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Notes from the Suburb.
The Image of Helsinki in the works by Kjell Westö

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*Min skomakare såg att sulorna var slitna, men jag har
inte vandrat färdigt¹.*

*When the soul of a man is born in this country
there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight.
You talk to me about nationality, language, religion.
I shall try to fly by those nets².*

¹ “My shoemaker saw that my soles were consumed, but I have not stopped wandering yet” (Westö, 1988 : 62).
All translations are mine except when explicitly mentioned.

² Joyce, 2000 : 220.

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Problem statement and work's structure.

The representation of the city in literature is a very old topic. Throughout history writers have described cities in a remote past, portrayed imaginary cities of the future or pictured the city where they had grown up in or where they had lived in a particular moment. My first concern, when I first started to engage myself in urban studies in literature, was to limit my analysis to that type of representation which basically deals with modern cities (I will return later to the adjective “modern”) “recreated” from an autobiographical perspective. This chronological and thematic delimitation however was only one part of the problem, because, as soon as someone approaches the study of any city, it seems clear that its essence is very hard – almost impossible – to grasp, because of the persistently mutable character of the urban environment.

Cities change constantly, with a speed and with an intensity that vary from time to time and from place to place; they are like organisms that grow bigger or shrink, expand or simply modify, but there is no urban agglomerate that stays the same forever. This particular characteristic of the city as the place of change *par excellence* sets an unavoidable problem, namely that no *physical* evidence remains of the urban environment's multiple transformations. On the other hand, whenever a writer tries to represent a certain urban environment, he or she can recreate, through his or her memories, a section of an urban space which has changed or has been lost³. This is the case, for example, of *Berlin Childhood about 1900* by Walter Benjamin, with which I opened my work. This book consists of a group of short texts where the author recalls some episodes of his childhood in the German capital at the beginning of the century, thus developing a dichotomy between his personal memories of these events and the city where they took place. Benjamin's book offers an excellent example of what I defined the representation of the city as an “invisible palimpsest”, that is to say the possibility to consider the city as a stratification of which no visible trace has remained but that a writer can recreate through the use of memories. This process of reconstruction brings together an “inner look” (the personal experience of the writer in the urban environment) and an “outer look” (the description of the city as it was in a particular time), producing a picture that is inescapably tied to a precise chronotope and to a particular moment in the writer's lifetime.

³ Of course, writers can also make use of other tools, such as paintings, photos or older literary descriptions. Nevertheless, this is more the case of historical novels and has no particular relevance for our study.

In chapter II, *Exploring the city*, after discussing the concept of the invisible palimpsest, I have outlined the critical discourse about modern city in the western world from different perspectives. First, I exposed some of the most important contributions to the sociological debate about the urban environment at the dawn of the Twentieth century such as *The City* by Max Weber and *The Metropolis and Mental life* by Georg Simmel. Second, I exposed the representation of urban life in writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire and Dostoyevsky, following the critical discourse elaborated by Marshall Berman. Finally, after an excursus of how the city is depicted in modernism, I showed how semiologists like Barthes and writers like Italo Calvino and Hélène Cixous have analyzed the urban space emphasizing its transient, fugitive nature.

In chapter III, *Exploring Helsinki*, I have outlined the history of Finland and of its capital, trying not to dwell too much on historical records, but highlighting instead the composite characteristic of its past. After centuries as a province of the Swedish kingdom, Finland became a Russian Grand Duchy at the beginning of the Nineteenth century, and finally became independent on 6th of December 1917. Of course, this historical development has affected Finland's national identity, especially what matters the relationship between the Swedish-speaking minority and the Finnish-Speaking majority.

In chapter IV, I started to analyze the early works of Kjell Westö, focusing on his three collections of poems and his second book of short stories, *Fallet Bruus*. In chapter V, instead, I focused on his first two novels, *Drakarna över Helsingfors* and *Vådan av att vara Skrake*. My research primarily aims at showing how the image of Helsinki in this selection of Westö's works reflects the personal experience of the writer in the urban environment (especially during his childhood and youth) as much as the social, economical and cultural developments of the country during the second half of the Twentieth century. As a consequence, the investigation in the invisible palimpsest of the Finnish capital stretches approximately over fifty years, from the post-war reconstruction until the Nineties, known in Finland as the "lame years". My analysis basically rests on two pillars: on the one hand, I tried to show how the suburbs of Helsinki can be considered the place where post-war "modernity" unfolds in Finland, in a moment when the country, after years of wars and a recent turbulent past, definitely opens up to capitalism. On the other, I tried to analyze the relationship between the Finnish-speaking majority and the Swedish-speaking minority questioning the current status quo that acknowledges to the two groups the same official character, but implicitly sets them one against the other. My goal has been to show how the characteristic of being *official* sets in motion a mechanism which aims at

creating a situation of mutual respect, but that ultimately only separates communities and may lead to conflicts.

1.2. Methodology and critical instruments.

It is very difficult to state an exact date for the beginning of the critical debate about the representation of the city in literature. At least in Europe, this tradition usually refers to the evolution of the urban environment during the industrial revolution, when a massive phenomenon of urbanization brought people from the countryside towards the cities, initiating a process which has not yet come to an end. It seems evident, therefore, that the rise of the modern city proceeds at the same pace with the development of the industrial economical model.

In the field of literature, a fundamental contribution to the critical debate regarding the city is represented by the works of Walter Benjamin about Paris during the Nineteenth century. Benjamin's definition of Paris as the capital of modernity, that is to say the centre of radical social transformations, unprecedented technical progresses and the creation of a urban environment that became – with the boulevards – the *model* itself of the modern city, represents an ineludible starting point for any reflection about this topic.

Although writers like Dickens in Great Britain and the French realists already depicted the transformation of the urban environment following the industrial revolution, most of the critics (Lehan, Berman, Bradbury and McFarlane) almost unanimously assert that it is with Modernism – that is to say, starting with the second half of the Nineteenth century – that the city imposed itself in western literature. With novels such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Knut Hamsun's *Sult* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from the underground*, just to name a few, the modern city breaks into the literary canon. Generally, it is described as a place that exercises a force of attraction and repulsion. On the one hand, the city attracts people looking for work and a better life, is the centre of the culture and the political activities; on the other, it presents more difficult living conditions, alienation and an impact on the human mind which is sometimes overwhelming. In the analysis of the representation of the urban space in literature, which occupies the central part of the first chapter, I have focused on the tradition that goes from Edgar Allan Poe to Charles Baudelaire and Dostoyevsky. The critical instrument that I have adopted to investigate this tradition is the excellent essay by Marshall Berman *All that is solid melts into air*. Starting with a Marxist reading of Goethe's *Faust*, Berman claims that capitalism is animated by a "innovative self-destruction", a powerful means that initially liberates positive energies and permits great achievements, but later develops an unstoppable mechanism that

constantly requires the replacement of what has been created with something else, in a process of continuous production and consumption. In his literary analysis, Berman detects three *loci deputati* that epitomize the unfolding of modernity in different countries: the Parisian boulevard of Baudelaire, the Nevsky Prospect as described by Dostoyevsky in *Notes from the underground* and the American expressway as the symbol of post-war capitalism in the United States (and criticized by Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*).

In my analysis of Westö's works I tried to demonstrate, keeping in mind Berman's theory, that it is possible to detect a specific place in the urban environment of Helsinki that best epitomizes the economical transformations, the social conflicts and the cultural contrapositions of the post-war years, namely the *suburb*. Most of the works of Westö are in fact set in the suburb of Munksnejden which, during the Sixties and the Seventies, used to host people coming from different parts of the country and belonging to different social classes. Low-class workers, middle-class families, upper-middle-class graduate students; rampant capitalists and radical communists: they all lived next door with each other and shared the same slice of urban texture. In my analysis of *Drakarna över Helsingfors* I have also tried to underscore how the post-war Finnish bourgeoisie largely embodies the "innovative self-destruction" described by Berman.

The suburb of Munksnejden has also another peculiarity, namely that it becomes the stage of the linguistic conflict between the Swedish-speaking minority and the Finnish-speaking majority. Kjell Westö, who belongs to the former but has an excellent command of Finnish (he regularly writes in Finnish on newspapers and magazines), often describes in his texts how, as a child and as an adolescent, he was mobbed by the older guys of the suburb for being an "hurri" (the negative definition of members of the Swedish-speaking minority). This gave me the possibility to conduct a reflection about the role of language as a social marker and as a powerful political means to impose a *norm*. Starting with Derrida's thesis about the language of the master as discussed in *Monolingualism of the Other* and with Pierre Bourdieu's theory about the political power of the official language and its intimately imposing nature, I have tried to develop a different mode to look at the relationship between Swedish and Finnish. Swedish, once the "language of the master" gradually lost its primate after the national independence, although it still retains the status of official language. In my reflection about the norm, I argue that the *official status* sometimes so proudly boasted by the Swedish-speaking community is actually a double-edged weapon that, on the one hand, gives to the community a certain set of rights, but on the other marks a difference which places the community automatically outside the norm. The central power, thus, acknowledges a group as a

“minority”, which surely obtains some benefits, but is also labeled with something that makes it easily recognizable. The result of this process is that very often – if not always – the minority closes inside itself and turns into a “counter-norm” that ends up replicating the same way of thinking of the norm that it wanted to change. The two communities, ultimately, enjoy the same rights. They are equal, but also equally isolated.

Going on with my research I noticed how this dynamic could be also applied to other social constructions, such as patriarchy, and – as I tried to show with my analysis of *Drakarna över Helsingfors* and *Vådan av att vara Skrake* – to the social hierarchy and cultural phenomena.

1.3. Kjell Westö’s biographical profile.

Kjell Westö was born in Helsinki on the 6th of August 1961. His father was born in Ostrobothnia and moved to Helsinki after the war to study economy. Also his mother came originally from Tammerfors and had moved to the capital during the Fifties. In his autobiographical essay *Har aldrig hittat hem* (I have never found home, 2009), Westö describes his family tree and emphasizes his split social background. On his father side, he notes, there was a past of poverty and economical hardship. His grandmother had raised Westö’s father alone. After the war, his relatives had left the small village of Permo and moved to Jakobstad. “Farmor Dagny, Sigurds och Lisbeths äldre syster bodde i en lägenhet i ett nybyggt hus hon också, på Skutnäsgratan i Jakobstad. (...) Farmor hade uppfostrat pappa ensam, de hade varit fattiga.”⁴ (Westö, 2009 : 232). On his mother’s side, instead, the economical situation and the social belonging was different. The Tammerfors relatives had a past rooted in the first industrial developments in the country and were still well off:

På mödernet var det annorlunda. Det geografiska navet för min mammas familj var Tammerfors. Min mormors far Hugo Sandbacka hade lämnat hemorten Nedervetil, och kort efter inbördeskriget hade han landat i “Finlands Manchester” och grundat läderfabriken ute i Epilä. När jag var barn var fabriken redan nerlagd, och min mormor Roald med familj hade tillfälligt flyttat från Tammerfors⁵. (Westö, 2009 : 232-233).

In the light of his novels, which often describe family sagas during the Twentieth century, Westö’s social background is not at all irrelevant. Many of the characteristics of his

⁴ “My granny Dagny, Sigurd’s and Lisbeth’s older sister lived in an apartment in the newly-built house on Skutnäsgratan in Jakobstad. (...) My grandmother had raised my daddy alone, they had been poor”.

⁵ “On my mother side was it different. The geographical hub of my mother’s family was Tammerfors. My grandmother’s father, Hugo Sandbacka, had left his home in Nedervetil and, shortly after the civil war, he had landed in “Finland’s Manchester”, where he had founded a leather factory in the district of Epilä. When I was a child the factory had been already closed, and my grandmother Roal had temporarily moved to Tammerfors with her family”.

real family can be detected in some of the characters of *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, *Vådan av att vara Skrake* or *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, confirming the autobiographical matrix of these works.

If the writer's parents came from different parts of the country and belonged to different social classes, Kjell Westö is instead a complete *helsingforsare*. He has lived all his life in the Finnish capital, making it his place of residence and the setting of basically all his works (the only exception is the short-story *Moster Elsie*, which is set in the countryside). Until he was ten year-old, he lived in the suburb of Munkshöjden, in the west part of the city. Afterwards, his family moved to the southern (and richer) part of the area, called Munknäs. The life in the suburb during the Sixties and Seventies represents a fundamental experience in the life of the writer and becomes the prism through which he reads the social, political and economic changes of the city and, more generally, of the entire country. It is here that Westö also experiences for the first time a feeling of exclusion (*utanförskap*) because of his belonging to the Swedish-speaking community:

Jag gick vilse i mina tidiga försök att förstå språkslagsmålen och de andra konflikterna i min barndoms förstäder. Många finskspråkiga blir irriterade och somliga svenskspråkiga skamsna när man tar upp det här, men det fanns gånger då man tvingades slåss – eller som i mitt fall, fick stryk – bara för att man råkade tala svenska. Det här var på 1970-talet, och fördelningen var den att en majoritet av de finskspråkiga pojkarna var hyggliga och trevliga, medan en minoritet upplevde svenskan som ett rött skycke och ville slåss⁶. (Westö, 2007 : 236-237).

The experience of the language-fights, the problem of the national identity and of the social membership thus marked the childhood and adolescence of the writer and constitute some of the central themes of his works.

After taking the school-leaving exam in 1980, Westö planned to study journalism at the university of Helsinki. He left his parents' house and moved quite frequently to different apartments in the city. An account of those years can be found in his contribution to the anthology *Adress: Helsingfors* (1994), with the title *Resan utan Ithaka*.

In January 1982, Westö made his debut as a journalist on the national press with a review of U2 first album "October" on *Huvudstadsbladet*⁷. He continued to work for the

⁶ "I got lost already when I first tried to understand the language fights and the other conflicts in my childhood's suburbs. Many Finnish-speaking get irritated and all the Swedish-speaking ashamed when you pick up this topic, but there were times when you were forced to fight – or in my case, to get beaten up – just because you happened to speak Swedish. It was during the Seventies, and the advantage was that the majority of the Finnish-speaking kids were kind and nice, whereas a minority experienced Swedish like a red cloth and wanted to have a fight".

⁷ Recently, in an article originally written in Finnish for the book *Kasari* and published in Swedish translation on *Huvudstadsbladet*, Westö recalls how his review was an unconditioned celebration of the Irish band, written with the stubborn enthusiasm that characterized most of his juvenile works: "Jag hyllade U2 reservationslöst trots några av mina intellektuella vänner förhöll sig skeptiska till bandet redan då. (...) som så många unga skribenter före och efter mig tyckte jag att mina tankar var rättigenom genial" (Westö, 2011 : 24). "I praised U2 unreserved, despite

newspaper until 1986, when he entered the editorial staff of the left-oriented newspaper *Ny tid*, where he remained until 1989. About the early years of his career as a journalist, Westö has given a quite severe judgment in the preface of his latest book, *Sprickor* (2011), which contains a selection of his articles, columns and reportages written during twenty-nine years of activity in the press: “Jag skulle vilja gärna skriva att jag hittade mängder av bra och viktiga texter skrivna av den unga 80-talsjournalistes KW. Men tyvärr, det gjorde jag inte. Tvärtom, när jag läste mina ungdomsalster undrade jag hur jag så ofta kunde skriva så långt och ändå få så lite sagt”⁸ (Westö, 2011 : 13). Westö has been constantly active as a journalist until today. Interestingly, the majority of his articles and columns were first written in Finnish. This – in a country like Finland, where the language debate has been lately rekindled after the land-slide victory of the populist party *Perussuomalaiset* (True Finns) at the general election of the 17th of April 2011 – should not be underestimated⁹. Westö expressed his apprehension for the current political situation in the country with the following words: “Medan åren gick blev mitt skrivarliv småningom sådant att jag, son till två svenskspråkiga österbottningar, kom att skriva all min journalistik på finska. Och nu ger jag ut den här boken, i ett samhällsklimat där sannfinländarna sätter mycket av agendan och där svenskan i Finland är i motvind på många sätt”¹⁰ (Westö, 2011 : 10).

The spectrum of the topics treated by Westö in his articles and columns is very wide. However, the selection presented in *Sprickor* gives an interesting account of the journalist’s major interests throughout the years, which mostly concern music, sport, fishing, travelling and urban life – with special attention, of course, on Helsinki – and often re-appear in his fictional works.

In 1986 Westö published his first collection of poems, *Tango Orange*. The book received enthusiastic reviews and got sold out. The same good exit of critic followed two years later, in 1988, with his second collection, *Epitaf över Mr. Nacht*. Critics praised his original language and the ability to describe the urban scene of those years with a sharp and disillusioned eye. Orphan of political ideologies and without strong cultural references, the

some of my intellectual friends were skeptical towards the band already at that time. (...) Like many other writers before and after me, I was sure that my thoughts were totally genial”.

⁸ “I would like to write that I found a lot of good and important texts written by the young journalist KW from the Eighties. But unfortunately I didn’t. The opposite, when I read my juvenile works, I wondered how I could write so much and still getting so little said”.

⁹ *Perussuomalaiset*, headed by Timo Soini, obtained 19% of the votes in the last general election. With 39 seats in the Eduskunta, the national parliament, the party has become the third biggest political force in the country.

¹⁰ “As the years passed by, my life as a writer has become little by little such as I, son of two Swedish-speaking person from Ostrobothnia, came to write all my articles in Finnish. And now I publish this book, in a moment when the True Finns sets the agenda and where Swedish is upwind in many different ways”.

generation of the Eighties, which the poet satirized with merciless precision, gets drunk of consumerism and self-satisfaction. As Pekka Tarkka notices in his portray of Westö in 1990: “Kjell Westö har sagt att han velat skriva ’en sorgesång över en förlorad generation’. Enligt honom är denna gång 1980-talets ungdom som kan tyckas förlorad, den ungdom som hamnade i ett politiskt och kulturellt vacuum, in en värld utan fasta värderingar” (Tarkka, 1990 : 208).

His third (and last) collection of poems, entitled *Avig-bön*, appeared in 1989 and was written under the pseudonym Anders Hed. The general tone of this work was substantially different compared to the previous collections, and the polemic, harsh style of the first poems was replaced by a more intimate introspection. Although the author considers *Avig-bön* the best result of his career as a poet, the book passed almost unnoticed and sold only few copies¹¹.

Between 1986 and 1987, Westö also worked in the staff of the literary magazine *KLO*. Like Michel Ekman noticed, *KLO* represents an interesting exception in the panorama of the literary debate of that period for the scarce interest in literature theories in vogue during those years and the multicultural approach:

I skandinavisk perspektiv var *KLO* en ovanlig åttioalstidskrift genom sitt begränsade intresse för litteraturteori och samtida filosofi. Den innehöll mycket ung skönlitteratur, och presenterade bl. a. danska, turkiska och finskspråkiga författare, men redaktionsmedlemmarnas ställningstagande befattade sig mycket mera med traditionell moralfilosofi, t. ex. existencialistiskt influerad, än med poststrukturalistiska tankegångar.”¹² (Ekman, 1992 : 8).

Westö’s contribution consisted of articles, poems, translations and editing. For the second number, he wrote a provocative poem entitled (*på redaktionen*) and the essay *Meddelande från dvärgkastningens tidevarv* (Messages from the midget toss era), where he strongly criticized postmodernism’s critical thinking. According to the young intellectual, postmodernism, postulating the impossibility to recompose the cracks that have split the human consciousness during the last century, postulates a way of living that leads to annihilation. Reflecting over Nietzsche’s philosophy, Camus’s works and Stig Dagerman’s novel *De dömdas ö*, Westö comes to the conclusion that, even if the agency is irreversibly fragmented and composed of an heterogeneous mix of feelings and experiences, the effort to find a way to interpret it should not be left undone. Postmodernism’s preaching “to accept things as they are” inevitably led to a complete de-personalization of the human being.

¹¹ During my interview with Kjell Westö on the 24th of November 2011, he told me: “Jag kan fortfarande läsa några av dem där dikterna utan att rodna, trots att boken inte sålde mer än fem kopior”. ”I can still read some of these poems without blushing, even though the book sold no more than five copies”.

¹² “In Scandinavian perspective, *KLO* was a unusual magazine during the Eighties, because of its limited interest for literature theory and contemporary philosophy. It contained much young literature, and presented, among the others, Danish, Turkish and Finnish-speaking writers, although the staff members’ position dealt more with traditional moral philosophy, for example with that influenced by existentialism, than with poststructuralist ideas.”

The third number of the magazine was mostly devoted to contemporary Danish poetry. On this occasion, Westö wrote an article about Michael Strunge, the *enfant terrible* of the Eighties in Denmark, and translated the poem *Livets Hastighet* (The Speed of Life) from 1978. In the article, entitled *Seklets barnbarnsbarn*, Westö commented the heterogeneous background of Strunge's poems, which contained influences from Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Breton as much as from punk and rock'n'roll music icons like David Bowie. One particular feature that of course did not pass unnoticed in Westö's critic was the urban setting of both Strunge's and Thompsen's lyrics: "Texterna är urbana: staden är hela tiden närvarande både som förståtlig hydra och som möjlig tillflyktort"¹³ (Westö, 1986, 21). In *Godot I Vilda Västern*, appeared on the fourth number, Westö presented the works of the American dramatist Sam Shephard and translated some short texts and poems from his collection *Motel Chronicles* (1982). His last contributions to *KLO* are the translations of a prose text by the Finnish theatre director Joukka Turkka from 1982, which appeared on the fifth number, and of a selection of poems by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, taken from the English edition entitled *Sand*.

This experience, together with his contribution to the book *Rockad : en brevbok* (1986), where the young poet discussed the political and economical situation in Finland with the journalist Johan von Bondsorff, results particularly useful in the analysis of Westö's juvenile works. On the one hand, in fact, it is possible to track down the literary influences that mostly marked his poems, and, on the other, to have an overview of his critical and political thinking. As for the situation in Finland during the Eighties, which represents the topic of major interest in most of his poems, Westö expressed deep concern about the raging consumerism of the decade and a feeling of dissatisfaction for the rigid ideological approach of the radical left, that he considered out-of-date. What I tried to highlight in this regard is the author's equidistance from the traditional political instances, which should by no means be confused – like the author clearly stated – with a postmodern "acceptance" of the state of things. Westö means instead to develop a personal dialectic with the social, political and economical situation in the country, even if this places him into an isolated position of *utanförskap* (exclusion).

The same year of the publication of *Avig-bön* (1989), Westö made also his debut as a prose-writer with the collection of short-stories *Utslag och andra berättelser*. The book contained a cast of characters, usually young men at odds with their lives, in the urban frame of Helsinki during the crazy years of the Eighties. Westö seemed to further develop the themes already present in his first collections of poems and outline a faithful picture of the urban life of

¹³ "Texts are urban: the city is always present, both as a subtle hydra or a possible haven".

that period, although with a more varied spectrum. This is also the first time when he tried to describe the intimately social characteristic of the language debate between Finnish and Swedish in Helsinki. In the first short-story, *Kabana*, he tells in fact the story of a young Swedish-speaking man, Martin, who temporarily works in a workshop but wants to study literature at the university. All his co-workers are strong Finnish-speaking men, and only one of them, the old Vahe, shows some sympathy for him. Martin belongs to the Swedish upper-class and his unconcealed bourgeois manners are the reason for the hostility he experiences on his working-place. In the other stories, Westö mostly depicted the fate of successful men who had to come to terms with a sudden downfall or the unexpected end of a romance – a situation that became the archetype for a narrative line that he later developed in his novel *Lang*, from 2003. *Utslag och andra berättelser* received positive reviews and was candidate for the prestigious price *Finlandiapriset* in 1991.

