spiritual force", which comprised the idea of unity and merging of all people, tolerance and will to brotherhood, striving for community and unity with deity, free of all church impetuosity. L. Onerva (ibidem) emphasises that in 1915, Leino was not interested in polemics any more, he wanted to construct, spread peace and understanding, create harmony and unite all people regardless their differences, preach the gospel of Enlight-

15 Harmainen (2010: 12) points out that while E. Gullman (1991) and E. Mustonen have emphasised Leino's proximity to theosophy, scholars like A. Peltonen and M.-L. Kunnas follow L. Onerva's dismissive stance. Also Leino's most recent biographer, Panu Rajala (2017: 351-373), tends to explain Leino's involvement with theosophy and the poet's role in *Sunnuntai* by other than ideological reasons, emphasising Leino's disenchantment with both Finnish and international politics and his personal ties with the journal's publisher and with Pekka Ervast; however, Rajala (2017: 360) brings up Leino's life-long interest in mysticism and "secret worlds", visions and mirages.

16 "... suuri ja suloinen ...", "... voimien vyöryttäminen", "...itsevaltainen hallitseminen" (L. Onerva 1932/1979: 451: quoted from E. Leino's letter to L. Onerva 22 August 1915).

17 "Runous on pyhä ja pyhä on samaa kuin runous."

enment and goodness; in the first issue of *Sunnuntai*, Leino writes about his belief in humankind. Later on, he dismisses all dualism: "[s]pirit and matter, depth and height, the fundament of all existence and superficial phenomena, divine and human unite. On the basis of fantasy, mysticism, poetry and religion" according to L. Onerva (1932/1979: 465).¹⁸

The *Sunnuntai* period was very fruitful for both Leino and L. Onerva (cf. 1932/1979: 466; Nieminen 1982: 179-191). Leino was writing his second volume of *Helkavirsiä* (Whitsongs II, 1916), some of which he published first in *Sunnuntai*. In the poems, Leino creates a dream world, where the protagonists, according to L. Onerva, resemble visions, abstractions and concepts rather than people. Dualism and all kinds of divisions appear as negative, and as in the *Kalevala*, salvation comes from the omniscient son of Marjatta (a Finnish folk version of the Virgin Mary), the most perfect of all humans. All figures appear as a means of understanding the eternal values of the universe. The concepts of power and force became more spiritual, circulating in all creation; the defiance of the individual opens into cosmic ecstasy (ibidem). Leino's philosophical system had retained features of Nietzschean defiance, but became more mystical, and, obviously, more influenced by theosophical thought. L. Onerva (ivi: 470) points out, a bit redundantly, that Leino "was neither a theosophical theoretician nor had he studied theosophy from books",¹⁹ going on to argue (ivi: 470-471) that Leino's ideas were closest to what Albert Einstein called "cosmic religion" in his article "Religion and Science" (1930).

Naturally, what L. Onerva, his biographer, close friend and beloved, wrote about Leino's relationship to theosophy and the esoteric, as well as about his religious and spiritual seekership in general, is her interpretation of Leino's work and its (personal and cultural) context. As usual in biographies, *Eino Leino* tends to tell us as much about the biographer as the subject, bringing us back to the role of these ideas and themes in L. Onerva's own creative work. Reetta

18 "Henki ja aine, syvyys ja korkeus, jumalainen ja inhimillinen yhtyvät. Fantasian, mystiikan, runouden ja uskonnon pohjalta."

19 "Hän ei ole mikään teosofinen teoreetikko eikä kirjanoppinut."

Nieminen (1982: 179) aptly sums up both Leino's and L. Onerva's main reason for their involvement with theosophy: the theosophists' emphasis on tolerance, striving for unity between people with the divine, brotherhood and peace. As Nieminen argues (*ibidem*), for them, theosophy as a movement meant a general proclamation of religious liberalism and invocation of inner mystical forces.