The connection between the language debate and the social belonging became one cardinal point of the second collection of short-stories, *Fallet Bruus*, published two years later, in 1992. This book is composed of only three stories, *Iiro och pojken*, *Melba Mallinen och jag* och *Fallet Bruus*. Although *Iiro och pojken* contains interesting anticipations of his later works and *Fallet Bruus* has a refined narrative construction, it is especially the autobiographical childhood tale proposed in *Melba, Mallinen och jag* that represents the most interesting contribution of the book. Here Westö analyzed for the first time the urban space of the suburb from multiple perspectives: the language conflict between the Swedish-speaking and the Finnish-speaking kids epitomized by bullying; the social split between the northern, humble part of the suburb and the southern, bourgeois part; the political and economical contraposition between the capitalistic-oriented group and the sustainers of the radical left. As I have tried to show, *Melba, Mallinen och jag* can be actually used as a map to describe the route of Westö's investigation in the invisible palimpsest of *his* Helsinki.

Fallet Bruus was candidate to *Runeberg Priset* and was the first work by Westö to be translated into a foreign language. The book was published in Estland in 1996 with the title *Bruusi juhtum*, translated by Mari Allik¹⁴.

Up to this moment, with three collections of poems and two books of short-stories, it seemed that Kjell Westö fitted in the typical pattern of the Finnish-Swedish literature, which is

¹⁴ When I say that *Fallet Bruus* was the first book by Westö to be translated for the first time into a foreign language, I mean languages different from Finnish. All Westö's work, both the collections of poems as much as the short-stories and the novels have always been translated into Finnish shortly after (if not simultaneously) the Swedish editions. Westö's books are published in Finland by the Publishing House Otava.

mostly represented by a solid lyrical tradition and some talented writers of short stories. Runar Schildt, for example, is one of the most significant writers of the Swedish-Finnish canon and, although he successfully published several collections of short stories during his lifetime, he never managed to compose that great long novel that everybody was expecting from him. Still at the end of the Eighties, Merete Mazzarella initiated her essay *Det trånga rummet* with the following question: “Hur dålig är egentligen den finlandsvenska litteraturen, kan man ibland få lust att fråga sig. Och framför allt: hur dålig är egentligen den finlandsvenska romanen?”¹⁵ (Mazzarella, 1989 : 7). Of course the somehow provocative incipit of this essay is partly denied by the successive analysis, which postulates the existence of a novel-tradition and the possibility, for example, to read Schildt’s most acclaimed work, *Den segrande eros*, as a novel, and not as a collection of independent short stories. I will return later to the critical discourse of Mazzarella; it is true, however, that the Swedish-Finnish novel is relatively less relevant compared to other genres of this tradition, such as poetry or short-stories.

As Kjell Westö wrote himself in the article *On writing and not writing*, after the publication of *Fallet Bruus*, he suffered of a long crisis of inspiration and lack of self-confidence. Many drafts ended up in the trash-bin and repeated writer’s blocks paralyzed his activity. On the one hand, Westö felt the pressure of the literary expectations he had on himself, on the other, the country’s economic recession affected also his work as a free-lance journalist and a translator. Fortunately, Westö did not follow in the aftermath of Runar Schildt, and, on a January evening in 1996, he wrote a half page that marked the beginning of his first long novel, *Drakarna över Helsingfors*. The final result was a family saga almost five hundred pages long, covering five decades of Finnish history through the deeds of three generations of Bexar. The novel, which describes the social, economical and cultural developments of the country from the post-war reconstruction until the financial crack following the casino economy of the Eighties, is mostly set in the suburb of Munksneiden, which again stands for the epicenter of the transformations that characterized the country throughout these years. The novel had a great success in Finland and was acclaimed by the critics. Tuva Korsström, who reviewed *Drakarna över Helsingfors* in *Huvudstadsbladet* on 6th of October 1996, wondered if Kjell Westö had not finally accomplished the task of writing the great Finnish-Swedish novel that had been so long awaited: “Är det nu möjligt att Kjell Westö gått och gjort det som Runar Schildt och så många

¹⁵ ”How bad is the Finnish-Swedish literature, sometimes you feel like asking. And especially: how bad is the Finnish-Swedish novel?”

finlandssvenska prosaister aldrig gjorde – nämligen skrivit den Stora finlandssvenska romanen, undrar jag efter att ha slagit igen Westö's debutroman.”¹⁶ (Korsström, 1996 : 8).

Drakarna över Helsingfors, which in 2001 was also made into a film directed by Peter Lindholm, not only put the final seal on Westö's fame among the public and the critics, but also marked the final phase of his transformation from poet into short-stories writer and finally into novelist. Before publishing his second novel, however, he collaborated with the photographer Christoffer Albrecht at the volume *Metropol*, a photographic book about Helsinki, which appeared in 1998. Westö contributed with some texts and captions commenting the pictures of the city taken by Albrecht.

In 2000 Westö published his second novel, *Vådan av att vara Skrake*. Like the previous book, also this one was an epic tale about a Swedish-Finnish family, the Skrake. The story significantly begins in 1952, the *annus mirabilis* of post-war Finland, when the country hosted the Olympic games and the last war-debts were paid off, and ends in our days. The narration is conducted by Wiktor Juri, the last descendent of the Skrake dynasty, who tells the story of his father Werner, his uncle Leo and his grandfather Bruno. *Vådan av att vara Skrake* represents a good example of the “narrow room” tradition of the Finnish-Swedish canon as discussed by Merete Mazzarella in the essay mentioned above. The protagonist of the novel, Werner Skrake, stands as the last representative of a tradition of anti-heroes who try to liberate themselves from the straightjackets of an asphyxiating social and cultural heritage. This novel became a best-seller in Finland and, like the previous one, received enthusiastic reviews. The same happened in Sweden, where the selling was however less impressive and critics sometimes vitiated by a too rigid gender-perspective¹⁷. *Skrake* marked also the beginning of Westö's international success. The novel, in fact, was published also in Denmark (*Faren ved at være en Skrake*), Norway (*Faren vid å være Skrake*), Latvia, France (*Le Mahleur d'être un Skrake*) and Germany (*Vom risiko, ein Skrake zu sien*).

The definitive international consecration arrived however two years later, with the publication of the noir *Lang*. The story of the successful writer and program-leader Christian Lang, whose bright career suddenly begins to fade away, takes up again some motives already developed by Westö in *Utslag och andra berättelser*. The major difference in this case (and this is so far an *unicum* of Westö's literary production) is that the novel turns into a psychological thriller when Lang falls in love with a woman, Sarita, who still has a

¹⁶ “Is it possible that Kjell Westö has managed to do what Runar Schildt and many other prose-writers never did – that is to say, to write the Great Finnish-Swedish novel? I wonder after finishing Westö's debut novel”.

¹⁷ Westö has been accused by some feminist reviewer to present a patriarchal world, where men are sick of machismo and women are often described as marginal figures and mentally weak.

controversial relationship with his ex- husband, Marko. The accidental murder of the man by the hand of Lang is the final act of his human and professional downfall. If we consider the Scandinavian crime novels' world-wide success of today, it does not seem strange that *Lang* became a huge success and was published in fourteen countries (besides Sweden and Finland, the novel appeared also in Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, UK, United States, Rumania, Russia, Latvia, Poland, Eastland, Germany and Bulgaria)¹⁸.

In 2005, Westö re-published most of his previous short-stories (in some cases with consistent variations) in the volume *Lugna Favoriter*. The book is organized as a sort of “greatest hits” of his short-stories, where he included also two new “tracks”, *Lugna favoriter* and *1968*. As I will explain later, these short-stories represent the point of arrival of my research.

With *Där vi en gång gått* (2006), Westö obtained the prestigious *Finlandiapriset*, the most important literary prize in the country. The novel is set in Helsinki and stretches over thirty years, from the years before the civil war (the novel starts in 1905) until 1938, shortly before the beginning of the Winter War. In this historical novel Westö develops a choral narration, intertwining the story of three families with different social membership (two are bourgeois and one is a proletarian) and depicts a fascinating historical fresco of the Finnish society during the first decades of the century. The success of *Där vi en gång gått* in Finland was colossal and confirmed the prominent position of this writer on the national cultural scene. Westö's latest novel, *Gå inte ensam ut i natten* (2009), represents instead a return to his favorite topics. The plot of the book describes the destinies of a group of friends grown up in different suburbs of Helsinki during the Sixties and the Seventies. Adriana Mansnerus, Ariel Wahl e Jouni Manner – the three main characters of the novel – start a music band, but they manage to record only one song: *Gå inte ensam ut i natten*. Shortly after, Adriana falls victim for a chronic depression, Ariel mysteriously disappears somewhere in Sweden, whereas Jouni becomes a politician.

As mentioned before, in august 2011 Westö published *Sprickor*, a wide collection of newspaper articles and columns (included a travel reportage after a visit to the United States) and he is currently working on a new historical novel set in Helsinki during the years 1939-1941.

¹⁸ Interestingly, though, Westö's refined crime-novel was published some years before Stieg Larsson's trilogy, the author told me that, when he started to write *Lang*, he wanted to use for the first time a genre that he thought was “passé”.

1.4. Previous researches and critical contributions.

Since the publication of his first collection of poems, Kjell Westö has imposed himself as one of the most original and interesting personalities of the Swedish-Finnish literature of the latest years. Together with Monika Fagerholm (who also obtained a notable success with the novels *Underbara kvinnor vid vattnet* from 1994, *Diva*, 1998 and *Den amerikanska flickan*, 2005), he is the protagonist of the renaissance of this “minor” literature, which is often considered doubly provincial: on the one hand, it is perceived as a distant outgrowth of the Swedish *riksvensk* literature, and, on the other, as an heterogeneous element in the Finnish cultural panorama. Westö’s interest in Finnish culture and his excellent command of the language, together with his critical approach towards the sometimes stubborn resistance of the Swedish-speaking community to open up to the rest of the country surely contributed to make the Swedish-Finnish “narrow room” a little bigger and ultimately reconsider the relationship between the two communities according to different premises.

The first critical contributions about Kjell Westö’s works appeared at the beginning of the Nineties and regarded his collections of poems and short stories. Åsa Stenwall’s *Barn av sin tid* (1996) and Bror Rönholm’s *Den ihåliga verkligheten – ett tema hos Kjell Westö* (1995) belong to the first and most significant critical essays about the writer’s early production. Insightful observations about his novels can be found in the articles written by Michel Ekman for the literary magazines *Books from Finland* and *Nordisk tidskrift*. Professor Merete Mazzarella also wrote an interesting analysis of the short-story *Monster Elsie*, but I found her correspondence with Westö, *Våra narrativa liv*, and especially her essay *Det trånga rummet*, more inspiring for my research.

Kjell Westö has written a lot about himself and his books too, so I often quote his critical contributions and articles in order to shed new light on his poetic and narrative works. Some ideas contained in my thesis also came from our correspondence during summer and autumn of 2011 and were eventually discussed during our meeting in Stockholm on the 24th of November 2011.

As far as I know, this is the first PhD thesis devoted to Kjell Westö and the first academic essay that tries to conduct a comparative analysis comprehending a wide selection of his works. However, this is not meant to be an exhaustive monography about this writer. I chose instead to consider only a selection of his works which, according to my critical reading,

represents a specific narrative line of his production. As a consequence, I took into consideration his three collections of poems, the second collection of short-stories, *Fallet Bruus*, and the first two novels *Drakarna över Helsingfors* and *Vådan av att vara Skrake*, because I think – and I hope I have been able to prove – that it is in these works that the urban space, especially the suburb, becomes the symbol of all the social transformations, political contrapositions, linguistic conflicts and social tensions that characterized Helsinki during the second half of the Twentieth century, confirming the pivotal role of the city as the place of change *par excellence*, which represented the starting point of my critical discourse about the urban space. Furthermore, this representation of the suburb places Kjell Westö in the modernist tradition outlined by Berman in his study.

As I mentioned above, I have not considered *Fallet Bruus och andra berättelser* and *Lang*, because, although interesting in themselves and also with implications in some of the works I have analyzed, they represent another narrative line that falls beyond the spectrum of my research. On the other hand, I have used Westö's last short-story *1968* as the final investigation in the space of the suburb. Despite the huge international success, I have not considered *Där vi en gång gått* either, because in this case the penetration into the invisible palimpsest of Helsinki (extremely fascinating and historically unexceptionable) takes place in the past, so that the autobiographical aspect, which I considered as one of the fundamental criteria in the works' selection, ceased to be used and is substituted by another kind of approach. *Där vi en gång gått* requires thus a separate analysis and different critical premises; something that could be done in the future, especially considering that Westö is soon expected to publish another historical novel.

Of course my reading of Westö's exploration in the urban palimpsest of Helsinki, mostly influenced by the neo-marxist theory of Marshall Berman, is far from exhaustive. My focus on the economical transformations in the post-war Finnish society, with its social implications and cultural shifts, together with the critic to the current *norm* (linguistic, national or cultural) represent only two – though in my opinion central – aspects of Westö's works. More could be said about the narrative technique used by Westö to describe the arrival of pop culture in Finland, as much as the role of music (which is one of the most important themes of his latest novel) could be more carefully highlighted. Another topic often recurrent in Westö's novel is *madness* (or depression) and it could be much of interest to analyze in which circumstances it appears and which value it has in the narrative discourse. Furthermore, this topic would also give the possibility to analyze Westö's reception by some critics, who – like mentioned before – often criticized him for making female characters too often mentally weak.

Finally, it would be possible to compare Westö's works with other writers of his generation. A comparison between *Melba*, *Mallinen och jag* and *Diva* by Monika Fagerholm, which is also set in an "invented" suburb called Värtbyhamn, would probably enrich the analyses I have conducted on post-war Helsinki.

CHAPTER TWO

EXPLORING THE CITY

PARAGRAPH ONE:

THE CITY AS PALIMPSEST

Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of the day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley.

(Benjamin, 2006 : 53-54)

Walter Benjamin's project to write a book about his childhood in Berlin at the beginning of the Twentieth century traces back to 1931. At this time he had already published twenty short texts for various newspapers and magazines in Germany and planned to put them together in a volume under the title *Berliner Chronik*¹. Benjamin never saw the book published during his lifetime: the process of writing went through different stages over the span of eight years (only in 1932 he wrote two manuscripts, the Felicitas-manuscript, dated autumn 1932, and the Stefan-manuscript, from the end of the same year) and occupied the philosopher during his exile in Paris (1933-1940) together with the composition of his unfinished critical work, *Paris, 19th Century Capital*.

It is not surprising that the major critic of the representation of city life in modern literature decided to recollect his childhood memories with a special consideration for the place where he was born and grown up in. There are of course many reasons for this. First of all, Benjamin was about to leave his city, and had the feeling that he was probably going to be away for a long time. As he wrote in the preface of the manuscript of 1938, "in 1932, when I was abroad, it began to be clear to me that I would soon have to bid a long, perhaps lasting farewell to the city of my birth" (Benjamin, 2006 : 37)². Second, the translation of the first volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust, which he had completed in 1925 together with Franz Hessel, was finally published in 1930. The work of Proust had made a deep impression on Benjamin and there is no doubt that the *Childhood in Berlin around 1900* should be held against

¹See Hallberg, 1994 : 7.

the light of the masterpiece of Proust³. The historical moment gave Benjamin the reason to start writing; his work on Proust's novel gave him the literary item.

Critics have stressed that both Benjamin and Proust struggle with the problem of bringing back the memories of childhood and, at the same time, of depicting the atmosphere of the *fin de siècle*. Nevertheless, what matters their ways of treating the temporal dimension, it is hard to say that they were aiming at the same result. As Peter Szondi claims in his essay about *Childhood in Berlin around 1900*:

Proust sets off in quest of the past in order to escape from time altogether. This endeavor is made possible by the coincidence of the past with the present, a coincidence brought about by analogous experiences. Its real goal is escape from the future, filled with dangers and threats, of which the ultimate one is death (...). Unlike Proust, Benjamin does not want to free himself from temporality; he does not wish to see things in their ahistorical essence. He strives instead for historical experience and knowledge. Nevertheless, he is sent back into the past, a past, however, which is open, not completed, and which promises the future. (Szondi, 1978 : 18-19)

Thus, the time-perspective of the *Berlin Childhood* is anchored in a specific moment of history, the beginning of the Twentieth century, a period of turbulent historical events in many European countries and of dramatic social, economic and political changes, that would pave the way to World War II.

Most of the critics have stressed the importance of the historical dimension of the book, that seems to give us a picture of a precarious world on the verge of being swept away by the war that was to follow, whereas less attention has been devoted to the setting of the book, the city of Berlin. This is probably due to the fact that Benjamin does not describe the city "as it was" when he was a child, within the frame of a traditional book of memoirs. *Berlin Childhood* is a collection of short texts, a collage of singular episodes that can also be read separately (the exact number of the texts varies between thirty and thirty-six, depending on the edition), each of them containing the description of a place in Berlin, a room in his parents' house, an object with a particular emotional significance, a person in his family or at the school, or simply a feeling, a state of mind that for some obscure reason has re-emerged in the flow of the memory. His wanderings on the streets of the Westen (the part of Berlin where his family lived) like a young and unaware flâneur, his visits to Potsdam or to other parts of the city where other relatives used

³ Like Hallberg claims, "Barndom i Berlin kring 1900 utgör på många sätt en pendang till Marcel Prousts På spaning efter den tid som flytt." (Hallberg, 1994 :7). "Berlin Childhood around 1900 represents in many different ways a counterpart of Marcel's Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*".

to live, do not constitute a regular itinerary. Sometimes we are given an address or even the description of a monument (as in the case of the *Siegestsäule*, the column erected in Berlin after the victory of Sedan against France), but generally what Benjamin depicts is a fragmented picture of the city, glimpses over a urban environment that seems to be fading away. The philosopher is not interested in describing a certain route through the city, giving an account of its architecture and landmarks. Instead, he wants to recall the impressions that big city life has left on his mind. In the preface of the book in 1938 he wrote: “I have made an effort to get hold of the images in which the experience of the big city is precipitated in a child of the middle class” (Benjamin, 2006 : 38). What Benjamin seeks to catch, through his action of remembering, is the spirit of the city and how it has affected his perception of reality as a child. Thus, it follows the intimate path of memory, made up of blurred images, where the personal experience is inseparable from the city where it took place. This is why his vision of Berlin is both historical and personal. By representing the city through his own memories and with an impressionistic immediacy, the author gives us both an historical portrayal of Berlin (the Tiergarten, the Market-Hall, Charlottenburg and Potsdam) and a personal image of the city observed through the magnifying lens of his own experience as a young boy at the beginning of the century: the winter mornings, the summer-excursions, the recurrent fever that forced him to stay at home from school, the wanderings under the loggias of the streets in his neighborhood (which the young protagonist baptizes *krumme straÙe*, crooked street); all this, both the historical witnesses and the personal memories, had to be rescued from the devastation that history had already set up and from the oblivion of his own mind. The result of this operation is an intellectual map of Berlin, where the tale of the author’s childhood is intertwined with the description of the urban environment, not merely from a descriptive perspective (such would make the book a collection of literary postcards), but through the peculiar filter of his personal feelings⁴. The look of Benjamin over the city outside his window in 1930 (when he started to write the first texts) goes beyond the physical aspect of the streets and buildings and penetrates their historical dimension in order to relocate them in another time of history (the beginning of the Twentieth century). At

⁴ Graeme Gilloch emphasizes the historical conception of the work of remembrance in Benjamin’s work: “In his writing on Berlin, Benjamin seeks to map out his early life, to chart his childhood experiences in the urban setting. He gives memory and his past life (the temporal, the historical) spatial representation. Memory itself is represented as ‘city-like’. The dense networks of streets and alley-ways are like the knotted, intertwined threads of memory. The open spaces of the urban environment are like the voids and blanks of forgotten things”. (Gilloch, 1996 : 67)

the same time, the author looks inside his mind and tries to place them in another time of his consciousness, namely that of his childhood. Benjamin's look is directed outward and, simultaneously, inward, because the observation of the city brings back the memories of Berlin at the beginning of the century together with the impressions that the urban environment had caused on his mind. This gives to this operation of remembering an epistemological meaning and shows the possibility of reading the city as a palimpsest.

To state that a city can be read as a palimpsest requires of course further explications. The word palimpsest comes from the Greek expression *πάλιν* (again), and *ψηστός* (scraped) and it refers to parchments that contained several texts written one upon the other. In fact, Romans and literate people in the Middle Age used to write on the same parchment more than once, scraping away a text from the surface in order to use it again and again. Philologists are nowadays able, through the use of chemical substances, to recuperate parts of these texts formerly scraped away, so that the same piece of parchment appears as a stratification of different texts.

Today the concept of palimpsest has gained new meanings. In his work about literature in the second degree, Gerard Genette has brilliantly demonstrated that even modern texts can be considered "palimpsests". In its easiest form, a modern literary palimpsest stems from the relationship, called *intertextuality*, between a text A and another text B. In the narrative discourse of modern literature the space of intertextuality has expanded in so many different ways and to such an extent that it could be said that basically all works are palimpsests. Genette focuses on a special kind of intertextuality, called *hypertextuality*. Hypertextuality refers to any case when a hypertext B is connected to an earlier text A, which bears the name of hypotext, because it "lies" underneath and interacts with the text above in different ways⁵. In fact, the relationship of the hypertext with one or more hypotexts can change quite radically. An hypertext might contain simply one element from another work (for example a character or a quotation) or re-elaborate a situation that refers to a previous text. Sometimes the process of transformation can be so elusive and take such an elliptic form that the hypotext completely dissolves in the hypertext, without

⁵ "By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary (...) to view things differently, let us posit the general notion of a text in a second degree, a text derived from another preexistent text. This derivation can be of a descriptive or intellectual kind, where a metatext (for example, a given page from Aristotle's *Poetics*) "speaks" about a second text (*Oedipus Rex*)" (Genette, 1997 : 5). Genette defines the process that unite one or more hypotexts to an hypertext *transformation*.

leaving any apparent trace of its existence (the notorious example of *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey*, where the hypertext by James Joyce evokes the epos of Homer, in a way that is explicit basically only through the title). We do not need now to further explain the taxonomy elaborated by Genette. What is important for our study is to understand that a literary palimpsest is a sedimentation of different strata, resulting in the final layer of the hypertext, which may or may not show any perceptible trace of the previous text(s), but whose existence is nevertheless dependent on the hypotext, because it is the matrix from which the hypertext derives (there would be no *Ulysses* without the *Odyssey*).