However, instead of speculating about the "true" nature of the writers' involvement with theosophy and its role in Leino's and L. Onerva's seekership, or critically analysing L. Onerva's interpretations of Leino's oeuvre and his engagement with theosophy, I next look at her own work in terms of a broad understanding of seekership.

L. Onerva – Woman as Seeker

L. Onerva²⁰ began her career as a poet (with a collection called *Sekasointuja*, Discords, in 1904, followed by *Runoja*, Poems, in 1908), with a Symbolist and Decadent aesthetic and a strong influence of Nietzscheanism. As shown at the beginning of this article, in her early poems, an ecstatic and blissful tone intermingled with a pessimist and Decadent mood; colourful images of exotic landscapes with those of melancholy, darkness, chill and loneliness which the human being is destined to. All this was accompanied with a frequent motif of *carpe diem*: a human being is just a shooting star, as in the poem "Ihminen" (Human Being, L. Onerva 1910). In her third collection of poems, the gods are broken, wrecked, fragmented, as suggested by the title of the collection ("Särjetyt jumalat", Broken Gods); nevertheless, God is often addressed and invoked. In all collections, most poems orbit around a "universal" human being, often a seeker whose gender is unknown to the reader (Finnish has no grammatical gender, so the gender of the lyrical I or the protagonist of the

20 For a long time, literary historians presented L. Onerva as an epigone of her male counterparts. She was first "rediscovered" as a poet, and since the Second World War, her work has been studied and interpreted mostly vis-à-vis Finnish Decadence and Nietzscheanism; in recent decades, gender-conscious analysis has prevailed, mainly focusing on the novel *Mirdja*. See e.g. Lappalainen 1992; Rojola 1992; Lyytikäinen 1997; Parente-Čapková e.g. 2014. For L. Onerva's reception, see Parente-Čapková 2014: 27-34.

text is often not expressed). However, we find poems where the speaking subject, or the person spoken to, is clearly a woman: "Te naiset" (You Women) in *Sekasointuja* (L. Onerva 1904: 11-12); the Biblical Mary Magdalene in *Runoja* (L. Onerva 1908: 69-71); Geisha in the eponymous long poem which forms an entire section of *Särjetyt jumalat* (L. Onerva 1910: 67-87). The images, sometimes even clichés, evoked by the figures of "sinful" women like Mary Magdalene or the Geisha alternate with those where female angst acquires existential dimensions, often explicitly gendered like when the ageing Geisha, searching for her place in the world, "sings" about the feelings of sorrow and shame provoked by the image of her old, decaying dancing body. Levels of irony, evident in the poem "Te naiset", give way to deep melancholy in "Geisha".

Similarly dissonant ways of seeking are to be found in L. Onerva's prose works. She produced a series of these around 1910: several collections of short stories and two novels, *Mirdja* (1908) and *Inari* (1913). The author deals with "mysteries" and "secrets" of woman and womanhood within the intertextual framework of (mostly Decadent) female figures and roles, into which the protagonists style themselves, or are styled by men. At the same time, she constructs, explores and questions various figurations of androgyny, easily evoking the mystic and esoteric teachings with their fantasies of androgyny and the "third sex". The interest in figurations of androgyny is evident mostly in *Mirdja*, but also in L. Onerva's early short story "Fantasist" ("Kuvittelija" from *Murtoviivoja*, Broken Lines, 1909). Here, an unconventional man, Tuulos, who lives in his own world and sees only things relevant to that world, finds the ideal of absolute beauty and human perfection in an androgynous creature he fantasises for himself, constructing a secret realm impossible for the surrounding society to understand.²¹

L. Onerva's interest in various paths of esotericism mingles with that in Catholicism, which manifested itself strongly already in her novel

21 L. Onerva uses the word "hermafrodiitti" in Finnish, since it was the only word available at the early twentieth century; the word "androgyni" was introduced much later. For more analysis of the concept of androgyny in L. Onerva's early work, see Parente-Čapková 2001.