When we try to apply this concept of the palimpsest to the city, it appears evident that there is a substantial difference between the literary and the urban discourse, which resides in the very nature of architecture as a process of creation, which usually makes a *tabula rasa* of what existed before. Urban renovation usually stems from an act of demolition which aims at eliminating something old and building something new⁶. Thus, most of the times, the physical link between a urban hypertext and its hypotexts is cut, broken down. This happens also when this process involves the exploitation of a new area: as a rule, the natural environment is destined to destruction whenever something is built on a virgin land⁷.

As a consequence, one might think that to read the city as a palimpsest would be an hazard. Of course the lack of physical evidence of an earlier urban stage is something – as we have already said – that marks a difference between a text and a city, and makes it more complicated to approach it as a construction of multiple strata. Nonetheless, it is possible to go roundabout this technical limit through what we call now a “fictional reconstruction”: the human mind has the power to re-elaborate the actual image of a city and, through the use of certain means, both material and immaterial (photographs, paintings, maps, historical witnesses, or simply personal memories), can actually tear down an existing building and rebuilt what was there before.

⁶ Michel de Certeau notes that: “The kind of difference that defines every place is not on the order of a juxtaposition but rather takes the form of imbricated strata. The elements spread out on the same surface can be enumerated; they are available for analysis; they form a manageable surface. Every urban “renovation” nonetheless prefers a *tabula rasa*.” (De Certeau, 2002 : 214).

⁷ To this general rule, some exceptions can be enumerated, for example when a part of the building is integrated in a new construction. The same happens for any archeological excavation, which brings back to light a former “layer” of a certain place. Nevertheless, these episodes are considerably sporadic compared to the general principles of construction.

Andreas Husseyn, in his book about the representation of Berlin in contemporary German novelists, explains that “the trope of the palimpsest is inherently literary and tied to writing, but it can also fruitfully be used to discuss configuration of urban spaces and their unfolding in time without making architecture and the city simply into text” (Husseyn, 2003 : 7)⁸. Husseyn too is aware that the urban texture very seldom preserves traces of earlier stages, so that a philological reading of a city – that is to say a physical investigation of the different transformations of an urban agglomerate – is (at least most of the times) practically impossible. Despite that, he emphasizes the ability of the human mind to re-create the images of a city in the past by substituting a building or a place with the memory of what it used to be or of what there was instead of it.

The majority of buildings are not palimpsests at all. As Freud once remarked, the same space cannot possibly have two different contents. But an urban imaginary in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memory of what there was before, imagined alternatives to what there is. The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with strong traces of the past, erasure, losses and heterotopias. (Husseyn, 2003 : 7)

Husseyn suggests here another possibility, namely to recreate a place not only by using (personal) memories but also with an act of imagination, postulating an alternative development of an urban context. The operation of “fictional construction” is therefore bi-dimensional, because it can work both towards the future and towards the past. Although this is true especially in the field of fiction, where the representation of a city spreads from the imagination of a writer, by the time being we limit our discussion about this topic to the memory discourse, which suits much better the idea of the palimpsest.

Michel de Certeau goes a step farther compared to Husseyn, and does not hesitate to state that: “The place is a palimpsest” (De Certeau, 2002 : 202)⁹. Underneath a visible surface, which he defines “the legible discourse” (De Certeau, 2002 : 201), a place hides the images of the past. De Certeau explains also what is at stake when such an operation of fictional reconstruction is taken into being. According to his theory, the re-creation of the vanished layers is particularly important because it gives the opportunity to re-actualize the social, historical, political and

⁸The book of Husseyn primarily deals with the contemporary memory discourse vs history, in the light of the use of public places for the formation of national identities.

⁹It is important to note that de Certeau in this passage speaks about the concept of “place” and not explicitly about the city. Nonetheless, in the central section of his book, entitled “Walking in the city”, he emphasizes the role of the urban context as the place *par excellence*.

economic meanings of the previous stages of a certain place. Underneath an apparently homogeneous surface we can find the footprints of the past:

The revolution of history, economic mutation, demographic mixtures lie in the layers within it (*the place*) (...) This place, on its surface, seems to be a collage. In reality, in its depth it is ubiquitous. A piling up of heterogeneous places. Each one, like a deteriorating page of a book, refers to a different mode of territorial unity, of socioeconomic distribution, of political conflicts and of identifying symbolism. (De Certeau, 2002 : 201)

Any operation of “reconstruction” needs to come to terms with this peculiar ubiquitous nature of the place, especially with reference to the urban environment, where the process of construction and tearing down, of renovation and exploitation of new space is basically constant. Although the physical layers of the historical sedimentation of a place have partly or completely disappeared, and a city, a neighborhood, a building has changed maybe entirely from one age to another, it is still possible to see *through* their time-perspective and detect one or more of those layers.

It is quite interesting to notice that de Certeau describes his concept of a place as a palimpsest using the metaphor of the pages of a book, which actually brings us back to the literary dimension. What we have seen so far is that any operation in literature aiming at the recreation of the images of a city from the past represents the possibility of analyzing the invisible dimension of the urban palimpsest, actually to make the urban palimpsest itself perceptible. This operation can be unfold in many different ways, which go from an historical description of a city in a certain period to an invented topography with no connection with a real urban space. The type of “fictional reconstruction” that will be discussed in the present work is well represented by *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, that is to say, a literary representation of a urban environment recreated by a writer through the use of memories, not intended – as in the case of Proust – to annihilate the concept of time, rather occupied to mainly work on the temporal present-past axe in order to bring back the images of the past and shift the focus on the interplay between some historical, political, social and economic changes and the urban environment where they have taken place. Another type of fictional reconstruction that writers can make use of, but that we will not consider here, is the more traditional historical representation, based on materials such as photographs, paintings, maps and other books. These types of fictional reconstruction enable us to investigate the hidden palimpsest of the city, an operation that gives the possibility to discover, behind this ubiquitous and invisible stratification,

all the historical, social and economic changes of a city and, by virtue of a synecdoche relationship, of a whole country.

If we compare now this idea of the urban palimpsest with that elaborated by Genette apropos the literary palimpsest, we can see that there is actually a convergence between the literary and the urban discourse. The most elusive form of the literary palimpsest, when the hypotexts are completely dissolved within the hypertext and the latter does not show any visible trace of them, is actually quite close to the most common urban hypertext, where a construction usually replace another, without leaving any detectable element of the previous one¹⁰.

Up to this point we have basically dealt with what we previously called, speaking about *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, as the “look outward”, the look that enables the writer to start the investigation into the palimpsest of the city. Another example can help us to visualize even better the concept of the palimpsest and to show how the operation of fictional reconstruction is tied up to the “look inward” of the narrator¹¹, which re-creates a former layer of a city through the use of his own memories or imagination. The example comes from *Civilization and its discontent* by Sigmund Freud. In the first chapter, Freud draws a parallel between the description of the city of Rome and the structure of the human mind, in order to explain that basically nothing that has once taken shape in the mental life can be lost and “that everything is somehow preserved and can be retrieved under the right circumstances” (Freud, 2002 : 7).

Now, let us make the fantastic assumption that Rome is not a place where people live, but a psychical entity with a similarly long, rich past, in which nothing that ever took shape has passed away, and in which all previous phases of development exist beside the most recent. For Rome this would mean that in the palatine hill the imperial palaces and the Septizomium of Septimious Severus still rose to their original height, that the castle of Sant’Angelo still bore on its battlements the fine statues that adorned it until the Gothic siege. Moreover, the temple of Jupiter Capitolino would once more stand on the site if Palazzo Caffarelli, without there being any need to dismantle the latter structure, and indeed the temple would be seen not only in its later form, which it assumed during the imperial age, but also in its earliest, when it still had Etruscan elements and was decorated with terracotta antefixes. And where the Coliseum now stands we could admire the vanished Domus Aurea of Nero, on the Piazza of the Pantheon we should find not only the present Pantheon, bequeathed by Hadrian, but the original structure of M. Agrippa; indeed, occupying the same ground would be the church of Maria sopra Minerva and the ancient temple over which it is built. And the

¹⁰ The difference that remains, of course, is that a literary hypertext cannot exist without its hypotexts, no matter how they appear on the surface. A building, instead, can be entirely tore down and replaced by another, which strictly speaking has no connection with the previous construction if not for the fact that it is erected in the same place.

¹¹ We will return later to the discussion about the role of the author and that of the narrator in the specific case-study of Kjell Westö.

observer would perhaps need only to shift his gaze or his position in order to see the one or the other. (Freud, 2002 : 8-9)

Rome is probably the best example in the west-world of a city where the previous layers of ancient times are still partly visible and sometimes – as in the case of Castel Sant’Angelo – incorporated in later urban development. Nevertheless, as Freud himself is aware of, “the same space cannot accommodate two different things” (Freud, 2002 : 9) and his admirable attempt to imagine Rome through its architectural development – thanks to the traces still visible from different epochs – confirms that the urban palimpsest is an invisible dimension that can be given a shape only through an act of the mind¹².

Desmond Harding, who gives an extensive analysis of this metaphor in his book about urban visions and literary modernism, says that:

Though not the first one to adopt the mind-city metaphor as a way of shaping our understanding of the workings of the human consciousness, Freud’s metaphor isolates the concept of an invisible dimension (...) in which the textual city incorporates space and time: the present, the past and the implied future, beyond the constricting formal boundaries of received notions of ‘reality’. (Harding, 2002 : 3)

Harding shifts the attention from the space-perspective to the time-perspective and claims that what Freud does, when he portrays the historicity of Rome through the epochs, is to follow Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope¹³. This concept, which will be analyzed more extensively later, plays a central role in the theory of the novel elaborated by the Russian scholar. According to Bakhtin, which loans the term chronotope from the theory of relativity of Einstein, the relationship of time and space is so intimate and their bond so strong, that it is impossible to disentangle them: narratives always represent space in the dimension of time. Bakhtin defines the chronotope as:

the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationship that are artistically expressed in literature (...) In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, spaces become charged with and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (Bakhtin, 1981 : 84)

¹² By drawing a parallel between the description of the different changes of Rome and the human mind, Freud meant that, if no trauma or inflammation has occurred, nothing can be erased from the mental life of a person, even if sometimes forgetfulness might give the impression that old memories tend to fade away. In this perspective, his “reconstruction” of the different stages of the urban development of Rome is particularly useful, because it represents a good visual example of how a human mind looks like: a collage of older and new impressions, and, as much as the previous stages of the urban development are “hidden” behind the visible hypertext, so the memories of anything that has happened in our mental life are still preserved, although we are not always able to recognize them.

¹³ See Harding, 2002 : 3.

If we go back now, circle like, to *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, we can see how the investigation of the urban palimpsest of Berlin is inextricably tied up to a certain time in the history of the city and how this time interacts with the biography of Benjamin. It is quite significant that the subject of the book, the childhood of the author, is placed already in the title in relation to a specific chronotope: the capital of Germany at the dawn of a new century. Although the time-perspective remains sometimes slightly more vague compared to the topographic dimension of the text, it is not possible to disconnect these perspectives from each other. As we will see, when the concept of the chronotope is applied to the representation of a modern urban palimpsest, its function becomes even more sophisticated. The more precise is the investigation of the palimpsest, the more specific will be the time-perspective, this because of the peculiar nature of the urban environment which is, especially in modern time and in capitalistic societies, constantly subject to change and transformations.

All major cities have gone through profound makeovers which reflect the result of historical changes, natural disasters or political decisions. Just to give some examples, we can say that the centre of London was completely rebuilt after the great fire of September 1666 by Sir Christopher Wren; in the same way, the nucleus of old Lisbon is the final result of the reconstruction designed by Marquis Pombal after the earthquake of 1755. Medieval Paris disappeared almost entirely when Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's project for the renovation of the city was completed in 1860's. But even cities which have hardly been ravaged by wars or natural catastrophes undertake deep changes in their shapes to meet needs of different kind, such as an increasing population, new architectural taste or simply because of the obsolescence of old buildings and infrastructures¹⁴. As we have noted already before, cities change continuously, they are – even in the most well-preserved examples – never-ending works in progress. Cities become larger, increase the number of their inhabitants, modify their skylines or their waterlines, modernize their dwellings, invade and exploit new space. A city, like Don Martindale states in the prefatory remarks of *The City*, “is a living thing” (Weber, 1966 : 10), as such, it constantly develops and grows, modifying itself and the surroundings. As a consequence, we do not need to look back at major historical events, such as wars and natural disasters, to find

¹⁴ After his visit to Rome in September 1901, Sigmund Freud wrote that “Even the most peaceful urban development entails the demolition and replacement of building. (Freud, 2002 : 10)

the reasons for a city to change. It is in the very nature of the city to be the place where the change is continuous and inexhaustible. Thus anytime a writer undertakes the mission to investigate the palimpsest of a city, he or she will have to excavate that “invisible dimension” that lies underneath the surface of the hypertext, trying to rescue a glimpse of something that is quickly fading away under the turn of the time.

PARAGRAPH TWO:

THE CITY IN HISTORY

According to a report of the United Nation Population Fund, 2008 is to be remembered as a crucial year in the human history, because, for the first time ever, more than the half of the world's population lived in cities¹⁵. This statistic is hardly surprising; starting from the industrial revolution, urbanization has developed on an impressive scale and in a way that has been almost constant, changing the shape of vast territories and moving millions of people from the countryside to cities, which have been growing bigger and bigger all over the world. As a consequence, we got used to read about the impressive size of the twenty-first century megalopolises and about the challenges that they represent in terms of environmental sustainability, consumption of economical resources and livability. Although it is true that this phenomenon has accelerated during the last three hundred years and especially after the end of World War II, the concept of "city" is probably as old as civilization itself. The origin of the word 'city' derives in fact from the Latin *civitas* (citizenry, citizenship) while 'urban' and 'urbanism' come from *urbs* (city), revealing an etymological intimacy between these two concepts. Historians agree that urbanism appeared in Mesopotamia around 3,500 B.C., followed by similar examples in different continents¹⁶. Since ancient time, cities have always been strictly connected with the development of civilizations and – as Lewis Mumford claims – "The city is characteristic of most civilizations and is often considered their fullest expression" (Mumford, 1938 : 17)¹⁷. Still today, we consider the foundation of Rome (usually dated to 753 B.C.) as the beginning of the Roman civilization, as much as the polis are the eponymous of the ancient

¹⁵ "In 2008, the world reaches an invisible but momentous milestone: For the first time in history, more than half its human population, 3.3 billion people, will be living in urban areas. By 2030, this is expected to swell to almost 5 billion" (United Nations Population Fund, 2007 : 1).

¹⁶ "According to most estimates, the first cities arose in Mesopotamia about 5,500 years ago, followed by similar developments in the Nile, Indus, and Yellow River valleys; around the Mediterranean Sea; in West Africa, Central America, and the Andes" (Fischer, 1986 : 2-3) "Even the basic etymology of the word reveals its ancient past, for behind the English word *city* lie the Latin words *civis* (citizen) and *civitas* (citizenry, citizenship). Of course humans have been reading cities in all sorts of ways since they generally agreed upon beginnings of civilization in Mesopotamia, circa 3500 BCE", (Harding, 2002 : 5).

¹⁷ We will return later to Mumford, who was a pioneer in the field of urban studies from a sociological perspective.

Greek culture. Throughout the history of the West world, cities have always been the stage of major historical changes, the epicenter of social and political revolutions and the neuralgic points of economical developments.

Despite this, it is a hard task to give a clear-cut definition of the city that can be applied anywhere on the planet. No matter how evident the existence of urban agglomerates is, the very nature of the city seems too heterogenic and fluid to be grasped in one single sentence. It is much easier to say that a certain place *is* a city than to formulate a definition which explains *why* some places are ranked as cities. It could be said that this task is as complicated as to elaborate a definition of the concept of “novel”. If we draw a parallel between the city in the world-history and the novel in the world-literature, someone could claim that *size* may be taken as a general criterion. When a short story reaches a certain amount of pages, then it becomes a novel. In the same manner, when a town reaches a certain number of dwellers, it becomes a city. However, as soon as we look closer into the matter, a series of questions arise: When does a short story reach a sufficient number of pages to become a novel? Where is the threshold that a literary work needs to cross in order to gain that status? The same is for the city: how many dwellers are necessary for a town to become a city? Which limit marks the difference in terms of population between a village, a town and a city?

Just to give an example, it can be mentioned that the U.S. Census Bureau has created a definition of a “Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area” (SMSA). According to it, a metropolitan area is “roughly, a county with a city of at least 50,000 people, plus adjacent counties if they are heavily built up, plus other counties if many of their residents commute to work in the center city. (...) an SMSA is approximately a city and its suburbs” (Fischer, 1986 : 5). Such a definition of a metropolitan area might be useful for the statistics of the U.S Census Bureau, but it could hardly be used as a general criterion for any other city outside the American borders. 50,000 inhabitants is a fully artificial limit, created by an authority on the basis of statistics and data, and tied up to a certain national perspective. European cities are historically smaller than American cities, which are nowadays becoming themselves smaller compared to the new giant metropolis in Asia. A Chinese middle-size town would probably be considered a city in the US, whereas a middle-size European city would be classified as a village on a Chinese urban scale. Basically every State has its own criteria of how big a urban centre has to be in order to gain the status of city.

Moreover, as claimed in the previous paragraph, cities change constantly, grow bigger (or shrink) in terms of extension and population, so even the most accurate definition will always be provisory and related to a certain moment in history.

The case of Helsinki, in this sense, is a quite illustrative one. On a local perspective, with its almost 600,000 city-dwellers, it is by far the biggest city in Finland, followed by Tampere, which counts no more than 213,000 inhabitants¹⁸. As soon as we widen the perimeter outside the national borders, Helsinki appears as one of the smallest cities in Northern Europe, outstripped by its big sister Stockholm (with 1,2 million inhabitants), the Baltic capital Riga (700,000 inhabitants) and its long-time rival city Saint Petersburg, which, with its more than 4,6 million city-dwellers, is the biggest urban centre of the Nordic region. More than a matter of size, a “city” is therefore a matter of perspective. This lies in the very nature of the urban phenomenon; as Claude Fischer observes, the term “urbanism” is misleading, because it does not give any clear evidence about the essence of the city. Urbanism is rather a form “of gradation, a matter of degree” (Fischer, 1986 : 5)¹⁹, and, as such, it depends on the context where it is applied to.

A standard definition of the city according to the size can be useful on a local perspective (often national), in order to organize the bureaucracy and the socio-economic and architectonic developments of the urban areas – the so-called city-planning – but it is otherwise insufficient and not satisfactory on a general scale. The same frustration about this way of valuating the urban phenomenon was already expressed by Max Weber in its fundamental work from 1921, when he contested the general definition of the city as an agglomerate of dwellings so big that people could not know each other personally:

The city often represents a locality and dense settlement of dwellings forming a colony so extensive that personal reciprocal acquaintance of its inhabitants is lacking. However, if interpreted in this way, only very large localities could qualify as cities; moreover it would be ambiguous, for various cultural factors determine the size at which ‘impersonality’ tends to appear. Precisely this impersonality was absent in many historical localities possessing the legal character of cities. In contemporary Russia there are villages comprising many thousands of inhabitants which are, thus, larger than many old ‘cities’(for example in the Polish colonial area of the German east), which had only few hundred inhabitants. Both in

¹⁸ The official statistics about population in Finland by area show that Helsinki had 588,549 inhabitants as for 31st December 2010. If we consider the urban area around Helsinki, thus including the suburbs of Esbo and Vanda (both outstripping 200,000 people), the total population amounts to more than a million people. Strictly speaking, though, they retain the title of municipality, thus constituting a more general “metropolitan area” together with Helsinki. Official tables and charts can be found at http://pxweb2.stat.fi/database/StatFin/vrm/vaerak/vaerak_en.asp.

¹⁹ Fischer states also that “terms ‘urban’ and ‘urbanism’ both refers to the population of a place of settlement; the greater the number of people residing in and around a place, the more urban it is and the more urban are the experiences of its residents” (Fischer, 1986 :5).

terms of what it would exclude and what it would exclude size alone can hardly be sufficient to define the city. (Weber, 1966 : 65-66)

Neither the size nor the fact that people cannot possibly interact on a personal level with each other can be assumed as general categories to designate a place as a city. Anyway, Weber is not so much interested in finding a standard-definition for the urban environment, but rather aims at enucleating the features that has shaped the city through history.

Since ancient times people have tended to create permanent settlements that, for different reasons, became larger than others and attracted people from the “outside”, thus developing a dichotomy between “urban” and “rural”, “city” and “countryside”, which is still today a large matter of discussion in the social debate about urbanism. For centuries philosophers, historians, sociologists and architects have tried to understand and explain why this phenomenon is so intertwined with civilization and how it affects the human mind, creating different social behaviors in the urban space and outside the city. Starting from the often quoted statement of Aristotle in the *Politics*: “Outside the polis no one is truly human” (Aristotle, 1995 : 178), it would be possible to review the millenary struggle between the city and the countryside, which goes on still today. Nevertheless, this would fall beyond the scope of the present research and it would not give any precise answer about the nature of the city.

It is more useful, instead, to follow the analysis conducted by Weber and to consider this dichotomy as a starting point. The city and the countryside, in ancient and medieval times, never had a clear-cut relationship, because usually the cultivated fields outside the city were a property of the merchants, who used to live in the first urban environments. Because of that, the center of the city was the market-place, where the food-products were carried from the countryside in order to be sold to the city-dwellers and exchanged with other products. Weber insists on the fundamental importance of the market-place as the nucleus of the economical life of the city, but at the same time he warns that the market-place alone cannot be a defining feature for the city: “The mere fact that merchants and tradesman live crowded together carrying on a regular satisfaction of daily needs in the market does not exhaust the concept of the city” (Weber, 1966 : 72). The second, indispensable element of the city in antiquity and in the Middle Ages is the presence of a fortress, where the military and political power had its seat. The existence

within the same walls of the market (the economic power) and the fortress usually determined an increase in the economical life:

The relation between the garrison of the political fortress and the civil economic population is complicated but always decisively important for the composition of the city. Wherever a castle existed artisans came or were settled for the satisfaction of manorial wants and the needs of the warriors. The consumption power of a prince's military household and the protection it guaranteed attracted the merchants. Moreover the lord was interested in attracting these classes since he was in position to procure money revenues through them either by taxing commerce or trade or participating in it through capital advances²⁰. (Weber, 1966 : 78-79).

This dynamic between these two places, each of them representing a distinctive entity of the urban environment, continued until the beginning of modern time: the fortress evolved into the castle and the palace, which hosted the nobility, whereas the market became more and more central in the economic life of the city. The merchants and the working-classes organized themselves in groups according to their specific employment and, towards the end of the Medieval period, the importance of the guilds both in northern and southern Europe had grown so much to become the main feature of the economic activities in the urban areas. Weber quotes the example of King Edward II, who, in 1383, introduced the membership to a guild as a requirement to be eligible for the citizenship in the British capital: "The increasing power of the guilds is shown by the growing dependency of all civil rights on membership in the professional association. Finally, Edward II established guild membership as the basic principle determining London citizenship" (Weber, 1966 : 154)²¹.

Another aspect that steams from the internal social organization of the city is the interaction between these groups, which could co-operate, struggle or fight each others in order to defend privileges or to obtain more rights. Throughout the centuries, the social tensions between the different strata of the urban society has always determined popular upheavals, protest movements, cultural shifts, making the city the stage of history *par excellence*²². As we

²⁰ Weber also claims that, until the Middle Ages, this phenomenon appears indistinctly in any civilization: in Rome the *campus martius* was separated from the economic *fora*. In the same way, in Medieval Italy, the *piazza del campo* at Siena, as a front of the municipal palace, was distinct from the *mercato* at the rear. Analogously in Islamic cities, the *kasbeh*, the fortified camp of the warriors, was spatially separate from the *bazaar*.

²¹ At the same time, many aristocratic families started to develop merchants activities on a pre-capitalistic basis, which determined a blurring of the lines between nobles and merchants.

²² Like Eisenstad and Shachar emphasize: "Weber's analysis indicates – even if it does not fully explicate – that the cities can be studied as the major arena for political struggle and social conflict, as a full-scale laboratory in which can be observed and analyzed the integration and disintegration of political regimes, the rise and fall of dynasties,

will see, this is still a key-topic in the contemporary city, especially in the space of the suburbs, where the social contraposition between different groups depends nowadays not only on economical/working conditions, but also on other social matters such as ethnicity and language.

We do not need now to enter into the details of the analysis of Weber, whose work had the ambitious goal of studying the urban development in the world from the Greek polis to the early modern cities from a socio-economical perspective. What seems clear, anyway, is that the sociologist emphasizes the fundamental importance of the manifestations that made the city the centre of the economical and the political power and how the interplay of the different classes created a breeding ground for a dynamic social development in the Western countries.

The prominence of economical activities, the centralization of the political power and the social heterogeneity became more and more evident in modern time. London offers in this respect an example that has remained paradigmatic for the European cities during the last centuries. As mentioned already in the previous paragraph, after the Great Fire on the 1st and 2nd September 1666, the centre of London laid in ashes. The project for the reconstruction, drawn by Sir Christopher Wren, re-shaped the urban organization of London by placing at the centre the Stock Exchange instead of Saint Paul cathedral, as it used to be before²³. This marked an evident shift in the role played by economy, which turn into the absolute central power of the city and that would become even more influent in the following century with the industrial revolution.

Historians agree that the demographic growth and the urbanization accelerated in Europe starting from the Seventeenth century, paving the way to a phenomenon that is still going on today. Great Britain (along with the Netherlands and the France) experienced an impressive urban development in the two centuries after 1600, when their urban population quadruplicated. If we look at the tables of the demographic distribution in these countries between 1670 and 1800, we can see a constant increase of the people living in cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants. In England the urban population doubled whereas the rural agricultural population decreased by 50%. Until the beginning of the Nineteenth century, the relationship between the city and the countryside can be described almost as vampire-like. Cities started to grow at unprecedented speed, although the mortality-rate in the urban environment was much higher than

the changing forms of domination and revolts, the multifaceted interactions among classes, status groups, and ethnic and cultural collectivities.”, (Eisenstad, Shachar, 1987 : 57-58).

²³ An account of the history of London during this period can be found in Lehan, 1998 :76.

in the countryside. This was basically due to the fact that the flux of people migrating from small villages to bigger cities was constantly increasing. As Pat Hudson observes: “The greatest demographic impact of towns was excess urban mortality: until at least the later eighteenth century urban death rates considerably exceeded urban birth rates, especially in the larger centers, and towns could only grow by sucking in population from the outside” (Hudson, 1992 : 155). At the beginning, urbanism was a two-headed phenomenon: on one hand people migrated from the countryside to poor and unhealthy slums and worked under conditions that would be considered unthinkable nowadays; on the other, it gave rise to a boom in many economical sectors (construction and tertiary), an increasing spread of literacy and other skills and “the establishment of a more modern social structure, with power concentrated in upper- and middle-class groups” (Hudson, 1992 : 155).

During the Nineteenth Century the industrial revolution expanded, though at different speed from country to country, all over Europe. As many historian have claimed, the spread of the modern industrial model did not happen at random, but clustered around regional and urban sites which had already developed manufacturing activities²⁴. During this century the majority of European countries created an industrial asset on large scale, which continued to expand until the break of World War I in 1914. If we look at the charts regarding the increase of the urban population, it is possible to notice a clear connection between the industrial development and urbanization, which attracted thousands of people from the countryside to the cities. As Andrew and Lynn Lees observe:

In Great Britain between 1802 and 1901 London grew from about 900,000 (the exact figure depends on which of several definition of the city is employed) to over 4,5 million, and Manchester expanded from 75,000 to over half a million. In Germany, Berlin’s population rose from 197,000 in 1816 to a little over 2 million in 1905, while Essen’s went from 4,000 to almost 230,000 between 1810 and 1905. In France, Paris grew roughly fivefold between 1801 and 1901, from half a million to over 2,5 million, and Lille went from 55,000 to almost 200,000. (Lees & Lees, 1976 : VIII).

Although Great Britain, France and Germany were the first European countries to experience on national scale a mass migration (mainly of workers) towards the industrialized centers, many other cities were interested by the same phenomenon. If we consider the threshold of 1,000,000

²⁴ Like P.K. O’Brien claims in his introduction to the history of the Industrial revolution: “Many, if not most economic historians (...) insist that the foundations of modern (Nineteenth-century) European industry will be found in regional and urban economies which had developed port forms of manufacturing activity centuries before steam-power machinery and factories appeared on the continent”, (P.K. O’Brien, 1994 : XVIII).

inhabitants, we can see that already at the dawn of the Twentieth century, not only London, Paris and Berlin had passed that mark, but also Barcelona, Vienna, Moscow and Saint Petersburg²⁵, and everywhere the reason that attracted people to the cities was the prospect to find a job in the factories which were growing fast and were constantly supplying new employments.

Industry gravitated increasingly toward the cities, in turn attracting migrants in search for work. To be sure, many cities grew because they were commercial centers, and others owed much of their expansion to their political position as national capitals, but it is inconceivable that Europe would have urbanized to anything like the extent that it did without the Industrial Revolution²⁶. (Lees & Lees, 1976 : IX-X)

With the industrial revolution and the massive increase of urban population, the city begins to take on the features of modernity, expanding over its old borders. The explosion of urbanism during the Nineteenth century in Europe created enormous problems of different kinds. As we have seen, the mortality-rate in the slums of London and Paris was higher than in the countryside, epidemics of typhus and cholera were frequent and working conditions were not far from slavery. On the other hand, a new class, the middle-class bourgeoisie, arose, creating a new social dynamic and setting up a new cultural epoch.

As we have seen before, a city is not only a matter of statistics. During the last one hundred years the city has become a topic often debated by sociologists, who have tried to interpret the European or the whole Western culture through the evolution of its urban models. We have already mentioned the importance of the analysis carried on by Max Weber which, although it was not the first to emphasize the central role played by the city in a historical and sociological perspective, provided an extensive investigation about the main characteristics of the urban life and paved the way for a whole tradition of studies.

Approximately during the same years (1917-1922) another German sociologist, Oswald Spengler, published a two-volume essay about western civilization under the title *Der Untergang des Abendlandes (The Decline of the West)*. Using the same approach of Weber (the comparison

²⁵ Andrew and Lynn Lees provide an extensive analysis about the urbanization in Europe through the Nineteenth century and many charts show the impressive increase not only in the size of the cities but also in the amount of urban environments which passed the limit of 100,000 dwellers, which rose from 23 at the beginning of the Nineteenth century to 143 in 1900.

²⁶ Some historians have even claimed that urbanism was not a result, but the origin itself of the industrial revolution. "Instead of having experienced an 'industrial revolution', England experienced an 'urban evolution', as part of an age-old process of a shift of population to the towns. This change was accompanied by changes in wealth, skill, commercial practices and transport facilities. It was part of a process which can first be observed to have occurred in the Sumerian cities of 3,000 B.C., in which some people got much richer and other people got poorer (slaves in the earlier case, 'wage-slaves' latterly)", (Fores, 1981: 189).

between civilizations in different moments of history and in different parts of the world), Spengler came to the conclusion that the rise of big cities usually marked the beginning of the decline for a civilization: “The Stone Colossus “Cosmopolis” stands at the end of the life’s course of every great culture. The Culture-Man whom the land has spiritually formed is sized and possessed by his own creation, the City, and is made into its creature, its executive organ, and finally its victim. This stony mass is the *absolute* city.” (Spengler, 1928 : 99). According to his theory, what happens to people living in big cities is the final act of a process that slowly makes them indifferent first to the place where they belong, and then to their final destiny. The city-dweller is a rootless, eradicated individual, no longer tied up to a *home*, not intimately attached to the place where he lives. Losing this bound with his environment, he starts to question himself and develops a *Verstand* (intelligence) which is the opposite of the *Vernunft* (peasant wisdom) of the people living in the countryside. In the final stage of the evolution of big cities, people are victims of “the sterility of civilized man” (Spengler, 1928 : 103). Whereas people in the countryside feel the urge to continue the family name through their offspring and care about the land that they possess and have cultivated for an entire life, the city-dwellers replace these feelings with a cleverness that makes these concerns unnecessary and determines, in the very final phase of urban mentality, a new, indifferent approach to the problem of death:

The last man of the world-city no longer wants to live- he may cling to life as an individual, but as a type, as an aggregate, no for it is a characteristic of this collective existence that it eliminates the terror of death. That which strikes the true peasant with a deep and inexplicable fear, the notion that the family and the name may be extinguished has now lost its meaning. The continuance of the blood-relation in the visible world is no longer a duty of the blood, and the destiny of being the last of the line is no longer felt as a doom. Children do not happen, not because children have become impossible, but principally because intelligence at the peak of intensity can no longer find any reason for their existence. Let the reader try to merge himself in the soul of the peasant. He has sat on his gilet from primeval times, or has fastened his clutch in it, to adhere to it with his blood. He is rooted in it as the descendant of his forbears and as the forebear of future descendants. His house, his property, means, here, not the temporary connection of person and thing for a brief span of years, but an enduring and inward union of eternal land and eternal blood. (Spengler, 1928 : 103-104)

Spengler takes up the dichotomy between the city and the countryside and develops a series of binary oppositions that emphasizes the virtues of the agrarian society (the family-bonds, the attachment to one’s own ground) against the corruption that characterizes the urban environment, where individuals are drifted away from their natural aspiration to reproduction (in another passage he refers to Ibsen’s plays to condemn the emancipation of women) and their intimate

connection with mother earth. His conservative rhetoric, his emphasis on “blood and land”, his call for the defense of traditional values earned him the appreciation of the merging national socialism in Germany, which found in his works the socio-philosophical seal of its political action²⁷. Spengler’s theory represents, in a very radical way, the feeling of dismay towards the urban environment and the increasing social conflicts steaming out of it that was rather common among many writers and intellectuals of that period. Nevertheless, what he is able to point out is the existence of a peculiar “mentality” of the city-dwellers which is the result of the influence of the urban environment on the human mind, but he fails to explain in what this mentality consists.

The same topic had been taken up and analyzed at the beginning of the Twentieth century by Georg Simmel. In *Die Großstadt und das Geistesleben (The Metropolis and Mental Life, 1903)*, Simmel claimed that the difference between the city and the countryside resides primarily in the amount and intensiveness of the stimuli that they provide. The hectic rhythm, the constant changes and the huge supply of impressions of big cities stand in clear contrast with the placid flowing of rural life. According to his thought, the city-dweller, always exposed to a constant nervous stimulation, soon exhausts the reserve of mental strength, and, being in the same milieu, does not have the possibility to upload new energies. As a consequence, the inhabitants of big cities have developed what he calls the “blasé outlook”²⁸, which can be considered another – less pejorative – way to define the “intelligence” of city-dwellers described by Spengler, at least in the sense that it does not necessarily lead to a cultural decline. This attitude (which is a sociological counterpart of the literally habitus of Benjamin’s flâneur) is the result of the excessive solicitation of the urban environment and the only way the city-dweller have at their disposal not to break down in front of the immense variety of stimuli that the city constantly erupt. The analysis of Simmel goes a step further than Spengler’s and tries to explain why the urban environment produce this never-ending stream of impressions. Like Max Weber, Simmel insists that the main feature of the modern city is the economical activity, which has expanded

²⁷ The relationship between Oswald Spengler and the Nazism is of course complicated and is still today a matter of debate. Spengler died in 1936 and during his last years he openly criticized the anti-Semitism of the Third Reich. His last work, *Jahre der Entscheidung* (1934) was banned. On the other hand, he publicly admitted of voting for Hitler and Joseph Goebbels invited him to hold public speeches.

²⁸ “There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which is so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook. It is first the consequence of those rapidly shifting stimulations of the nerves which are thrown together in all their contrasts and from which it seems to us the intensification of metropolitan intellectuality seems to be derived”, (Simmel, 1997 :72-73).

outside the market and has taken up the shape of the money economy. The market, in modern time, is no longer the only place designated to the selling and buying of products, but it has become a system of factories, warehouses and shops in which the values of everything is decided in the Stock Exchange (like the example of London after the Great Fire clearly shows). Therefore, what continuously stimulates the mind of the city-dweller is the flow of impressions originated by the supply of the uncountable products provided by the market:

The metropolis is the seat of commerce and it is in it that the purchasability of things appears in quite different aspect than in simpler economies. In it is brought to a peak, in a certain way, that achievement in the concentration of purchasable things which stimulates the individual to the highest degree of nervous energy. Through the mere quantitative intensification of the same conditions this achievement is transformed into its opposite, into this peculiar adaptive phenomenon – the blasé attitude – in which the nerves reveal their final possibility of adjusting themselves to the content and the form of metropolitan life by renouncing the response to them. (Simmel, 1997 : 73).

What seems to be clear in the analysis conducted in these early sociological studies about the city in the West world is the unquestionable centrality of the economical factor, which in ancient and medieval time manifested itself in the place of the market. In modern time, with the industrial revolution and the impressive increase of the urban population, economy became even more dominant and ramified itself in every aspect of life, creating a modern concept of “market” which expanded outside the space of the market-square and has evolved in a complex system that steers the whole economical life. On a social level, the dynamics that used to characterize the city since centuries evolved into a new hierarchy, with the development of the working-class and the bourgeoisie, which lived next to each other in the new modern city, although occupying very different spaces inside of it. Finally, the modern city – the western city coming out of the Nineteenth century – registers the rise of a peculiar “urban mentality”, which is connected (according to Simmel) to the surplus of impressions derived from the economical power outstripping the receptivity of the human mind and thus creating a new type of attitude among the city-dwellers.

All these topics were a major concern not only of philosophers and sociologist, but also of writers, poets and painters and would represent a matter of debate about the urban development also in the decades following World War II, when the capitalistic economy further expanded and invested every western-country, transforming their cities into the radiating points of this ultimate transformation.

PARAGRAPH THREE

THE CITY IN MODERN LITERATURE

*Lo! Death has reared himself a throne
In a strange city lying alone
Far down within the dim West,
Where the good and the bad and the worst
and the best
Have gone to their eternal rest.*

(...)

*No rays from the holy heaven come down
On the long night-time of that town;
But light from out the lurid sea
Streams up the turrets silently –
Gleams up the pinnacles far and free
Up domes – up spires – up kingly halls –
Up fanes – up Babylon-like walls –
Up shadowy long-forgotten bowers
Of sculptured ivy and stone flowers –
Up many and many a marvelous shrine
Whose wreathed friezes intertwine
The viol, the violet, and the wine.*

(...)

*And when, amid no earthly moans,
Down, down that town shall settle hence,
Hell, rising from a thousand thrones,
Shall do it reverence
(Poe, 2003 : 52-53)*

The poem “The City in the Sea” by Edgar Allan Poe, published in 1845 (but already appeared in 1831 in an earlier version under the title “The Doomed City”), depicts an imaginary city buried by water. The ghostly and sinister aspect of this place is announced in the first line, where the city is described as the “throne of the Death” and where vanitas seems to be the only principle still valid (*where the good and the bad and the worst and the best/have gone to their eternal rest*).

The magnificent architecture of its buildings, with the richly decorated spires, domes and halls, is threatened by the tide which, in the last stanza, reaches up to the top of the towers that have slowly and silently sunk. No clear indication is given about the name of the city, although some critics have linked this poem with another one by Poe, entitled “Al Aaraaf”, where some ancient cities, such as Tadmor, Persepolis and Gomorrah are named.²⁹ Anyway, it seems more probable that Poe alluded to an imaginary place and, despite the biblical echo that the parallel with “Al Aaraaf” would suggest, nothing prevents from claiming that he had actually in mind a modern city. As Morton and Lucia White state: “Like so many romantic writers, Poe was fascinated not only by the lurid quality of ruined cities in the past, but also by cities in his own day” (White, 19xv, : 284).

What is apparently missing, in this deserted city governed by death is the people, unless we admit that the tide, with its destructive fury, stands as a metaphor for the crowd swarming over the mysterious place. This interpretation stretches perhaps too much the indefinite character of the poem, but does not seem so inconsistent if we consider *The City in the Sea* in the light of the short story “The Man of the Crowd”, which has become a sort of manifest for the representation of urban environments in literature. In this text Poe narrates the story of a man who, after a period of illness, goes to a café facing one of the principal thoroughfares of London. As the evening approaches, his attention is drawn to the crowd strolling outside, to which he turns his gaze through the slightly fogged-up window-panes. After describing the multitude of people walking fast on the pavements of the streets, the protagonist notices a man, “a decrepit old man, some sixty-five or seventy year of age” (Poe, 1992 : 446) and, mysteriously fascinated by this unknown character, he feels compelled to follow him in order “to know more about him” (Poe, 1992 : 447). So they cross streets, round corners, walk through squares, never exchanging a word, but constantly surrounded by the murmuring mob. During their wandering across the “mighty London”, they end up in a bazaar, come in view of one of the principal theaters, keep on walking in the night until they reach “the most noisome quarter of London, where everything wore the worst impress of the most deplorable poverty, and the most desperate crime” (Poe, 1992 : 449) and finally go back, circle-like, to the same spot from where they had started. The

²⁹ Like Morton and Lucia White suggest: “We are not told by the poet what town this is, but it has been suggested that the origin of this poem is to be found in lines from Poe’s longer poem, ‘Al Aaraaf’: Friezes from Tadmor and Persepolis - / From Balbec, and the stilly, clear abyss / of beautiful Gomorrah! O, the wave / Is now upon thee – but too late to ave!” (White, KLÇKÇL : 284).

long walk through the metropolitan labyrinth has lasted the entire night, because, when they get back to the street of the Hotel D - , it is nearly day-break.

“The Man of the Crowd” has been often considered one of the first and most intense description of the modern metropolis in literature. Its compact and dense prose exercised a deep fascination on Charles Baudelaire and created a literary *topos*, that of the crowd, that was going to become peculiar for the whole Modernism³⁰.

Walter Benjamin, in his essays about Baudelaire’s poems, emphasizes the importance of “The Man of the Crowd” as the inspiring text for some of the major topics for the poet of the *Fleurs du mal*:

A story by Poe which Baudelaire translated can be seen as the classic example among the older versions of the motif of the crowd. It is marked by certain peculiarities which, upon closer inspection, reveal aspects of social forces of such a power and hidden depth that we may include them among the only ones that are capable of exerting both a subtle and a profound effect on artistic production (...) Poe’s image cannot be called realistic. It shows a purposely distorting imagination at work, one that takes the text far from what is commonly advocated as the model of social realism. Barbier, perhaps one of the best examples of this type of realism, described things in a less eccentric way. Moreover, he chose a more transparent subject: the oppressed masses. Poe is not concerned with this; he deals with “people”, pure and simple. For him, as for Engels, there was something menacing in the spectacle they presented. It is precisely this image of big-city crowds that became decisive for Baudelaire. (Benjamin, 2006 : 186-188).

The passage quoted above sheds a critical light on two issues that primarily concern our research, namely the powerful “social forces” hidden but constantly perceptible in the crowd of the modern city, and the attempt to represent the mass of the city-dwellers in their totality, without focusing on a particular group or taking a particular perspective. The interesting aspect of Poe’s short-story lies therefore not only in the object of his description (the crowd of the modern city), but also in the mode of its representation, which dismisses a perspective tied to a specific section of the society, but aims at embracing its full totality. As a consequence, the observer of the new social and economic life is someone who is able to take up a particular position, neither inside nor outside the crowd, constantly walking on an invisible border which separates him from the reality unfolding all around him, although – exactly like the protagonist of Poe – he walks through it. This peculiar viewpoint over the urban crowd will be embodied in the Nineteenth

³⁰ Richard Lehan claims that two kinds of urban realism are detectable in Modernism: the first one is the city created by artists, where their feelings and impressions embody a urban vision; the second is the city created by the crowd, which gains a new significance and becomes almost like a personality in literature: “The crowd became a metonym for the city in modern discourse, and a great deal of urban study is given over to the study of the crowd: the subject of the *Grosstadt* dominates the thought of Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and Walter Benjamin”, (Lehan, ,1998 : 71).

century by the flâneur, the Parisian character depicted by Charles Baudelaire in his poems and in his *petit poems en prose*, of which “The Man of the Crowd” represents – like many critics starting from Benjamin have noticed – a forerunner³¹.

We will analyze later the literary importance of the flâneur. Before that, we need to give attention to the heterogenic nature of the crowd on the street of London described by Poe. It is interesting to detect that approximately half of the text is devoted to the description of the crowd itself, that is to say almost as much as the nightly walk through the city. When the narrator turns his gaze to the multitude hurrying on the pavements outside the café where he is sitting, what he sees is the whole social hierarchy in small scale. Starting from the top, he notices “noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stockjobbers – the Eupatrids and the common-places of society – men of leisure and men actively engaged in affairs of their own” (Poe, 1992 : 443). Then he descends to the tribe of clerks, divided between two phalanxes: the junior clerks, easily recognizable because of their *deskism*, that is to say “a certain dapperness of carriage” (Poe, 1992: 445), and the senior clerks, balder and more self-secure. After them come the pick-pockets, “with which all great cities are infested” (Poe, 1992 : 444) and the drunkards “innumerable and indescribable” (Poe, 1992 : 444). Between these two opposites, the narrator catches the presence of the dandies and military men, and of modest young girls “returning from long and late labor to a cheerless home” (Poe, 1992 : 444). Like Benjamin clearly pointed out, this overlook of the city-crowd is not realistic and its features are amplified to the extreme. Nevertheless, this kaleidoscopic crowd is probably well-representative of the social mixture generated by the modern time. The picture is dominated by two social classes, the raising industrial bourgeoisie, which was growing faster and faster, and what could be called the lower middle-class (the clerks). Among them, the indefinite multitude of the underdogs and poor workers. Although different in their clothes, appearance and way of walking, they are all part of the crowd and they all share the same urban space. Of course, like the slum described immediately afterwards clearly exemplifies,

³¹ Critics, starting with Walter Benjamin, have claimed that the anonymous protagonist of the short-story can be regarded as anticipation of the Parisian flâneur: “The Man of the Crowd is an onlooker at urban scene, thus making him an excellent specimen of what many critics call the flâneur. In French that word means ‘an idler’, and Poe’s narrator seemingly idles as he looks on and pictorializes urban scenes. In fact, early assessment of the flâneur in Poe’s writing concentrated on urban situation. Other Poe protagonists fit the flâneur paradigm”, (Fisher, 2008 : 61) “Poe’s famous tale ‘The Man of the crowd’ is something like the X-ray picture of a detective story. (...) This unknown man is the *flâneur*. That is how Baudelaire interpreted him when, in his essay on Guys, he called the *flâneur* ‘l’homme des foules.’” (Benjamin, 1991 :207).