Mirdja. The author's curiosity about Catholicism was, partly, motivated by fascination with its aesthetic aspect (cf. Condé & Gosling 2018: vii; Hanson 1997). She absorbed this during her travels in France and Italy during the first and second decades of the twentieth century, stimulated by her mentor and university teacher Yrjö Hirn²² and the enchantment with Catholic mysticism of many Decadent writers like Huysmans or Verlaine. When seeking a female deity, which Protestant Christians lacked, L. Onerva was captivated by the Catholic cult of sacred womanhood. In the novel *Mirdja*, the protagonist, highly critical of the institution of the Lutheran Church, searches for her mother and the secrets of mystic motherhood, both on the very earthly level, and through art and spirituality. This search leads her to visit Catholic churches during her travels abroad.

They say that Catholicism is the religion of the broken. I don't know, but the fact that the church door is never closed to the exhausted wanderer feels wonderful. // Here I am standing at the doorway and staring at the shining wax candles and the glinting gold, devoted to God. // I would also like to kneel down in front of the crucified and, by weeping, convert the emptiness of my life into infinite, mysterious religious contents... But I can't. // I am standing aloof, and I there is just one thing I would like to ask the silent saints in the church... // Mother of God, have you ever seen my mother among those kneeling in front of you? (L. Onerva 1908/1956: 151).²³

As a Decadent subject, *Mirdja* is destined to remain aloof, never able to indulge in spiritual ecstasy. At the end of her search, *Mirdja* thinks

22 In 1909, Hirn, a versatile cultural personality, essayist and diplomat, published his work *Det heliga skrinet: studier i den katolska kyrkans poesi och konst* (The Holy Shrine: Studies in the Poetry and Art of the Catholic Church).

23 "Sanotaan että katolilaisuus on särkyneiden uskonto. Minä en tiedä, mutta minusta tuntuu ihanalta, ettei kirkon ovi koskaan ole suljettuna väsyneeltä vaeltajalta. // Tässä minä nyt seison ovensuussa ja tuijotan lekottaviin vahakynntilöihin ja välkehtelevään, Jumalalle vihittyyn kultaan... // Minäkin soisin voivani polvistua ristiinnaulittun edessä ja itkeä siinä elämäni tyhjyyden uskonnon äärettömäksi, salaperäiseksi sisällöksi... Mutta minä en voi. // Minä seison syrjällä, ja minulla on ainoastaan yksi asia, jota tahtoisin kysyä kirkon hiljaisilta pyhymyksiltä... // Jumalan äiti, oletko koskaan nähnyt minun äitiäni polvistuviesi joukossa?"

she has found her deity in the icon of suffering motherhood, embodied in the figure of an old woman, mother of a criminal. *Mirdja* screams at the people around: "Don't you see God in front of you? Look at the suffering human being! Look at the holy mother! Kneel down, people! What you see is God..."²⁴ Here, however, *Mirdja* is already mad and eventually, she goes astray and her seekership ends tragically in the bog.

While, as mentioned earlier, L. Onerva's early work has been researched during the last few decades, her later works have not been studied much. In these texts (both prose and poetry from the *Sunnuntai* period and later), it is possible to trace the development of L. Onerva's religious and spiritual seekership. The pronouncedly Decadent themes and the oneiric, fragmentary style, typical of *Mirdja*, give way to more traditional narrative strategies, evident mostly in L. Onerva's short prose. The interest in the figure of the Virgin Mary continues, but in the form of a legend, namely in the collection *Neitsyt Maarian lahja ynnä muita legendoja* (The Virgin Mary's Gift and Other Legends, 1918). In it, a mother promises the Virgin one of her twin sons and she expects the Virgin to take the brave knight, who is ready to spread Christianity with a sword. However, the Virgin takes the other young man, a loving, kind person, who sacrifices his life in order to save others, making his brother understand that "the power of good is greater than evil and love is stronger than armies" (L. Onerva 1918a).²⁵ The rather anachronistic pacifist tone permeating the story was, however, typical of L. Onerva's work after the Finnish Civil War. In her writings vis-à-vis the national conflict of 1918, she repeatedly emphasised the necessity of ideals and the danger of a purely materialist world view (e.g. L. Onerva 1919).²⁶

24 "Ettekö näe Jumalaa edessäänne? Katsokaa kärsinyttä ihmistä! Katsokaa pyhää äitiä! Polvistukaa, kansa! Te näette Jumalan..."