London was not the same everywhere and the chance of seeing all these people walking on the same pavement in such a limited span of time was probably feeble. Poe concentrates a panoramic view of the city in a relatively small place and in a short interval, making it intensive and partly distorting it. Nevertheless, what matters is the image of a city where a new social order has been established and where a contact between the different strata is possible, even if the crowd appears to be composed of people foreign to each other. Poe portrays, in a cinematographic-like sequence, not only the crowd of London on a misty evening; he is describing the modern crowd.

As we have seen in the previous paragraph when discussing the sociological analysis of the city conducted by Max Weber, one of the peculiar characteristics of the cities in the West countries is the social interplay, the clash between the different classes, the struggles that constantly redefine the intimate setting of the urban environment. The industrial revolution determined the phenomenon of urbanism, which was not merely an incredible migration of people from the countryside to the major industrial centers, but also a radical redefinition of the urban environment itself, both on a social and on a physical level. During the Nineteenth century cities grew impressively in size, their population increased and their borders expanded, but also what was already existing underwent an extensive transformation. The dominant social class, the bourgeoisie, created a new economic and cultural climate, expressed new needs, and craved also new *space*. The example of Paris is, in this regard, extremely important. Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's renovation of the center of the French capital during the regime of Napoleon III tore down entire districts along the Seine, cancelling almost every trace of medieval architecture and giving the topography a new, more modern and efficient, shape. The symbol of this operation was the Boulevard. The political and social value of the transformation of Paris between the years 1852 and 1870 has been analyzed by Walter Benjamin in his essay *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, in the paragraph entitled "Haussmann, or the Barricades". Here Benjamin, with his rapid, quicksilver-like prose, links together the urban project of Haussmann with the rise of the bourgeoisie spirit, the political power of Napoleon III and the economic force of the financial speculation:

The institutions of the bourgeoisie's worldly and spiritual dominance were to find their apotheosis within the framework of the boulevards. Before their completion, boulevards were draped across with canvas and unveiled like monuments. – Haussmann's activity is linked to Napoleonic imperialism. Louis Napoleon promotes investment capital, and

Paris experiences a rush of speculation. (...) The expropriation carried out under Haussmann call forth a wave of fraudulent speculation. (...) In 1864, in a speech before the National Assembly, he vents his hatred of the rootless urban population, which keeps increasing as a result of his projects. Rising rents drive the proletariat into the suburbs. The *quartiers* of Paris in this way lose their distinctive physiognomy. The “red belt” forms. Haussmann gave himself the title of “demolition artist”, *artiste démolisseur*. (Benjamin, 2006 : 42-43).

Benjamin emphasizes the role played by Haussmann as the executor of the political will incarnated by Napoleon III to favor the financial market and to pull the working-class out in the suburbs, in order to keep it at safe distance and to create an implicit boundary between the place which was supposed to be for the bourgeoisie and the slums where the proletarians should move. According to Benjamin, the width of the boulevard was also aiming at nullifying the possibility for people to erect barricades: “Widening the streets is designed to make the erection of barricades impossible, and new streets are to furnish the shortest route between the barracks and the worker’s districts.” (Benjamin, 2006 : 44). The entire process of Paris renovation consequently finds its origin in the demographic change of the French capital during the Eighteenth and the beginning of the Nineteenth century and in the development of a new social order, both phenomena originated and propelled by the industrial revolution. The project of Baron Haussmann showed for the first time the cyclopean force that the bourgeoisie was capable of. When Haussmann called himself as a “demolition artist”, he – most probably unconsciously – made a statement which well defines the very spirit of the bourgeoisie, that is to say the establishment of a system that turns the process of tearing down, sweeping away and replacing into a principle. This principle, which finds its most visible and majestic expression in architecture, penetrates the entire society, extending in any direction and absorbing into itself everything that comes on its way. The new capitalistic market applies the principles of the industrial production to other sectors of the society such as construction, manufacturing, and popular culture, so that every creation, like Benjamin explains in the last page of his text, is submitted to the new economic dynamic:

The development of the forces of production shattered the wish symbols of the previous century, even before the monuments representing them had collapsed. In the Nineteenth century this development worked to emancipate the forms of construction from art, just as in the sixteenth century the sciences freed themselves from philosophy. A start is made with architecture as engineered construction. Then comes the reproduction of nature as photography. The creation of fantasy prepares to become practical as commercial art. Literature submits to montage in the feuilleton. All these products are on the point of entering the market as commodities. (Benjamin, 2006 : 45).

The analysis of Benjamin describes the rapid conversion of the whole society into a commodification process. The incredible power generated by such a system would alter radically the physiognomy of the western countries in every aspect, from economy to art, from politics to architecture. At the same time, it revealed how its capacity of constant innovation and regeneration, of creation through destruction, was also its intimate limit and, ultimately, its destiny. The distinctive feature of the bourgeoisies is in fact the ephemeral character of any of its creations, which are not thought to last, but to be inserted in a cycle of constant production and consumption, that aims at substituting what is existing with something new, over and over again.

The neo-Marxist critic Marshal Berman, in his brilliant essay *All That is Solid Melts into Air* emphasizes this peculiar feature of the bourgeoisie's economic structure. Starting from the analysis of *Faust*, Berman argues that Goethe's masterpiece, written between 1771 and 1831, mirrors the early shift of the European society towards industrialization and the process of commodification. Faust goes through three phases: he is first a dreamer (when he evokes the places and the rituals of his childhood as idyllic), then he turns into a lover (when the interaction with the environment of his childhood is not possible anymore) and finally into a developer. In this final stage, Faust "connects his personal drives with the economic, political and social forces that drive the world; he learns to build and destroy. He expands the horizon of his being from private to public life, from intimacy to activism, from communication to organization"(Berman, 1983 : 61). According to Berman, the Faustian hero represents the prototype of the newly-born bourgeoisie at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century and his role of the developer is an anticipation of the capitalistic society that was to follow³².

Berman claims that Marx's background is to be traced back in the German humanist culture of his youth, steaming from Goethe's and Shiller's writings and their romantic successors. What Marx understands is that "self-development grows out of the emerging reality of bourgeois economic development" (Berman,1983 : 96) and perceives that capitalism is based on a dynamic that, while it is still creating something new, is already working to replace it with something else. Berman calls this feature the "innovative self-destruction" of capitalism:

³² We will return later to this possibility of re-actualizing the figure of Faust in the society after War World II, suggested by Berman in this passage.

And yet, the truth of the matter, as Marx sees, is that everything that bourgeois society builds is built to be torn down. ‘All that is solid’ - from the clothes on our backs to the looms and mills that weave them, to the men and women who work the machines, to the houses and neighborhoods the workers live in, to the firms and corporations that exploit the workers, to the towns and cities and whole regions and even nations that embrace them all – all these are made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, so they can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in even more profitable forms.

The pathos of all bourgeois monuments is that their material strength and solidity actually count for nothing and carry no weight at all, that they are blown away like frail reeds by the very forces of capitalistic development that they celebrate. Even the most beautiful and impressive bourgeois monuments and public works are disposable, capitalized for fast depreciation and planned to be obsolete (Berman, 1983 : 99).

This definition of the capitalistic “innovative self-destructive” force is the very heart of the reflection conducted by Berman, which aims at bringing together Marxism as a philosophical discourse and modernism in literature not intended as a perfectly codified system, but as a “maelstrom” of contrasting elements, opposite forces, paradoxical expressions with ramifications that go from painting to literature, from economy to politics. Despite the extremely heterogenic nature of modernism, Berman claims that it is possible to detect an “interfusion of its material and spiritual forces, the intimate unity of the modern self and the modern environment” (Berman, 1983 : 132). Among the writers and thinkers that were able to capture this interfusion he counts Goethe and Marx, Stendhal, Baudelaire and Dostoevsky.

The analysis of Baudelaire’s *petit poem en prose* “The Eyes of the Poor” and of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the underground* reveals how, no matter how inhomogeneous and hard to grasp modernism can be, it is possible to find a specific *place* in the urban environment, both physical and literal, where the instances of modernity (the new social mixture, the new ethical values, the new urban rituals, the new economical process) actually find their *locus deputatus* and interact with each other. The first place detected by Berman is the Parisian boulevard designed by Haussmann. He takes up the study case of the 26th *poem en prose* of the *Paris Spleen*, “The Eyes of the Poor”, which depicts a typical urban scene from Paris in 1864. In the evening hour, a young bourgeois couple enter a café on a boulevard and take a seat: “Le soir, un peu fatiguée, vous voulûtes vous asseoir devant un café neuf qui formait le coin d’un boulevard neuf, encore tout plein de gravois et montrant déjà glorieusement ses splendeurs inachevées.”³³ (Baudelaire, 2009 : 67) Baudelaire seems to emphasize that both the café and the boulevard are

³³ “In the evening, a bit tired, we wanted to sit down in front of a new café that formed the corner of a new boulevard, still strewn with debris and already gloriously displaying its unfinished splendors”.

new, a creation of the time where the story takes place. The café is sparkling, well-illuminated, displaying any sort of imaginable delight “au service de la goinfrerie”³⁴ (Baudelaire, 2009 : 67), but when the protagonist turns his head to the window-pane, he suddenly catches a scene that upsets his mind: outside, on the pavement, stands a man with two children, looking inside the café with a bittersweet gaze expressing both admiration for the gorgeous interior and resignation for not being admitted to that rich banquet. The protagonist feels almost embarrassed for the luxury surrounding him: “Non-seulement j’étais attendri par cette famille d’yeux, mais je me sentais un peu honteux de nos verres et de nos carafes, plus grands que notre soif”³⁵ (Baudelaire, 2009 : 67), whereas the woman who is sitting together with him does not show any compassion and wishes that the waiter would ask them to leave.

According to Berman, what marks the difference between this scene and any other of the same kind written before is the presence of the boulevard, which becomes the absolute symbol of Haussmann’s urban plan and of a whole epoch³⁶. Baudelaire wrote this prose poem in 1864, exactly in the middle of the work of reconstruction that was transforming the centre of Paris. What is important to underscore in this regard is not only the historical and political value of Haussmann’s project (already mentioned in the analysis of Benjamin) but especially the impact that the works of the “demolition artist” had on the social interplay. The construction of the boulevards tore down entire districts and became eponymous of the bourgeois *vie parisienne*, but it partially failed in its attempt to push out of the city the poor people who used to live in these neighborhoods. Even if their old houses were torn down and they had been forced to move to the *banlieu*, they could now move freely across the city thanks to the boulevards, whereas before they were more confined to a specific area.

The new construction wrecked hundreds of buildings, displaced uncounted thousands of people, destroyed whole neighborhoods that had lived for centuries. But it opened up the whole city, for the first time in its history, to all its inhabitants. Now, at last, it was possible to move not only within neighborhoods, but also through them. Now, after centuries of life as a cluster of isolated cells, Paris was becoming a unified physical and human space (...) Haussmann, in tearing down the old medieval slums, inadvertently

³⁴ ”At the service of gluttony”.

³⁵ ”Not only was I moved by this family of eyes, but I also felt a little ashamed of our glasses and our carafes, which were larger than our thirst”.

³⁶ As Berman points out, there is something peculiar about this *petit poème en prose*: ”What marks it off from a multitude of earlier Parisian scenes of love and class struggle? The difference lies in the urban space where our scene takes place (...) The difference, in one word, is the boulevard: the new Parisian boulevard was the most spectacular urban innovation of the nineteenth century, and the decisive breakthrough in the modernization of the traditional city.” (Berman, 1983 : 150).

broke down the self-enclosed and hermetically sealed world of traditional urban poverty. The boulevards, blasting great holes through the poorest neighborhoods, enable the poor to walk through the holes and out of their ravaged neighborhoods, to discover for the first time what the rest of the city and the rest of the life is like. (Berman, 1983 : 150-151; 153).

Consequently, the boulevard gains a new epistemological value. It is not only the place where the bourgeoisie can celebrate itself and stroll undisturbed along the streets, but also the connecting link that allows the eradicated working-class to wander across the city and discover its modern complexity. This boulevard-effect also influenced the bourgeoisie, as the *petit poem* by Baudelaire shows in the final part: the narrator of the story is deeply touched by the view of the poor father with the children and he questions the excess of the new luxuries (the cans bigger than their thirst), whereas the woman in his company has a different opinion. In her eyes, the poor family is out of place and their visibility prevents her from enjoying her meal.

If we return now to “The Man of the Crowd” by Poe, it is possible to note a convergence with “The Eyes of the Poor”, and it is therefore not surprising that Baudelaire, at the beginning of his essay *The Painter of Modern Life* expressed a great interest for this short-story:

Do you remember a picture (it really is a picture!) painted – or rather written – by the most powerful pen of our age, and entitled *The Man of the Crowd*? In the window of a coffee-house there sits a convalescent, pleasurably absorbed in gazing at the crowd, and mingling, through the medium of thought, in the turmoil of thought that surrounds him. But lately returned from the valley of the shadow of death, he is rapturously breathing in all the odours and essences of life; as he has been on the brink of total oblivion, he remembers, and fervently desires to remember, everything. Finally he hurls himself headlong into the midst of the throng, in pursuit of the unknown, half-glimpsed countenance that has, on an instant, bewitched him. Curiosity has become a fatal, irresistible passion! (Baudelaire, 1964 : 7).

Despite some significant differences (we could argue that the picture given by Poe is a panoramic view of the social mixture of the thoroughfare of London, whereas Baudelaire concentrates only on a particular segment of the French society), in both cases it appears evident the central role played by the *street*, which turns into the symbol of the new urban environment and the place *par excellence* where the new social interplay happens and the new economic order unfolds, with all their dramatic tension and unavoidable conflicts.

The second place, according to Berman’s analysis, which is able to express the dynamic of modern life is the Nevsky Prospect in Saint Petersburg. Also in this case the Russian boulevard, created on the model developed by Haussmann in Paris, appears as the stage where the advent of modernity in the Czar’s empire takes place. The first writer to give the Nevsky

Prospect this role was Nikolai Gogol, who emphasized the polymorphic nature of the big avenue of Saint Petersburg in the homonymous story of 1834, but its best depicter is to be found in Feodor Dostoevsky. The modernity of the Nevsky Prospect can be expressed in many different ways. From the technical point of view, it represented the most advanced creation of the country, it was the “showcase for the wonders of the new consumer economy that modern mass production was just beginning to open up” (Berman, 1983 : 194), but its peculiar feature was especially that of being:

The one space in Petersburg (and perhaps in all Russia) where all the existing classes came together, from the nobility whose palaces and town-houses graced the streets at its starting point near the Admiralty and the Winter Palace, to the poor artisans, prostitutes, derelicts and bohemians who huddled in the wretched fleabags and taverns near the railroad station in Znaniemsky Square where the prospect came to an end. (Berman, 1983 : 195)

Berman emphasizes immediately the economic prominence of the city and the composite social character of the crowd strolling on the Nevsky Prospect, implying that the new Russian capital (Saint Petersburg retained this status from its foundation in 1732 until 1918) served as a bridgehead towards the western countries (so that the products of the industrial revolution could arrive to the East of Europe and find a market in the shops on the Nevsky) and hosted a unique mixture of the social classes in the Empire.

This situation was the result of a profound social change that had been long awaited in the country, especially after the negative exit of the Crimean war (1853-1856), when it became clear that Russia had to go through radical transformations. In this sense, the years that followed the war became an historical watershed and the most significant event was probably Alexander II’s edict of February 19, 1861, that freed the serfs. As a consequence, a new social class, consisting of people with different backgrounds, began to develop, marking an historical transition in the Russian society. Its name was the *raznochintsy*:

The 1860’s are notable for the emergence of a new generation and a new style of intellectuals: the *raznochintsy*, “men of various origins and classes”, the administrative term for all Russians who did not belong to the nobility or gentry. This term is more or less equivalent to the French pre-revolutionary Third Estate; it is a measure of Russia’s backwardness that the members of this estate – which, of course, included the vast majority of Russians – did not appear as historical actors until this point. (Berman, 1983 : 213).

The enfranchisement of the *raznochintsy*, of course, did not happen overnight. The edict of 1860 was the response to social instances that had been growing for many years, and,

although it represented an historical turning-point, it took a long time before the entire process could be fully accomplished. The story of the *raznochintsy* is described in many novels from that period and one of its best literal representations is certainly the anonymous protagonist of *Notes from the Underground* by Feodor Dostoevsky, which, by coincidence, was published for the first time in 1864 (the same year of “The Eyes of the Poor”). The short novel depicts the wanderings of a mysterious man who, at the beginning of the story, seems to suffer of a sort of agoraphobia: “I was terribly afraid of being seen, of being met, of being recognized. I already had the underground in my soul” (Dostoyevsky, 1992 : 9). All of a sudden, though, he feels an almost compulsive need to interact with the people around him. This unexpected turn, from being scared of people to the desire of interaction, is the distinctive characteristic of the Underground Man, that is to say, of the *raznochintsy* of the 1860’s. At the very beginning he feels unease with the freedom he has been granted, he does not know how to blend with the others, he feels chased by a feeling of discomfort, but – after a rather long internal struggle – he becomes aware of his (subaltern) condition and decides to react. Such a process coincides with a different kind of behavior on the Nevsky Prospect. The Man of the Underground admits that he used to feel constantly out of place when he walked on the boulevard of the city and that his major preoccupation was to show a referential attitude in front of the nobles and the militaries:

Sometimes on holidays I used to stroll along the sunny side of the Nevsky about four o’clock in the afternoon. Though it was hardly a stroll so much as a series of innumerable miseries, humiliations and resentments; but no doubt that was just what I wanted. I used to wriggle along in the most unseemly fashion, continually moving aside to make way for generals, for officers of the Guards and Hussars, or for ladies. (...) This was a regular martyrdom, a continual, intolerable humiliation at the thought, which passed into an incessant and direct sensation, that I was a fly in the eyes of whole this world, a nasty, disgusting fly – more intelligent, more highly developed, more refined in feeling than any of them, of course – but a fly that was constantly making way for everyone, insulted and injured by everyone. Why I inflicted this torment on myself, why I went to the Nevsky, I don’t know, I felt simply drawn there at every opportunity. (Dostoyevsky, 1992 : 35-36)

Slowly, the *raznochintsy* understands that this sort of deference for his superiors has no sense and, after many sleepless nights, plans to make an act of revolt. One day, when he will meet his officer again, he will not move aside. Finally, the Man of the Underground is given the chance to carry out his plan: “Suddenly, three paces from my enemy, I unexpectedly made up my mind – I closed my eyes, and we ran full tilt, should to shoulder, into each other! I did not bunge an inch, and passed him on a perfectly equal footing! ... Of course I got the worst of it – he was stronger

– but that was not the point. The point was that I had attained my goal, I had kept up my dignity” (Dostoyevsky, 1992 : 58).

This is – according to Berman – the great social change which is described in *Notes from the Underground*: the protagonist, after realizing the injustices he is victim of, decides to react and goes on the streets to make his personal revolution. Compared to the characters of the earlier works of Dostoevsky and other Russian writers who had depicted the typical Petersburg-situation of the confrontation between the high officer and the weak clerk, the Underground Man stands as a far more dynamic figure, and his upheaval, although still immature to be strong enough to topple down the political power, is anyway an incredible burst of energy. Finally aware of his social value and armed with a long experienced frustration, the character of Dostoevsky comes out of the anonymity and decides to confront his superiors in the only place where this could possibly happen: on the Nevsky Prospect, because – as already mentioned before – it was on its pavements that people of different social extraction had the chance to meet vis-à-vis and it was here that the social gaps between the *raznochintsy*, the nobility and the higher officials were given a clear evidence. If the higher classes of Petersburg used to stroll there to admire the goods imported from Europe and to interact with people of the same rank, the *raznochintsy*, once defeated the feeling of fear, emerged from the (social) underground where he has been forced for centuries and went to the most visible place of the city to face up those who had been neglecting his rights and still pretended he did not exist³⁷.

We have dwelt on the analysis conducted by Marshall Berman about Baudelaire’s “The Eyes of the Poor” and Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* for different kinds of reason. First of all, Berman’s theoretical discourse brings together in a stringent way the multiple factors that define what is generally called “modernity”: the technological progress that paved the way

³⁷ It is very important to notice a difference between Haussmann’s boulevard and the Nevsky Prospect, namely that the boulevards of Paris were the result of an operation of reconstruction which, by changing the architecture and the topography of the city, altered the social displacement of the city-population and decreed the attempt of establishing a new order, whereas the Nevsky Prospect – exactly like the whole city of Petersburg – was created *ex nihilo*. As a consequence, the historical and political significance of these two avenues, despite all the technical similarities, is radically different and implicitly shows how modernity can assume even contrasting features depending on the time and place of its development. According to Berman, this diversity marks also the difference between the early French Modernism and the Russian equivalent. The *Raznochintsy* constitute a social majority without an historical and political background, without a *fraternité* to cling on, and, because of that, they have to invent it from the scratch, from the “underground”. On one hand there is a modernism which derives from the synergy between a modern reality and a threat to this reality; on the other, we find a modernism from the underground, without a metaphysical or ideological anchorage, but nevertheless – or maybe because of that – much more dynamic and explosive. (See Berman, 1983 : 229-232).

for the industrial revolution, the raise of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of a new social hierarchy that radically changed the shape of the European societies, and above all the definition of the “innovative self-destructive” force of capitalism, which Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin had already anticipated. All these topics are still nowadays of the utmost importance. Second, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* describes how the experience of modernity has a particular impact on the development of the urban environment so that any philosophical analysis of the former leads inevitably to the latter. The same happens also for modernism in literature. Modernism, Berman claims, “is a movement of the street”, it is on the pavements of the boulevards, on the asphalt of the metropolis that the new social and economical order unfolds and it is here that poets and novelists look when they intend to write about the society they live in.

So far we have concentrated on the topic of the social interplay, how it can assume different shapes and how it finds its *locus deputatus* in the urban crowd meeting on the streets. As we mentioned already before about the short-story by Edgar Allan Poe, a new character arose from the urban crowd of the Nineteenth century and became its most intensive observer: the flâneur. This peculiar social type, which turn into a fundamental literal figure of its epoch, was outlined by Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life*:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home: to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. (Baudelaire, 1964 : 9)

The picture we are given of the Parisian flâneur is intimately bound to the crowd of the city, which seems to be his natural environment. Despite that, the flâneur does not have a clear-cut relationship with his habitat; rather the opposite. Like Keith Tester notices: “Baudelaire’s poet is the man *of* the crowd as opposed to the man *in* the crowd” (Tester, 1994 : 4), underscoring the dual character of this figure, which is attracted by the tumult of the *vie parisienne* but, at the same time, unable to completely become part of it. As mentioned before, the flâneur is a social type devoted to the observance of the modern life from a position which is neither completely internal nor external. The new social and economic reality that was unfolding in front of his eyes was the triumph of the French bourgeoisie, the disembowelment of the old

center of Paris to give space to the boulevards of Haussmann, the multiplication of the arcades, the flourishing of the *magasins de nouveauté*; it was a world marching into modernity at incredible speed. Baudelaire was one of the first intellectuals to see it clearly and to claim that this modernity was epitomized by the “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent; the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (Baudelaire, 1992 :13)³⁸. The major feature of the bourgeois epoch resides therefore in the ephemeral character of its nature, the same character that, according to Benjamin, stems from the commodification process and that, like Berman affirms, becomes the principle of the capitalist innovative self-destruction. The flâneur is in charge of trying to grasp the ephemeral nature of *this* modernity. In order to be able to catch a glimpse of the new reality, he needs to go down the streets, to observe and somehow immerse himself in the new urban context, but, at the same time, he must resist the annihilating strength of attraction exercised by it, otherwise he will be absorbed in the commodification process himself. That is why the flâneur walks on the pavements with an idle behavior and at tortoise-pace: he retains a marginal position that allows him to *feel* the modernity but prevents him from being helplessly sucked up in the urban vortex. Like Benjamin claims: “The flâneur still stands on the threshold – of the metropolis as of the middle-class. Neither has him in power yet. In neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd. (...) The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city beckons to the flâneur as phantasmagoria – now a landscape, now a room” (Benjamin, 1991 : 40). The flâneur, like Baudelaire and Benjamin interpreted him, appears consequently as a border-liner, a social outsider (he is not a noble, but he opposes resistance to the middle-class), a citizen who feels unease in the modern city; the crowd serves as a shield for him, but also as a lens through which to observe the epochal change that is taking place around him.

Keith Tester questions if the experience of the flâneur can be only limited to Baudelaire and Paris during the Nineteenth Century: “The flâneur is invariably seen as a bygone figure. Thanks to Benjamin, the flâneur is often seen as living and dying on the streets of Paris alone.” (Tester, 1994 : 13).

³⁸ It is important to notice that Baudelaire meant that every age had its share of modernity. At the beginning of the essay, he claims that beauty always made of an eternal, invariable part and a relative, circumstantial element. In the Nineteenth century, though, the ephemeral part was accelerating its transformation, making it more difficult to catch.

Tester points out what, on a closer look, seems to be a paradox of this figure: on one hand the flâneur is tied up to the chronotope of Paris under the Nineteenth Century, on the other, it tells something about modernity irrespective time and place³⁹. Nevertheless, such a paradox can be explained if we accept that the flâneur operates on two different levels, one which is local and particular and another which is more general and universally valid⁴⁰. This doubling of perspective gives the possibility to assign a more wider range to this figure in literature. Tester claims, for example, that also *The Man Without Qualities* by Robert Musil depicts Vienna at the beginning of the Twentieth Century like Baudelaire did with Paris one hundred years before.

This possibility of “liberating” the flâneur from the picture of Paris in the Nineteenth century and to make it into an archetype of a tradition of anti-heroes is particularly interesting and relevant for our research. As we will see, at the beginning of the Twentieth century, a group of young writers in Helsinki adopted the features of the Parisian flâneur and re-adapted them to the urban environment of the Finnish capital. This Nordic flâneur, named *dagdrivare* (day-waster) came to Finland through the mediation of the writer and journalist Hjalmar Söderberg, who had previously introduced it in the Swedish *fin-de-siècle* literature. Thus, the flâneur’s marginal, border-line position, as much as his blasé attitude and distanced behavior also appeared in another context, at that time very different from Paris, but that was also going through a period of radical transformations.

³⁹ Tester notices that this problem emerges also in Benjamin, who, despite his “scrupulous attention to the historical specificity of Paris, (but he) is perfectly happy to refer to London or Berlin if that will enable him to make a point more forcefully” (Tester, 1994 : 16).

⁴⁰See Tester, 1994 : 17-18.

PARAGRAPH FOUR

THE CITY TODAY

The storm-centre of all this grading, shovelling, hauling and hammering, is the college campus itself. A clear modern factory, brick and glass and big windows, already three quarters built, is being finished in a hysterical hurry. When the factory is fully operational, it will be able to process twenty-thousand graduates. But, in less than ten years, it will have to cope with forty or fifty thousand. So then everything will be torn down again and built up twice as tall. (Isherwood, 2010 : 28)

In the previous paragraph we have basically dealt with one type of city-representation during the Nineteenth Century, the one that, starting with Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, looks at the modern city as the eponymous of modernity, socially characterized by the rise of the bourgeoisie and economically dominated by the industrial-capitalistic outburst. Such view, which can be applied to other contexts as well (like the case of Dostoevsky testifies), tries to account for the rapid transformation of the urban environment, which reflects, with its radical changes, the “fugitive” and the “ephemeral” characters of modernity as described by Baudelaire in his essay *The Painter of Modern Life*. The result of this process is almost never clear-cut, rather it origins a twilight vision of the city: on the one hand writers emphasize the fearful mounting of the crowd as a result of the urbanization, the feeling of astonishment for the titanic works of destruction/construction operated in the urban texture, the disestablishing power provoked by the social and economical order; on the other, they perceive that this epoch has a beauty of its own and that its dynamic character opens up new perspectives and possibilities.

Of course this is only a part of the general discourse about the representation of the urban environment in literature. Generations of writers before and after Poe, Baudelaire and Dostoevsky contributed to make the city a literary *topos*. As Richard Lehan suggests, it is

possible to detect a tradition that goes back in time long before *The Man of the Crowd* or *Notes from Underground*. Already writers like Dickens or the French naturalists (such as Balzac and Zola) showed with striking efficacy the everyday life of different social strata in the modern city and basically the whole European (and American) Modernism is a metropolitan literary movement. However, like Berman, Lehan too claims that it was with Modernism that the city began to be loaded with new significance, because: “Modernism challenged the basic assumptions of naturalism, moving away from scientism toward a mythic/symbolic base, substituting cyclical for linear time, allowing a bergsonian kind of subjective reality to replace scientific empiricism” (Lehan, 1998 : 70).

To see a bound between Modernism and the raise of the city as one of the major subjects in literature seems therefore inescapable, like most of the theorists dealing with this period repeatedly underscore. Bradbury and McFarlane, in their fundamental text about Modernism in Europe between 1890 and 1930, give an extensive analysis of the central role played by the urban environment in most of the literary works of the period and draw a sort of map of modern cities that include not only the major European cultural-capitals, such as London, Paris and Saint Petersburg, but also Vienna, Berlin, Prague, Moscow, Zurich, New York and Chicago, and smaller cities such as Dublin and Oslo, the latter being the urban setting of two modernist masterpieces like *Ulysses* by James Joyce and *Sult* by Knut Hamsun. In trying to define the intimate connection between Modernism and the urban environment, Bradbury stresses the role of the modern city as the place of the technical and economical development, the irradiant point of the social changes and the frontier of the cultural experience:

The modern city has appropriated most of the functions and communications of society, most of its population, and the furthest extremities of its technological, commercial, industrial and intellectual experience. The city has become culture, or perhaps the chaos that succeeds it. Itself modernity as social action, it is both the centre of the prevalent social order and the generative frontier of its growth and change. (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1976 : 97) .

As we have already noticed before, the modern city always generated mixed feelings among writers and intellectuals. It appeared to be the centre of the cultural life, the place of the social intercourse and the beating heart of the economy, but, at the same time, it hosted sordid neighbourhoods where living conditions seemed to be inhuman and produced overwhelming individualism and greed among its dwellers. Bradbury talks about a double movement of attraction and repulsion:

Writers and intellectuals have long abhorred the city: the dream of escape of its vice, its immediacy, its sprawl, its pace, its very model of man has been the basis of a profound cultural dissent (...). Yet writers and intellectuals have, after all, gone there, as on some essential quest into art, experience, modern history, and the fullest realization of their potential. The pull and push of the city, its attraction and repulsion, have provided themes and attitudes that run deep in literature, where the city has become metaphor rather than place. (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1976 : 97).

This approach towards the urban environment testifies a combination of disregard and appeal that constantly has inhabited the notion of city in modernism⁴¹. If we look back at history, however, we can see that, starting from the end of the century, a darker, more despising and pejorative image of the urban environment became more recurrent. The wandering of the anonymous protagonist of *Sult (Hunger, 1890)* through the streets of Kristiania suffering of a starvation that transforms the city into an alienating and repulsive place; Mr Verloc's London, threatened by anarchy and terrorism in *The Secret Agent (1907)* by Joseph Conrad are just two examples of how the city was more and more experienced as a nightmarish place, where the individual is hunted by a feeling of dismay for a reality that slowly but irreversibly deteriorates his/her identity⁴². As Richard Lehan notices, the development of big cities at the dawn of the Twentieth century was perceived by some writers as the ultimate phase of a de-humanising, fearful process, that would turn the urban environment into a ghostly wasteland, consumed from within by its entropy. This expression, taken from the second law of thermodynamics, indicates the loss of energy in a closed system: "A city is a closed system: nothing provides it energy outside itself" (Lehan, 1998 : 123). Such an image of the city as an entity that consumes resources and only gives back slag becomes even stronger after the watershed of the First World War and culminates in *The Waste Land (1922)* by Thomas Stern Eliot, where the metropolis – London, again – is depicted as a dry and sterile soil, where nothing can grow and people are not afraid of death anymore, if not dead already. London is called the "unreal city", as to emphasize the

⁴¹ This double movement is the urban counterpart of what Alan Bullock defines as "the double image" of Europe during the period between 1870-1913. With its unequalled industrial and economic expansion, these decades were characterized by a strong bipolarity on different levels. The traditional European elites and the rich bourgeoisie were sitting next to each other, but, below the top, "Europe remained a society governed by class distinction, with undistinguished inequality between the rich and the poor. (...) The poor who thronged the overcrowded slums of the big cities were a lower order in humanity, and treated as such" (Bradbury & McFarlane : 61). On a political level, the old continent was split into two hostile coalitions ("France and Russia on the one hand, the Central power on the other"; Bradbury & McFarlane, 1976 : 61)

⁴² During the second decade of the Twentieth, Le Corbusier developed a urban plan for Paris, which included the demolition of most of the centre (considered as a big slum) and the construction of house-units. The *Plan Voicin (1925)* was never realized.

astounding and scary character of the multitude of people crowding the streets and the bridges. “Unreal city / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / a crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many” (Sterne, 1951 :63). Lehan points out that Eliot was not the first to make such a use of the wasteland landscape: already Dickens thought that the rapid and uncontrolled growth of the city would lead to a soulless and greedy society: “as the city went beyond a human scale, it became a destructive entity, organizing its citizens around impersonal institutions and the desire for money” (Lehan, 1998 : 124). Nevertheless, Eliot seems to go even further in his urban vision, echoing the philosophical discourse elaborated by Oswald Spengler, who – as we have seen before – developed a critical dichotomy between the city and the countryside, claiming that the metropolis, cutting itself off from the natural environment, symbolized the fall of civilization⁴³.

Berman too is aware of this development and states that, starting from the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the notion of modernity had been stretched into two different poles, creating opposite literary currents: “Modernity is either embraced with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm, or else condemned with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt” (Berman, 1983 : 25). The Italian futurism is a good example of the former; some English modernists like Pound perfectly personify the latter.

If we return to the historical overlook offered by Lehan, we can see that it deals with the English and Russian Modernism as much as with the American Modernism, and aims at showing how cities in the western world usually develop into three stages: from commercial knots into industrial centres and finally into a “world stage”: “The modern commercial city, which had its beginning in the eighteenth century, was transformed in the nineteenth century by the industrial revolution and underwent another transformation in the twentieth century” (Lehan, 1998 : 257). Such categorization brings us back again to the central role played in the urban environment by commerce and industrialization, but also widens the spectrum of the research outside the European borders and shifts the focus on the American metropolis. The central part of the work of Lehan is therefore devoted to John Dos Passos, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, William Carlos Williams and Nathael West, each of them questioning and analysing in different ways the

⁴³ “Spengler perceived a short-circuit within the modern city. Seeing the roots of human life in the soil, Spengler believed that the city bankrupted the country and was diminished in return. Cut off from a source of nourishment beyond itself, the city became a closed system, caught in an entropic process that depleted its energy” (Lehan, 1998 :127).

American capitalistic urbanization. Fitzgerald seemed to follow the spenglerian tradition of Eliot and “believed that in the cities the Enlightenment legacy had been corrupted from within, leading inescapably to disillusionment and waste” (Lehan, 1998 : 223); Dos Passos expressed the same feeling of dismay, perceiving the city as a self-consuming vortex: “Dos Passos spent his whole career depicting an urban America that was moving toward decline, caught in a degenerative process that worked secretly and compellingly within that whirlpool of elegant activity which in the name of progress led to death” (Lehan, 1998 : 241). We do not need to go further in the specific analysis of these writers operated by Lehan, but what is important to notice is that the shift towards the other side of the Atlantic reflects the rise of the US dominance in the economic and social life of the West world during the Twentieth century⁴⁴.

Until the outbreak of World War I, the European economical situation was characterized by the leading industrial role of Great Britain and Germany, followed by France and the Netherlands, and by the first developments in other countries such as Sweden, Italy and Hungary. The First and the Second World Wars (or, like François Crouzet suggests, the second Thirty Year War) changed completely the turn of history. By 1947, great part of the European industrial asset had been seriously damaged and the economical situation had regressed to a point neatly below the pre-war years⁴⁵. Despite that, the reconstruction of Europe was carried on at incredible speed, and, already few years after the end of the conflict, most of the countries were able to perform a robust economical growth, bringing the industrial output back to pre-war levels⁴⁶. Western Europe entered what has gone down in history under the name of “golden age” or economic “renaissance”, which lasted until the Seventies, but never managed to regain a leading position, which was retained all the time by the United States. It is important to notice that also Eastern European countries experienced an economic growth after the war. Russian and the Eastern Bloc recovered quite rapidly from the war devastation and until 1965 developments in

⁴⁴ In the opening line of his book about American capitalism, Tom Kemp asserts that “During the first half of the twentieth century, the United States became a dominant world power, assuming a role analogous to that played by Great Britain in the previous century. This predominance rested upon a mighty industrial base built up in a country of immense size and bountiful natural resources” (Kemp, 1990 : 1)

⁴⁵ “Economically, when the war ended, the Continent lay prostrate, almost paralyzed, a pile of ruins at first sight (...) Normal economic relations had often broken down, money being replaced by barter exchange or the use of cigarettes as currency (...) Europe’s GDP in 1946 was 19% below its 1939 level”, (Crouzet, 2001: 199-200).

⁴⁶ “The speed of Western Europe’s economy surprised everybody. Within five or six years after the war, reconstruction of damaged property was almost completed, the losses in output and capital stock were made good, and between 1948 and 1950, Western (and Eastern) European countries, but for very few, returned to their prewar output and income per capita levels” (Crouzet, 2001 : 201).

both the industrial sector and in agriculture as well as in technology were constant. Of course, the communist economical system was anti-capitalistic, based on different premises and following principles such as nationalization, centralization and compulsory planning.

The post-war reconstruction interested primarily those European cities and industrial settings destroyed during the war, but also fuelled a larger process of building up that created new neighbourhoods and satellite cities, together with the renovation of the existing infrastructures and the creation of new ones. This process sometimes presented significant differences from city to city and from country to country, but it has generally interested each urban environment in Europe after the war⁴⁷. As the “golden age” unfolded, cities all around Europe underwent a radical transformation. While the reconstruction of the centres was still in progress, the outskirts started to expand, changed their morphology, incorporating more and more space and tiding new bounds with the city. The suburbs became a new entity in the urban texture and started to draw the attention of architects, politicians, city-planners and sociologists.

The rapid rise of the suburbs, apparently uncontrolled, often long-debated by politicians and always a sensitive issue for the public opinion, created a new concept of urban environment, the “diffuse city”. According to the definition elaborated by Francesco Careri, a diffuse city is: “A system of low-density suburban settlement that extends outward, forming discontinuous fabric, sprawling over large territorial areas”⁴⁸ (Careri, 2002 : 180). Suburbs have been the most evident urban phenomenon of the last decades, giving way to an alternative culture, a different life-style and hosting people of mixed social statuses. In some cases suburbs have expanded so much and so quickly that they have overcome the size of the city-centre. Careri speaks about the “fractal archipelago”. Observed from above – Careri claims – the map of a modern city looks like organic fabric, where the centre is defined and compact, whereas the outskirts seem more unstable, with irregular borders and looking like small islands: “At the centre the material is relatively compact, but towards the edges it expels islands detached from the rest of the

⁴⁷ Interestingly enough, even the centre of Stockholm, one of the few European capitals that was not damaged during the Second World War, underwent a radical transformation during the Fifties and the Sixties. A large section of the central area north of the old town was torn down and entirely rebuild between 1952-1966. The project was meant to represent the beginning of a new epoch of prosperity and functionalism. It is not surprising, if we consider the philosophical discourse of Berman, that nowadays some buildings, which were considered old already after some decades, are now being tore down to be replaced – even more interestingly – with other ”more” modern buildings, which will probably go the same way in a couple of decades.

⁴⁸Careri primary refers to the suburbs of the American cities, but the same phenomenon happened, some years later, in many European cities as well.

constructed fabric (...) The result is an ‘archipelago pattern’: a grouping of islands that float in a great empty sea” (Careri, 2002 : 181-182).

Of course, as many scholars have noted, the concept of “suburb” is as old as the city itself. Places “outside” the city-centres have always existed. Lewis Mumford explains that suburbs used to be idyllic neighbourhoods where city-dwellers use to take shelter from unhealthy cities, a phenomenon which is detectable in medieval times as well as in the garden-cities of Nineteenth Century England⁴⁹. Modern suburbs (those suburbs that Careri talks about) are instead an extension of the city itself, separated from the centre by an invisible and artificial boundary, apt to mark a difference from one place to another. As a consequence, each section of the urban texture is given a somehow peculiar identity, which usually corresponds to a specific function in the general organization of the city. Even if – like Barthes suggests – these functions could be hypothetically enumerated, we need to cope with two different kinds of problems. On the one hand, it is difficult to find a codified pattern that fits every urban planning, since each city basically handles these matters in different ways and according to different needs. On the other, to try to outline a definition of the suburb or of any other part of the urban environment would bring us back to the same problem of elaborating a once-and-for-all valid definition of the city. If that has been proved to be constantly subject to change, it seems difficult to imagine that a single part of it can remain always the same.

As the city grows and constantly redefines its nature, so each part of it can modify its original significance and acquire another. Old working-class suburbs more and more often become part of the city-centre, industrial areas are dismantled and transformed into residential compounds, which might be designed as new settlements for low-income workers or fashionable garden-suburbs. At the same time, when the city expands, more neighbourhoods are built and connected to the centre by new infrastructures, taking on the urban role played by the previous “suburbs”.

As we can see, the urban environment of our days is even more complicated than it used to be in the past. The economical growth has determined a power of attraction towards the city

⁴⁹ Like David Popenoe claims, “The suburb – a community which lied apart from the city but is adjacent to and dependent on it – is not a latecomer in world history. Its origins go back almost as far as the city itself. Traces of suburban development can be found at the sites of the earliest Mesopotamian cities, where scattered buildings were unearthed outside the main city boundaries” (Popenoe, 1977 : 1). Also Lewis Mumford traces the origin of the suburbs back into the past; the suburbs were idyllic places where city-dwellers use to take shelter when they wanted to leave the unhealthy cities. See Mumford, 1961 : 482-496.

stronger than ever before. Despite the efforts of national governments to regulate the urban growth and make cities liveable, there is probably no urban planning that has not been contested or some outskirts that have not become a sort of new ghetto. The speed of change has been of such entity that – like Desmond Harding points out – a sort of distrust for the evolution of the urban space has come to its culmination. “Indeed, we now find ourselves at the end of a period in which (...) there has been a progressive devaluation of the city as a concept” (Harding, 2002 : 7). Nevertheless, urbanization has not come to an end; the opposite, its movement has now expanded on a global scale and does not seem to be willing to stop.

The modern city of today confirms its nature of being the place of the perpetual change, its pivotal role as the laboratory of new social interplay and its centrality as platform for the economical growth. Although these phenomena, already present in the modern city of the Nineteenth century, are still constitutive elements of the (post)-modern urban environment, they have speeded up so intensively that they need to be redefined or at least recalibrated. Cities continues to expand and grow bigger and bigger, new social instances have paved the way for the multicultural society (with the consequent subdivision of the urban space according to different parameters such as race, gender, income⁵⁰) and the economical growth has expanded so much to become hypertrophic, turning the capitalistic countries into consumer societies.

Like the passage from *A Single Man* quoted above suggests, the innovative self-destruction of capitalism discussed by Berman is still present and has turned even stronger, extending to almost every aspect of society. In Los Angeles, the city that probably best exemplifies the “golden age” of post-war USA, even the construction of a university campus is a temporary, transient work, not thought to last but to pass. The story of the book, set in the Sixties, represents one day in the life of George Falconer, a professor of English literature in Los Angeles. In the morning, when he arrives to his working place and parks his car, he has a vision of how the place will look like in few years: within less than a decade, when the number of students will further increase, the buildings of the campus will be torn down, to make space to bigger, more modern blocks, in a process of production that has turn also education into a commodity or, at least, into a part of the economical process. Obviously, the example of Los

⁵⁰ For a general analysis of how a place can be read according to certain social constructions, see Crosswell’s book *The Place – a short introduction*. Although Crosswell does not specifically talk about the urban environment in his book, he analyses the possibility to approach the urban space according to categories such as capitalism, patriarchy and heterosexism.

Angeles takes us to the very heart of the American capitalistic society and might result misleading if applied to a European context. Nevertheless, on a general theoretic level, it shows a striking example of capitalism's innovative self-destruction and, at the same time, how incredibly this process has speeded up. Today, the urban text re-writes itself at such a tumultuous speed and with a continuous process of fragmentation and reconstruction that it has become more complicated to decipher the stratification of meanings that it inhabits. The invisible palimpsest that we talked about in the opening paragraph continues to accumulate the images of its constant metamorphoses, in a process of piling up that goes faster than ever.

The difficulty of catching up with the speed of this change has emerged also when semiologists like Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco have discussed the possibility of analysing the city as a text. In his contribution *Semiology of the Urban*, Barthes emphasizes how complicated it is – despite the evidence – to define the language of the city.

The city is a discourse and is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it. Still the problem is to bring an expression 'the language of the city' out of the purely metaphorical stage. It is very easy metaphorically to speak of the language of the city as we speak of the language of the cinema or the language of flowers. The real scientific leap will be realized when we speak of a language of the city without metaphor. (Barthes, 1986 : 90).