25 "Niin on hyvyiden voima sittenkin suurempi kuin pahuus ja rakkaus väkevämpi kuin sotajoukot!"

26 Though L. Onerva considered some social developments during the First World War and February Revolution in Russia positive for women and their possible "liberation", she was very critical of the later developments (see L. Onerva 1917a, b; see also Parente-Čapková 2013). After the shock of the Civil War, she refused "militarism" and even said it was necessary to listen to the teachings of

In her legends, fables and other stories, L. Onerva made use mostly of the topics and motifs of the “great” tradition, drawing inspiration from the Bible, as suggested by the title of her subsequent collection of prose pieces. In *Jerusalem suutari ynnä muita tarukuvia* (The Cobbler of Jerusalem and Other Mythical Tales, 1921), the character of the cobbler acquires the features of the wanderer, a figure typical of esoteric art, whose importance has been brought up by Nina Kokkinen (2019). The “little” tradition never dominated L. Onerva’s writings, though it was definitely present there – mostly in the form of the “Kalevala metre”, folklore motifs (often from lyrical folk poetry, see Parente-Čapková 2016) and expressions like *Manala* (denoting the realm of the dead, the Otherworld or Underworld in the Finnish mythology, however, also used for other mythical underworlds, as a translation of Hades).

The predominantly gendered point of view diminishes in L. Onerva’s later work, especially compared to her earlier prose works. However, the concern with gender does not disappear by any means: in *Jerusalem suutari*, we find a tale called “Naisen arvoitus” (“The Enigma of Woman”). In it, the Grim Reaper visits a hermit sage Ben Hiram and wants to collect him unless he finds a person willing to die on his behalf. The hermit is desperate to find somebody, since he wants, at any cost, to complete his life work by unravelling the ultimate secret, the enigma of woman. Nobody is ready for such sacrifice, since he has lived a selfish life, “thinking only of himself and his work” (L. Onerva 1921: 188).²⁷ Eventually, a young person turns up and after some time, the hermit sage discovers that it is a young woman, a daughter of a friend of his, called Isabel. The sage, who “has always dreaded woman” (ivi: 190),²⁸ understands, that “among great men, there is nobody to match her” (ivi: 191).²⁹ They fall in love and Death spares them, saying: “Woman steps in and erases the

the (Lutheran) Church (L. Onerva 1918b). Her pacifism grew even stronger in the 1920s, when she unsuccessfully attempted, with some other cultural personalities, to found the Finnish section of the Clarté movement in 1926.

27 “Olen aina ajatellut vain itseäni ja omaa työtäni.”

28 “Minä olen aina kammoksunut naista...”

29 “Ei ole suurten miesten joukossa ainoatakaan sinun vertaistasi.”

whole enigma. [...] After all, there would be, perhaps, an enigma to solve, but a man can never ever solve it!” (ivi: 192-193).³⁰ Ironising the motif of the hermit sage, so important for various mystical traditions, L. Onerva ironises also the idea or cliché of the enigma of woman. The author’s multi-layered irony, typical of her oeuvre (see Parente-Čapková 2019) is, as elsewhere, juxtaposed and intermingled with pathos.