Barthes notes how the possibility of an urban semiology suffers the consequences of the crisis of “symbolism”, that is to say, the crisis of an immediate, univocal relationship between the signifiers and the signifieds: “My first remark is that symbolism (which must be understood as a general discourse concerning signification is not longer conceived today, at least as a general rule, as a regular correspondence between signifiers and signifieds” (Barthes, 1986 : 91). Although it would be possible to enumerate the functions for a neighbourhood of a city, this list will always be provisory, because the relationship between the signifieds and the signifiers has become more unstable and opaque. This is mainly due to the nature of the signifieds, which are like “mythical creatures, extremely imprecise, and at a certain point they always become the signifiers of something else; the signifieds are transient, the signifiers remain” (Barthes, 1986 : 91). Barthes' description of the limits of an urban semiology corroborates the assumption that the very nature of the city is hard to grasp, being the urban environment the territory of the constant change. Barthes goes also a step further and claims that the absence of a definitive signified reveals a dimension in the urban context that he – somehow provocatively – calls the “erotic

dimension". Such definition should be intended in terms of social interaction, or, like Barthes states, "sociality interchangeably": "The city, essentially and semantically, is the place of our meeting with the *other*" (Barthes, 1986 : 94). This statement emphasizes another aspect that we have underscored before, that of the social interplay. This fundamental aspect of the urban environment has taken up different shapes during history, and – as noted before – has also changed and intensified during the last decades. The new urbanization following the Wars and the global immigration (a phenomenon derived from the economical growth) has originated a multicultural society that has its epicentre in the urban suburbs. This is another aspect to which we will return later: there seems to be a convergence between the displacement of the different "communities" constituting the urban environment and how the different parts of the city are perceived and read by the city-dwellers. Roland Barthes analyses the example of Paris and notes that "there is in France a series of surveys concerning the appeal of Paris for the suburbs, and it has been observed through these surveys that Paris as a centre was always experienced semantically by the periphery as the privileged place where the other is and where we ourselves are the other, as the place where we play the other." (Barthes, 1986 : 96). The modern city has become more and more the place of the social mixture and also of the cultural encounter (or cultural clash) between people of different ethnicity, language and religion. The experience of the "other" has consequently intensified, both what matters its size and its mode, and has marked the creation of a new urban discourse.

So far we have analysed the evolution of the urban environment focusing on the rise of the modern city in the countries and its evolution from the Nineteenth up to the Twentieth century. Although the question "what is a city?" remains unanswered (and probably it will always be), still it is possible to isolate some topics that have characterized the urban environment during the last two centuries: the social interplay (the fearful crowd that Poe describes in his tale; the exchange of glances through the café's window-pane between the rich bourgeois man and the poor father with his sons in the *petit poème en prose* by Baudelaire; the refuse to step aside of the stubborn *raznochinsky* on the Nevsky Prospect in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*); the prominence of the economical activities, which manifests itself in the process of commodification fuelled by the industrial revolution and that has reached its peak with the consumer-society; and finally the acceleration of the constant metamorphoses of the

urban environment, which requires a particular effort in deciphering its language, because, to borrow Barthes' statement, we "must never seek to fix and rigidify the signified of the units discovered, because, historically, these signifieds are always extremely vague, dubious and unmanageable" (Barthes, 1986 : 97).

This last topic brings us back again to the concept of the chronotope elaborated by Bakhtin, that we mentioned in the first paragraph when we discussed the representation of Berlin in Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. If we consider the modern city as the place of change *par excellence*, we immediately understand that its temporal dimension is of utmost importance. When a writer enters the invisible palimpsest of the city, he or she will have to move carefully among the historical stratifications that it inhabits. Like in the case of Benjamin, or, as we will see, of Kjell Westö, a writer can use his/her autobiographical experience as a compass to find his/her way. When the investigation of the palimpsest stretches a long way back in the past and the personal experience becomes insufficient, or when a writer decides to depict a city where he/she has not lived in, then the operation of reconstruction will make use of other tools (such as historical documents, other books, paintings or photographs). Nevertheless, the exploration of the palimpsest will always be unique, because the elusive, transient nature of the city will never allow the possibility to have the same experience twice. This is why there will never be only one "Paris" or one "London", but a constellation of Parises and Londons.

Hélène Cixous, in a short text entitled "Attack of the Castle", tells the story of a long-awaited travel to Prague. The Czech capital appears as a mythic place, a dreamt city, a fortress that the traveller tries to enter. For two days the writer wanders around the centre, crosses streets and bridges, hoping – in vain – to be able to see Prague:

No sooner inside – there I was pushed back like an attack. How to take it? I look everywhere for the door, the entrance, the defect. Passing by the Charles bridge and its squads of statues planted like impassive saints coming off on the side of Mala Strana, by the alley of the Saxons, then by Velkopevorské Square by Prokopka Alley up to Malostravská Namesti at a brisk pace passing in front of the Schönborn Palace then going up by Bretislava until the Nerudova and there you go back down the slope until Mala Strana without ever managing to penetrate.

The next day, second try: on the quays up to the National Theatre, then coming back up to the Staroměstské, passing by Miners' Road, it was fleeing just in front of me. (...) Effacement, effacement, thy name is city. (Cixous, 1997 : 305)

The writer walks back and forth through the centre of the city, but, as soon as she thinks to be able to grasp at least a glimpse of it, the city seems to be vanishing like a ghost. The spirit of

Prague is impenetrable, impossible to catch. The very nature of the city is unmanageable because it is the result of stratifications of centuries of history: “No, this is not a city. A reserve of centuries of alleys and tombs. Centuries: alleys: it is all interchangeable. I do not know why, why Prague, Prague, why so many centuries flow in your alleys? Full of powder of generations, flasks of constructions. Stratigraphy of the layers of the Praguean bark. Columns of dates, piles of styles” (Cixous, 1997 : 306).

The somehow cryptic text by Cixous (which is partly autobiographical) gives us a vibrant example of how difficult it can be to enter the invisible palimpsest that a city is made of. Streets, places, monuments, are all tied up to an historical past that is still physically perceptible but only partly sizable, because layers after layers are continually added to its surface. The frustration of the visitor of Prague reminds us of how the urban experience is always unique and basically impossible to repeat, because the city is not only an agglomeration of buildings separated by streets and boulevards and embellished with monuments, but it is the result of flow of memories and impressions that dwellers and visitors project on it. Like Neil Leach suggests: “The theme of Prague as a city of multiple interpretation echoes Cixous’ earlier observations on Monet’s twenty six-paintings, each an attempt to ‘capture’ Rouen Cathedral. The ‘truth’ of Rouen cathedral is in fact twenty-six cathedrals”. (Leach, 1997 : 302).

Another writer who has coped with the difficulty to define and penetrate the urban palimpsest is Italo Calvino (1923 – 1985). In his book, *Le città invisibili* (*The Invisible Cities*), Calvino discards the traditional representation of the city through the *exemplum* of one specific city and invents from scratch a myriad of cities, each of them represented by a particular characteristic. *Le città invisibili* presents a complex structure: it is composed of fifty-five small texts, each of them describing an imaginary city that bears the name of a woman. The texts are grouped in nine chapters of five texts each, except the first and the last ones, which contain ten descriptions. Every chapter begins and ends with a brief dialogue between Marco Polo, the venetian explorer that plays the role of the story-teller, and the Mongolian king Kublai Kahn⁵¹.

⁵¹ Many critics, like John Updike, have already emphasized the almost mathematical structure of this book, which has “a complexity and subtlety of modulation worthy of Marco Polo’s contemporary Dante. The catalogue of fifty-five is broken into nine chapters, the first and the last containing ten cities, the middle seven five each; each chapter begins and ends with italic interludes of dialogue and speculation between the Venetian traveler and the Tartar Emperor. The fifty-five cities are also divided, evenly, among eleven categories: cities and memory, cities and desire, cities and signs, thin cities, trading cities, cities and eyes, cities and names, cities and the dead, cities and the sky, continuous cities, and hidden cities” (Updike, 1985 : 459).

In a paper written for a conference at the Columbia University in 1983, Calvino explains that, although his book partly concerns with some problems of the modern city (waste, poverty, space), his intention was not to treat in a fictional way the menace of uncontrolled urbanization, rather to explore the idea itself of the city as the place – like often suggested by sociologists, historians and philosophers – of the social interplay *par excellence*:

Quello che sta a cuore al mio Marco Polo è scoprire le ragioni segrete che hanno portato gli uomini a vivere nelle città, ragioni che potranno valere al di là di tutte le crisi. Le città sono un insieme di tante cose: di memoria, di desideri, di segni d'un linguaggio; le città sono luoghi di scambio, come spiegano tutti i libri di storia dell'economia, ma questi scambi non sono soltanto scambi di merci, sono scambi di parole, di desideri, di ricordi. Il mio libro s'apre e si chiude su immagini di città felici che continuamente prendono forma e svaniscono, nascoste nelle città infelici⁵². (Calvino, 2009 : IX).

The idea that cities continuously take shape and fade away hidden inside other cities, together with the decision to give to each city a female name, suggests that Calvino is primarily interested in the city-dwellers' behavior and in how they develop their relationships with each other and with the space they inhabit. At the same time, the emphasis on the dynamic character of the cities described in the book – often imagined like a landscape constantly changing shape and color – brings us back to the transient character of any urban environment, which slowly but continuously re-creates itself, forming a stratification of significances that only apparently disappears with the removal of the ruins. This emerges clearly in most of the cities belonging to the section “cities and memories”, like Zaira: “Una descrizione di Zaira quale è oggi dovrebbe contenere tutto il passato di Zaira. Ma la città non dice il suo passato, lo contiene come le linee d'una mano, scritto nello spigolo delle vie, nelle griglie delle finestre, negli scorrimano delle scale, nelle antenne dei parafulmini, nelle aste delle bandiere, ogni segmento rigato a sua volta di graffi, seghettature, intaglio, svirgole”⁵³ (Calvino, 2009 : 10-11), but also in other cases, like Fedora, the city that many travellers have tried to reconstruct in small models, with an effort destined to become a Sisyphus' work. In fact, as soon as a model is finished, it becomes

⁵² “What my Marco Polo cares about is to discover the secret reasons which have led men to live in cities, reasons which may still be valid beyond all crises. Cities are an amalgam of many things: memory, desire, of a language of signs; cities are place of exchange, as all the books of economy history explain, but these exchanges are not only trade in goods, but also exchange of words, desires, memories. My book opens and closes with images of happy cities that continually take shape and fade away, hidden in unhappy cities.”

⁵³ “A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banister of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls” (trans. by. William Weaver, in Calvino, 1997 : 9).

immediately obsolete, because in the meanwhile the city has already changed its shape. “In ogni epoca qualcuno, guardando Fedora qual era, aveva immaginato il modo di farne la città ideale, ma mentre costruiva il suo modello in miniatura, già Fedora non era più la stessa di prima, e quello che fino a ieri era stato un suo possibile futuro ormai era solo un giocattolo in una sfera di vetro”⁵⁴ (Calvino, 2009 : 31). Instead of describing one city and trying to catch its essence, the Italian writer makes the opposite operation; eluding the laws of the chronotope through the creation of imaginary cities that has neither physical nor temporal substance, he aims at constructing a possible “universal” matrix of the urban environment. Nevertheless, the result is mostly the same. Like we just saw with the Prague of H el ene Cixous, also the work of Calvino emphasizes how the city does not allow to be caught in its complexity by the visitor for more than an instant and, even in that case, the glimpse obtained will always be personal and tied up to a moment that fades away like a toll of a bell.

This is what we meant, talking about the *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, with the “inner look” of the writer on the urban environment, that is to say, the reconstruction of city through the use of memories and impressions, which creates a counterpart of the “outer” look, constituted by the chronotope of the city. By keeping in mind that the urban experience is intimately personal and unrepeatable, tied to a moment and a place in an inescapable way, we can move to Finland and see how Kjell West o, in his poems, short-stories and novels, has entered the invisible palimpsest of Helsinki.

⁵⁴ “in every age someone, looking at Fedora, imagine a way of making it the ideal city, but while he constructed the miniature model, Fedora was already no longer the same as before, and what had been until yesterday a possible future became only a toy in a glass globe.” (trans. by. William Weaver, in Calvino, 1997 : 9).

CHAPTER III

EXPLORING HELSINKI

PARAGRAPH ONE

THE ORIGINS: SWEDISH COLONIALISM AND RUSSIAN DOMINATION

There are probably few cities in Europe that can boast a history of its own foundation so well recorded as Helsinki (Helsingfors in Swedish). One of the reasons is surely that the Finnish capital is one of the youngest cities on the continent and its creation, like that of Saint Petersburg in Russia or Latina in Italy, is more the result of a political decision than the development of an old settlement. If the greatest European cities stretch their roots long back in the past and some also have a mythical origin, Helsinki is able, to use a metaphor, to tell the name of its father and to show its birth-certificate. The father was Gustaf I Vasa, the famous king of Sweden(-Finland) who, after defeating the Danes in 1521, caused the dissolution of the Union of Kalmar, which had kept together the three Scandinavian kingdoms (Sweden, Denmark and Norway) since 1397. The birth-certificate is the royal edict signed on the 12th of June 1550, in which the initiator of the House of Vasa stated that the people of Borgå, Ekenäs, Raumo and Ulfsby (four villages at that time) should move to a new city close to the Vanda river, in the parish of Helsinge. Little is known about this area before the edict of the king, except that the coast had been colonized already three centuries before by some Swedish settlers coming from the region of Helsingland. Like Klinge and Kolbe suggest: "Namnet Helsingfors och båten på stadens vapen syftar på de invånare som flyttade hit från Helsingland i Sverige. En del av dess anlände på 1200-talet som en följd av en medveten kolonisation i syfte att trygga en svenk kustbosättning längst farleden österut." (Klinge, Kolbe, 1996 : 8)¹.

On the political chessboard of northern Europe during the 16th century, the decision of Gustav Vasa to found a city in Finland (where a capital, Åbo, already existed) was meant to strengthen the Swedish position in the Baltic region and to create a new commercial harbour that could challenge the powerful city of Tallinn (called at that time Reval) in the frame of the important commercial routes of the Hanseatic League. Like Wourinen explains:

Gustav Vasa's ambitious purposes included the further development of existing, and founding of new, cities in Finland. He was determined to end the Germans' trade monopoly in the Baltic area by obtaining a substantial share of the trade with Russia, hitherto largely in the hands of Reval in Estonia. With this in his mind, he issued a Navigation in 1550 which also provided for the founding of a new city on the southern shore of Finland. Helsinki (Helsingfors) was the result of these plans. (Wourinen, 1965 : 85)

¹ "The name Helsingfors and the boat on the coat of arms of the city refer to the settlers who had moved here from Helsingland in Sweden. A part of them arrived in the 13th century as a consequence of an aware colonization which was trying to secure a Swedish settlement of the coast on the waterway eastward".

It is therefore not surprising that, when Erik 14th, Gustaf's son, conquered Reval, one of the main reasons for the development of Helsinki vanished. The small city continued its colourless life until 1640, when some new constructions were laid on the headland of Estnäskatan. The decision was taken by Queen Kristina, who thought that the new position would favour the development of a bigger harbour.

Nevertheless, Helsinki continued to be a centre of modest importance, overshadowed by Åbo, which retained the title of capital, and without any commercial prominence. In 1713, during the Great Northern War, it was first besieged by the Russian troops and then raised to the ground by a fire set by the retreating Swedish soldiers. Only with the Peace of Nystad, which ended the war on the 30th of August 1721, Helsinki – or the little that had remained of it – came back under the control of the Swedish crown. Some improvements were made, included the building of the town church, but the consequences of the war were so catastrophic (not only for the city, but for the whole country), that a full recovery was possible only after decades. Finland, which during the war was of course more exposed to the Russian attacks, paid a very high tribute in terms of human losses and economical damages. When peace was finally signed, its population had decreased by one fourth, not only because of the harshness of the fights, but also because of the plague, which hit the country in 1710. Wuorinen summarizes the exit of the Great Northern War for the Finnish side as follow: "Finland faced the years of peace with her population greatly reduced – from about 400,000 to under 300,000 – for the losses caused directly by the war were multiplied by epidemics and a particularly destructive plague that ravaged the land in 1710" (Wuorinen, 1965 :94). Moreover, Sweden lost the territories of southeast Finland, that is to say, the Baltic provinces Ingria, Estonia and Livonia. "This territorial amputation further weakened the country and appeared to mark the end of Finland's gradual eastward expansion that had been recorded during the three centuries between the Peace of Nöteborg and the Peace of Stolbova in 1617" (Wuorinen, 1965 : 95).

The end of the Great Northern War marked a shift in the political and economic balance of the Baltic region. Sweden, whose control over the coast of the sea had been basically total during the 17th century (the so-called *stormaktstiden*, the time of the Swedish Great Power), had now lost its territories in the south-east of the region at the advantage of Russia. The foundation of Saint Petersburg in 1703 and its proclamation as the new capital by Peter I in 1721 represented the clearest sign of the new political strategy of Russia in this area.

Another war broke out between Sweden and the Tsar empire in July 1741. The battlefield was again the southern part of Finland and the disastrous results for the Swedish troops led to further cession of territory two years later, in 1743. Like historians Hallendorff and Schück claim “Never had Sweden fought a more disgraceful war” (Hallendorff & Schück, 1929 : 329).

A sudden turn in the Finnish history and in the story of Helsinki was surely the end of the Napoleonic wars, when Sweden was forced to cede half of his territories (basically the part of the kingdom on the eastern side of the Baltic Sea which used to constitute the Finnish provinces) to Russia. The official “passage” of Finland to Russia took place at the Porvoo Diet, which started on the 25th of March 1809, when the last Swedish-Finnish troops surrendered. Three days later, on the 28th, the Emperor Alexander I entered the Cathedral in Porvoo and officially opened the Diet. The result of the works claimed that Finland would become a Russian Grand Duchy. The final document, signed by Alexander, stated as follows:

We, Alexander I, by the Grace of God Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias [...] Grand Duke of Finland, [...] do make it known: That Providence having placed Us in possession of the Grand Duchy of Finland, We have desired, by the present Act, to confirm and ratify the religion and fundamental laws of the Land, as well as the privileges and rights which each Estate in the said Grand Duchy in particular, and all the inhabitants in general, be their position high or low, have hitherto enjoyed according to the Constitution. We promise to maintain all these benefits and laws firm, unchanged, and in full force. In confirmation whereof We have signed this Act of Assurance with Our own hand.

Given [...] March 15, 1809.

Alexander

Finland was officially entering the Russian political orbit. Alexander promised to respect the religion and the existing laws of the country and promoted the institution of a Diet, where the representatives of the Finnish four estates could gather and discuss laws. Despite this apparent opening for the creation of an independent Finnish political authority, the Diet’s legislative power was extremely limited, because “it could petition but not initiate legislation. The Diet was not an organ whose participation in the formulation of the monarch’s decisions and policies was in any sense essential. Without activation by the Tsar-Grand Duke, it was nothing” (Wourinen, 1965 : 130).

The union between Finland and Russia, which lasted for more than a century, gave way to varying opinions in the population. Although some were afraid that the new political situation would imply a subordinate status of province in the Tsarist empire or of buffer-state against Sweden, the dominant feeling in the country was that of a fervent nationalism. For the first time, in fact, Finland could see its borders clearly marked, not only on the east-side, but also as regards

to Sweden². The fear for russification (which would start one century later and which Finns would promptly react against) was now kept abay by a newly-born but already strong feeling of patriotism, of having a territory which could be considered a 'homeland'.

Alexander's Act of Assurance was also edited both in Swedish and in Finnish. This is worth noting, because – although this was done for practical reasons – it somehow anticipates one of the main issues of the Finnish cultural debate during the decades to follow, that is to say, the linguistic unity of the country. Up to this moment, Finland had always been regarded as a bilingual territory, although the two groups presented remarkable differences about the number of speakers and the social value of each language. Needless to say, Finnish was far more widespread than Swedish (85% of the population was Finnish-speaking and nearly 15% Swedish-speaking, a proportion which remained basically stable throughout the Nineteenth century), but the latter had a higher social status: "Most of the upper and middle-classes were at least partly bilingual but Swedish was their 'first' language and it was Swedish that was the language of polite society and education" (Wourinen, 1965 : 138-139).

In order to understand how the relationship between the two language groups developed and what it meant for the Finnish history, we need to go a step backward. As we noted already, Swedish was the language spoken by those merchants who arrived on the Finnish coast at the beginning of the 13th century and gradually settled down in the area. Like Klinge and Kolbe underscored, this happened as a "kolonisation", carried out to strengthen the Swedish merchantile domination in the Baltic sea. In this perspective, the arrival of the merchants on the Åland isles and on the south-eastern coast marked the beginning of an economical and social expansion operated by the Swedes in these territories, although this event was by no means the first contact between the two groups. Historians have often empazised that until the end of medieval time, Sweden and Finland were both integral parts of the same political identity³. Before Gustav Vasa became king in 1523, Sweden was an elective monarchy fragmented into many different provinces. Finland was one of them, participated in the election of the king and its inhabitants enjoyed the same rights and privileges as anyone else living in the reign; like Wourinen claims: "Finland became a part of Sweden centuries before Sweden had become a unified state, or, to put

² "The events of 1808-9 placed Finland, for the first time, on the political map of the North. To be sure, the country's boundary with Russia was clear and of old standing. The inclusion in 1812 within autonomous Finland of the southeastern areas that had been ceased to Russia in 1721 and 1743 merely served to reestablish the northern with the empire where it had been fixed as far back as 1617. Now another new boundary line was drawn, for the first time separating Finland from Sweden. Finland now stood forth, with its geographical boundaries sharply marked off, as a separate political entity." (Wourinen, 1965 : 137).

³ "The relationship between what we have come to call Sweden and Finland was that of two constituent parts of the larger whole, the Kingdom of Sweden." (Wuorinen, 1965 : 46-47).

the matter differently, before the process of unification had destroyed the province as the basic unit of the political organization” (Wourinen, 1965 : 47). Moreover, contacts between the Finns and the Swedes probably stretch back long before medieval time and the borders between the two countries were never fully clear-cut until the beginning of the Nineteenth century: “Swedes has settled, hunted, and traded in Finland long before historic time.” (Wourinen, 1965 : 49). On the other hand, we do not dispose of enough historical records to be able to draw a clear picture of the political situation before the end of the Union of Kalmar. Wourinen goes as far as to say that the Swedish presence in Finland was the result of a somehow harmonic cultural intercourse: “In the absence of evidence of the contrary, it appears safe to say that gradual, peaceful penetration rather than invasion, war and plunder had characterized the process” (Wourinen : 49). This statement is particularly arguable; the lack of evidence does not imply that the “penetration” was necessarily peaceful. The establishment of merchantile basis on the coasts of Finland indicates an active economical interest in these territories and the permanent settlings were created to make profit and expande the Swedish sphere of influence in the area, as much as to contrast the increasing power of Novgorod. Even if no war, at least in the traditional meaning, took place, these factors (the economic interests and the international strategic policy) are sufficient to consider this “peaceful penetration” as the embryo of a colonial experience. The historian Jutikkala too agrees that the Finns were somehow willing to open up to the new settlers and were not reluctant in participating in the new economical enterprises, but underscores that other matters, such as the Christianization of the country, were managed in a more aggressive way. Three Swedish expeditions to Finland, recorded as crusades, were undertaken in order to establish the roman-christian credo in the areas of Tavastland and Nyland. The first crusade took place in 1157, when king Erik Jedvardsson and his soldiers set ashore together with bishop Henrik, an English nobleman who had arrived in Sweden few years before with Nicolaus Breakspear, the apostolic delegate who would become Pope Adrianus the IV. The crusade was carried out easily and the Finns were forced to convert to the Christian religion. Bishop Henrik remained in the country, but was killed by a farmer namned Lalli few months later:

Kung Erik landsteg enligt de berättande källorna med sin här någonstans på Finlands sydvästra kust och besegrade med lätthet finnarna. Dessa döptes och biskop Henrik lämnades kvar för att upprätta en kyrklig organization. Påföljande vinter dräptes han dock med yxan på isen av Kjulo träsk i Satakunta av en finsk boende vid namn Lalli. (Jutikkala, 1996 : 20)⁴

⁴ According to the sources, King Erik set ashore with his army somewhere on the south-eastern coast and easily defeted the Finns. These where baptized and Bishop Henrik remained there to set up an ecclesiastic organization. The following winter, anyway, he got murdered with an ax on the ice of Kjulo marshes by a Finnish farmer named Lalli.