Irony and satire are employed within L. Onerva’s concern with unmasking hypocrisy of “defenders of peace”, who struggle for peace by means of arms races (e.g. the poem “Rauhan ystävä”, Friend of Peace, from *Sielujen sota*, War of Souls, L. Onerva 1925: 125).³¹ L. Onerva’s texts from the 1920s onwards (from the 1930s, she produced mostly poetry) show how her seekership continued to develop. At times, the concern with opposing any kind of violence in the name of humanism leads to pessimist conclusions, especially vis-à-vis the warnings about modern man’s enormous, foolish pride, his feeling of almightiness in harnessing natural forces and winning wars (e.g. the poem “Uskon rajat”, The Limits of Faith, ivi: 135-136). However, the optimistic tone finally prevails, as shown by the urge to seek the “veiled truth” in the eponymous poem (ivi: 143-144), exploring the favourite theosophical motif. For L. Onerva, though it is impossible to ever find this truth, though the veil of secret and mystery can never be lifted, seekership itself remains the highest goal and the proximity, premonition and inkling of it the highest award. This invocation of the “veiled one”, of the “mute altarpiece” is both “the fire of destruction” and eternal bliss. Though this image is already far from the *fin de siècle* “playful veilings and unveilings of truth” typical of Decadent authors (Mantrant 2018), it still evokes remnants of the Symbolist, Mallarméan poetics of suggestion, consisting not of naming and revealing, but only of suggesting (*suggérer*) the object (see e.g. Acquisto 2013).

30 “Nainen tulee itse ja pyyhkii pois koko kysymyksen. [...] Siinä olisi ehkä sittenkin joku arvoitus ratkaistavana, mutta mies ei sitä ainakaan ikinä ratkaise!”

31 Though L. Onerva took the side of the “White” winners in the Finnish Civil War, here, she foregrounds the absurdity of keeping peace by means of keeping up the army. In the young Republic of Finland, such a stance was rather a dissident one.

Conclusions

Like most other *fin de siècle* writers and artists, L. Onerva and Eino Leino never adopted any definite form of theosophical or other teachings (cf. Kokkinen 2019, 372³²), though theosophy was certainly a source of inspiration. What is more pertinent is a general concern with seekership, focusing on the necessity of personal development and active search for truth – though the truth will never reveal her secret, the process of seeking it is the very goal of human endeavours. In the work of L. Onerva and Leino, as in that of so many others, the esoteric stimuli channelled into the concept of seekership can never be separated from other sources of inspiration: artistic currents such as Symbolism and Decadence, the “little” and “great” traditions, and other philosophies.³³ While for Leino, Finnish folk poetry and the *Kalevala* was most important source, L. Onerva developed a different “personal mythology”, inspired mainly by the “great” tradition, though the “little” one was present in her work on the level of motifs, expressions and formal features.

The Lutheran Church as an institution was severely criticised by both L. Onerva and Leino, but Christianity understood in an unorthodox way mostly remained the basis of their spiritual search. In L. Onerva’s work, the dream about the “New Human Being”, which was, at the beginning of her career, marked by variations on the Nietzschean Overman in the figure of woman, developed into a deep concern with humankind as a whole, with strong pacifist overtones, sometimes in tension with the nationalist discourse. The dream about the New Human Being as a New Woman develops according to these lines, the perspective of the female subject remaining author’s concern. In this way, L. Onerva’s engagement with the spiritual seekership manifests interesting commonalities and

32 Kokkinen (2019) arrives at similar conclusions when analysing the work of Finland’s *fin de siècle* visual artists Akseli Gallén-Kallela, Pekka Halonen and Hugo Simberg.

33 A central one would be F. Nietzsche, mentioned earlier and key for both Leino and L. Onerva. The analysis of their dialogue with Nietzsche within the framework of esoteric inspirations would be more than relevant, but it is beyond the scope of this article.

differences with her female contemporaries both in Finland and abroad – something to be explored in a separate study.

Humankind’s arrogant claims to omnipotence became the main target of irony in L. Onerva’s work from the 1920s on. In her later texts, the poetics of discord and dissonance developed into a tension between bitter scepticism and optimism. The ideas of eternal commitment to perennial seekership resonate throughout her posthumously published later poems; one of the recurrent themes is eternal fascination with the “greatness” and “sweetness” of poetry (see L. Onerva 2004, 2005).

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