Jutikkala admits that the scarcity of historical records makes it impossible to prove that things really went this way (for the first crusade, in fact, we have at our disposal only a legend of Swedish origin and a Finnish poem. The Finnish poem, entitled *Piipsa Henrikin Surmavirsi*, *Death Song of Bishop Henry*, is dated to the 17th century and is kept at the Folklore Archive of Finnish Literature Society).

For the Second crusade, instead, we have more evidences and, although a general agreement about the exact date is missing (some historians indicate the year 1238, others claim that it should be dated a couple of years later, at the beginning of the 1240's), there are few doubts about the nature of the expedition, headed by Birger Jarl. Groups of farmers in Tavastland had raised against Bishop Thomas and also burnt down a church. Some troupes were therefore sent from the west side of the Balticum to put down the riots. Like Jutikkala and Meinander suggest, the Second crusade also had commercial and political reasons; the people of Tavastland had tried to enter a coalition with Novgorod, and that would have weakened the Swedish status in the area, in a historical moment when the commercial routes across that region were developing more and more, attracting the interests of German and Danish merchants. The second crusade should consequently be read in the wider perspective, where the religious matter represents only one element⁵. In the same way, also the Third crusade of summer 1293, headed by Constable Tyrgil Knutsson, was an expedition with religious, political and commercial purposes. The penetration into the Finnish peninsula had reached the region of Karelia, and the Swedish crown wanted to secure his control over the place (which would be long disputed with Russia) by converting the population to the Roman Church (Karelians were originally orthodox) and building the Castle of Viborg⁶.

The raise of the Kingdom of Sweden in medieval time appears as the result of a mix of different factors, each intertwined with the others. Although Wourinen entirely dismisses the crusades as a significant part of the political development in the area, each element (the

⁵ See Meinander, 2010 : 18 "I slutet av 1230-talet företog den svenske jarlen Birger en straffexpedition till Finlands västra inland, närmare bestämt Tavastland, vars befolkning hade lierat sig med Novgorod. Expeditionen (1239) kom sedermera att kallas för andra korståg till Finland och verkställdes i enlighet med påvens önskemål, eftersom Tavasterna hade bränt ned en katolsk kyrka. Dess främsta syfte var dock att befästa den svenska kronans kontroll över Finland" (At the end of 1230's, the Swedish Earl Birger undertook a punishing expedition to the inner part of eastern Finland, Tavastland, to be more precise, whose population had made a coalition with Novgorod. The expedition (1239) would eventually be called the second crusade to Finland and was carried out according to the Pope's desire, because people in Tavastland had burn down a church. Their main goal, nevertheless, was to reinforce the control of the Swedish crown in Finland).

⁶ See Meinander, 2010 : 18 "Sommaren 1293 ledde den svenske riksmarsken Tyrgil Knutsson en framgångsrik militär expedition till Karelska näset. Man lät döpa om den ortodoxa ortsbefolkningen och uppförde Viborgs slott, som skulle förbli rikets viktigaste gränsfäste fram till början av 1700-talet" (In the summer of 1293, the Swedish constable Tyrgil Knutsson carried out a successful military expedition over the Karelian isthmus. The population of the region was re-baptized and the Viborg Castle, which would become the most important fortification along the border in the reign, was erected).

conversion to Christianity, the establishment of permanent settlements in order to secure the commercial routes, the expansion eastward to contrast the increasing power of Novgorod) indicates the imposition of a norm (religious, economical and political) on someone else and on another territory. That such imposition was not as violent as in other historical circumstances does not change its intimate character. Of course, we need to remember that these events took place in a time when the concepts of nation and state were yet to come. Terms such as “Swedes” or “Finns” are being used here in a loose sense, because – as noted before – “Sweden” and “Finland” were not part of a reign in a modern sense, rather a group of provinces with a mutual interchange and with the same bureaucratic machinery⁷.

On the one hand, it is true that the Finns never had the status of serfs and that the Swedes, up to modern time, never tried to impose an alien body of laws (Wourinen, 1965 : 49). On the other, the fact that the Swedish-speaking groups settle down permanently on the Finnish coast and that lately these settlements developed into “elites” with a higher status, speaks for a division that led to social complications and consequences until our days. Gradually, the Swedish-speaking group was given more power and became socially dominant, parallel to the political development in the entire reign. The new political turn took place when Gustav Vasa became king of Sweden-Finland, as he started to centralize the power and reorganize the kingdom according to new principles. After the Diet of Västerås, in 1544, he managed to have the crown declared hereditary and divided the territories into dukedoms. In 1556, his son John became the duke of Finland, with a royal seat in the castle of Turku. Some historians consider the institution of the Duchy of Finland as the first emergence of an independent political organization, although no significant change took place in the relationship with the Riksdag in Stockholm. It seems evident that, the more Sweden developed into a monarchy with a central power and a hierarchical structure, the more Finland tended to be considered an entity on itself. With the Constitution of 1634, the creation of a separate Finnish Provincial Office was established, and more efforts were made to translate laws, proclamations and decrees into Finnish (Wourinen, 1965 : 70). This confirms the development of the Swedish kingdom from a “confederation” of many provinces into a centre-directed monarchy, with a consequent shift of power into the hands

⁷ Meinander reminds that, until the end of the 12th century, the Finnish territories were called Osterlandia, “the eastern land”. The word “Finland” appeared officially for the first time in 1419, and its usage became wide-spread only after the 1440’s. “Senast på 1300-talet den östra delen av det svenska riket börjat kallas kort och gott för Osterlandia, Österlandet (...) År 1419 användes termen Finland för första gången i officiella sammanhang som beteckning på hela den östra rikshalvan och på 1440-talet slog den igen även i lagstifningen” (Only during the 12th century, the eastern part of the Swedish reign began to be simply called Osterlandia, the Eastern land (...) In the year 1419 the term Finland was used for the first time in an official circumstance as to define whole the Eastern peninsula and during 1440’s it started to be used for the law-approval too” (Meinander , 2010 : 21)

of the king and the nobles in Stockholm. It is during this period that Sweden started to develop its national identity, which regarded the Finnish provinces as a “periphery” of the kingdom (we will return later to this social and political development of the relationship between the two countries).

Already at this point it is possible to underscore two elements regarding the foundation and the first two centuries of life of Helsinki, which actually reflect the position of the whole country during this period. The first aspect is the tight connection between Finland and Sweden, which traces back before medieval time and whose character radically changed after the Great Northern War. The second is the relationship with the Russian empire, which managed to take Helsinki under control three times during the 18th century, until the entire country became a Russian Grand Duchy in 1808. Despite that, it was during the period of the Tsar domination that the country started to develop – as we will see – a real national identity. The history of Finland up to its independence in 1917 is therefore marked by the constant fighting on its soil by foreign powers. The complex relationship of Finland with its mighty neighbours is well represented by the history of Helsinki. Founded by a Swedish king, attacked by Russian soldiers, destroyed by retreating Swedish troops, it was made capital because of the will of Alexander the first, Tsar of all the Russias.

PARAGRAPH TWO

BECOMING A CAPITAL, BECOMING A NATION: HELSINKI DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND THE QUESTION OF THE NATIONAL IDENTITY.

*You cannot imagine how beautiful Helsingfors
will become and already is ...
(Carl Ludvig Engel, in a letter dated 10th of
November 1831 to his nephew Eduard Jacobi;
Engel, 2000 : 189)*

When Finland became a Russian Grand Duchy, the capital and major city of the country was still Åbo (Turku in Finnish). Helsinki was at that time a centre of very modest size, whose habitants (approximately 5,000), were still sweeping away the ashes of the big fire that had destroyed about a quarter of the town. The fire had been accidentally set by a young boy named Lindqvist on the windy night of November 16th, 1808. Schoolfield, in his book about Helsinki during the Nineteenth century, gives a slightly romanticized version of the event, which is nevertheless worth quoting:

A horse belonging to Lindqvist's master was brought back at about one in the morning, and Lindqvist led it into a shed (...). Then he gave the horse some hay, put out his lantern (which had no glass in it) by pinching off the wick, and went to bed. The trouble was that he threw the wick into the hay, and that a strong southwest wind was blowing. At five o'clock, an early-rising neighbor observed that smoke and fire were ascending from the place where these blurry events had transpired (...). Lindqvist was sentenced to fourteen days of bread and water for his carelessness, and about a quarter of the town burned to the ground. (Schoolfield, 1996 : 7)

The end sometimes is a new beginning, and the fire of Helsinki, though catastrophic, marked the birth of a new project, not only for the reconstruction of the town, but also for its administrative role in the new political situation. The first plan for the reconstruction was completed by Anders Kocke already in 1811, and got quickly approved by Tzar Alexander. While the preparatory works were set in motion, Gustaf Fredrik Stjernvall, the Governor of Nyland and Tavastland, discussed with the Emperor the possibility of making Helsinki a new capital. The proposal met the favour of Alexander: "Two imperial rescripts were issued on April 18, 1812. The one of them declared Helsingfors to be the new seat of government, 'because of its location nearer our capital, its splendid harbor, its inhabitants' industry and public-spirited disposition, as well as its situation, protected by the fortress of Sveaborg'" (Schoolfield, 1996 : 8-9). The new status of the town required a new urban plan, which was not supposed to be only the plan of a reconstruction, but also the creation of a new imperial city. Governor Stjernvall also

had a name in mind: Johan Albrecht Ehrenström, born in Helsinki on the 28th of August 1762. Ehrenström draw a plan for a new city that foresaw wide streets (mainly to avoid other disastrous fires) and the construction of important public buildings. Few years later, in 1817, he sent to the Empire palace in Saint Petersburg his second plan, on which Alexander simply wrote “Approuvé” (Schoolfield, 1996 : 11). During those years, Ehrenström had not only worked on the plan, but also found an architect that could turn his project into reality. In October 1814 he had met the young German architect Carl Ludvig Engel, who was at that time taking a one-year leave in Åbo after holding the post of city-architect in Tallin since 1808 (Schoolfield : 14). Engel’s father had worked as a bricklayer in Berlin and his son had studied the works of Giacomo Quarenghi, the Italian architect who had been chosen by Catherine II to enrich Saint Petersburg with rococo and neo-classical buildings. It was from the magnificent works in the new Russian capital that he took the inspiration for his projects. Upon his arrival in Helsinki, Engel immediately took up his new position. In a letter of dated 1st of May 1816, he writes to his parents in Germany about the enormous preparatory works required to level out the bedrock on which the city was planned to rise:

Helsingfors is situated by the sea, but the entire terrain consists of bedrock, and boulders the size of building must be blasted away where the new streets will be laid out. The crashing and banging of exploding stone is heard day in, day out, at all points where the new city is to be built. Among the native inhabitants I feel quite at home, as if I were in Germany, except that I must speak Swedish with them and am thus compelled to acquire that language. (Engel, 2000 : 185-186).

Engel devoted basically his entire professional life to the realization of the centre of Helsinki, whose focal point was the Senate Square (Senattorget). He began his work by designing the Senate, the Governor-general residence and the military barracks. In 1827, while the centre of Helsinki was still a big construction yard, Åbo received his final blow: between the 3rd and the 4th of September, a fire destroyed three quarters of the city and the new Emperor, Nicholas, decided to move Åbo’s academy to Helsinki, where a university (to be called Imperial Alexander’s University in Finland) was established in 1828. Engel got in charge of building a seat for the new academy. He designed for this purpose a three-floor neoclassical edifice on the eastern side of Senattorget, which still hosts the University and thus completed the actual plan of the square. In a letter to his Carl Herrlich, a friend of his student days, he comments the strenuous work he had to carry out very quickly:

I have been able to advance my unfinished tasks, since I last wrote you, so effectively that I was able to entrust the drawings of the new Alexander University to the mails, addressed to the State Secretary in St Petersburg. You may well imagine what a relief and what a pleasant feeling it is to be done with such a task. (...) Since the University is to face the Senate building, the façade was a very delicate subject, and the question was raised whether it should not receive one identical to that of the Senate. Many voices

were raised in favor of this proposal. I resisted it. There was talk about submitting the question to the Emperor, but I managed to find a way to prevent this and gain time. Now that the drawings are finished, no one dares to claim any longer that the façade of the University should be the same as that of the Senatem and I hope that no decision of that sort will be made in Petersburg neither. (Engel, 2000 : 186-187).

After the construction of the Senate and the University was accomplished, Engel started to supervise the execution of his masterpieces: the University Library and Saint Nicholas Church, the Lutheran cathedral of the city which still today dominates the square and the whole city-center with its white dome. In another letter to Carl Herrlich, on the 30th of July 1830, Engel writes enthusiastically about the inauguration of the University and the beginning of the construction of the cathedral:

On the 25th of July, the cornerstone of the new church was laid with great pomp and circumstance. I hope that you have already heard of this event from the newspapers, since a very detailed article about it, which was written here, appeared in Saint Petersburg News. I have gone over this project one more time, to rid it of everything superfluous, and I flatter myself that it will now be an entirely solid edifice, impeccable in its stylistic purity.

The University building, of which you may have received an impression from Senff, has not been stuccoed except for the middle part of both facades, and what's more, this has been done with such care and precision in detail that I find it a joy to behold. It is a remarkable piece of masonry, both in terms of its construction and of the eminently successful, clean, and accurate masonry work, which bears no comparison with the best in Europe. (Engel, 2000 : 188).

In the autumn of 1833, on the occasion of the Emperor's visit, Engel was praised for his work by Nicholas I and was given the solemn promise of new subventions for the University Library, whose project he had started working on few months earlier, when the University had received a huge donation of 24,000 volumes. During the following years, his efforts focused however on the cathedral, which started to take its final shape, giving to the skyline of Helsinki its modern appearance. In one of his last letters, dated 3rd of September 1839, Engel tells to his nephew how well the construction of the cathedral has progressed:

You say you would like to hear a little about my buildings. The church has progressed to the removal of all scaffolding from its tower, which now stands complete with its sky-blue and golden stars. In the interior, all vaults have been painted and some of the scaffolding has been removed. In its exterior appearance, the building is of an elegance that would be hard to match. The University Library should also be completed next year. I think I already told you something about this project. I had drawn three different facades for it; His Majesty, unfortunately, chose the one I liked least ... (Engel, 2010 : 193)⁸

Engel never saw his work finished. He died in Helsinki on the 14th of May 1840. By that time, however, the new Helsinki was almost completed (only the cathedral took twelve more years to be done, mostly due to technical problems that emerged later). The new capital could

⁸ An analysis of the architecture of Carl Ludvig Engel can be found in a short essay by Vilhelm Helander, the architect who supervised the restoration of Helsinki cathedral at the end of the Nineties. See Helander, 2000 : 181 – 184.

not only show a refined architecture and modern, wide streets worth of its new political status, it rapidly became also the centre of the economical and social life of the newly-born duchy. If industrialization started to bloom only after 1850, the first half of the century signaled an increase in the agriculture sector as much as in foreign trade. Despite the new political situation, the historical bounds with Sweden were not cut abruptly (the Swedish *krona*, for example, remained valid until 1860, when the central Bank of Finland started to produce its own currency, the Finnish *markka*) and new commercial contacts were established with Russia. The national economy, however, remained substantially agrarian. The cultural and national development instead speeded up and rapidly involved the *intelligentia* of the country. After the University of Helsinki, another important institution, the Finnish Literature Society, was founded in 1831. The purpose of the Society was to promote the study of the Finnish folklore and to open a debate about the Finnish national and linguistic identity. As mentioned before, the dominant position in Finland during the first half of the Nineteenth century was of a fervent national renaissance. The question that most urgently animated the debate was that of the language and found its first interpreter and spokesman in Adolf Iwar Arwidsson (1791-1858), professor of history at the Åbo Academy and editor of the *Åbo Morgonblad* (Åbo Morning Paper). Arwidsson, who strongly disregarded the status of Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire, claimed that Finland should find its own national identity and that, in order to reach this goal, a linguistic unity was a fundamental step. For that reason, teaching of Finnish had to become the cornerstone of a new educational system. Like Wourinen explains:

He saw the language barrier separating the classes from the masses as the main obstacle to be overcome. It could be overcome only if the teaching of Finnish and the use of Finnish as a language of instruction became general and if education, instead of remaining a privilege enjoyed by the few – and therefore continuing the process of Swedization – became an advantage enjoyed by all. (Wourinen, 1965 : 141)

Arwidsson's ideas were considered too radical at that time and he was forced to leave the country in 1823 and moved to Stockholm, where he became a librarian at the Royal Library. Nevertheless, the passage above illuminates a central question that we briefly mentioned before, that is to say, the development of the Swedization process throughout the second half of the Sixteenth, the Seventeenth and the Eighteenth century (and especially after the Great Northern War). During this period, Swedish became "the language of the power" ("Maktens språk", Meinander, 2010 : 18) as a consequence of the change from the provincial system to a centre-directed political model, that made more and more common "the practice of appointing Swedes to administrative, judicial, academic, and other positions in Finland" (Wourinen, 1965 : 99). To be more specific, Swedish had become the language of the *political* power or – to use an

expression of Jacques Derrida – “the language of the master” (Derrida, 1998 : 39), that is to say, the language spoken by the authorities who were holding the reins of government. This system generated a feeling of general dissatisfaction among the Finnish-speaking population, because the appointees could not speak Finnish and tended to privilege people of the same language-group (and often with the same social status). Consequently, a Swedish-speaking “upper-class” began to climb the social hierarchy, imposing “Swedish” as the *norm*, that is to say, as the language of education, administration, law and culture. Such imposition found its strongest vehicle in schools after the middle of the Seventeenth Century, when Latin lost its primacy as the language of education and it was rapidly replaced by Swedish. Until the middle of the Nineteenth century, Swedish was the only *official* language in every school of the country, except in Viborg, where German was the language of use. Therefore, anyone who wanted to obtain any kind of education was obliged to learn and speak Swedish fluently. Historical records witness of an increasing trend, during the Eighteenth Century, of Finnish citizens who took a Swedish name, usually as a sign of successful business or higher degree of education: “Swedization was often the consequence of even moderate success in business and invariably a part of the process of obtaining an education.” (Wourinen, 1965 : 103).

The dominant role that the Swedish language obtained during these centuries as a result of the higher social and political position of the Swedish-speaking community brings us to one of the central problems of colonialism, namely the affirmation of the *one* certain language in the public life of a given society (this can be the language of the conquerors, of the aristocratic elites, of any other dominant group not linguistically homogeneous). Jacques Derrida, in his book *Monolingualism of the Other* (1996), shows how the experience of a linguistic imposition is deeply intertwined with the development of a national and social identity. Speaking about his own experience as a Franco-maghrebian, Derrida underscores how the institution of an official language is a powerful tool of affirmation of any dominant cultural power: “Every culture institutes itself through the unilateral imposition of some ‘politics’ of language. Mastery begins through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations” (Derrida, 1998 : 39). Grown up in Algeri during the French colonial experience in Northern Africa, Derrida recalls how French was a compulsive subject in every school of the country before Arab and Berberian, only because it was the language of the ruling political power, that is to say, the language of the Master. The philosopher claims that the language of the Master is the language of the Law, the language taught in schools, the language that essentially codifies the belonging to a certain social status and to a certain State. As such, the language is loaded with a new epistemic significance that refers to the complex question of the identity (in our specific case of the *national* identity).

Derrida explains that he is not dealing with the general problem of colonialism “All culture is originally colonial” (Derrida, 1998 : 39), rather with a peculiar feature of what forms the concept of the identity: “Our question is still identity. What is identity, this concept of which the transparent identity to itself is always dogmatically presupposed by so many debates on monoculturalism or multiculturalism, nationality, citizenship, and, in general, belonging?” (Derrida, 1998 : 14). The institution of a “language of the master” presupposes the existence of a political center (the *metropole* in Derrida’s vocabulary) that extends his power over a territory, imposing the use of a determinate language in particular circumstances. Such process gives to the people no choice but to be able to master that language, confirming, every time such language is used, the power of the institution that has imposed it. Derrida underscores how this is a misappropriation of the language. A language can not be possessed and when it is made “official”, as a matter of fact, it is given a political label which is totally artificial, established by a power that aims at imposing it by virtue of a supposed correctness. Any *officiality* of a language is therefore a political artifice created by the master, who actually derives his superiority from the acceptance of his power of putting a seal upon what is correct or not. If the character of officiality was not recognized by law, the master would lose his role:

For contrary to what one is often most tempted to believe, the master is nothing. And he does not have exclusive possession of anything. Because the master does not possess exclusively, and *naturally*, what he calls his language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of property or identity that are natural, national, congenital, or ontological with it, because he can give substance to and articulate (*dire*) this appropriation only in the course of an unnatural process of politico-phantasmagoric constructions, because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which is always essentially colonial, to appropriate it in order to impose it as ‘his own’. That is his belief; he wishes to make others share it through the use of force or cunning. (Derrida, 1998 : 23)

The reflection about the language carried on by Derrida has many points in common with the language-theory that Pierre Bourdieu explains in his book *Language and symbolic power*. Also Bourdieu, describing the process of affirmation of the official language in France starting from the fourteenth century, claims that there is an evident connection between the institution of a central political power and a language – defined as “official” – that springs from the political power itself and is imposed as a general norm. The language of the court of Paris, spoken by the intellectuals, gained a particular power (a power that Bourdieu calls symbolic) and turned into the touchstone for establishing the degree of correctness of any public statement all over the reign.

Until the French Revolution, the process of linguistic unification went hand in hand with the process of construction of the monarchical state. The ‘dialects’, which often possessed some of the properties attributed to ‘languages’ (since most of them were

used in written form to record contracts, the minutes of local assemblies, ect), and literary languages distinct from each of the dialects used over the whole territory in which they were current, gave way progressively, from the fourteenth century on, at least in the central provinces of the *pays d'oïl*, to the common language which was developed in Paris in cultivated circles. (Bourdieu, 1991 : 46-47)

According to Bourdieu, to define a certain way of speaking and writing as *official* is equal to give it a privileged position and turn it into a *norm*. By doing this, the chosen way of speaking and writing is recognized as the language of the State, that is to say, the language of the political power (of the Master). Consequently, whatever falls outside the limits of the official language has a lower status and it is considered a minority language or a dialect, or, like Derrida suggests, “heteronomous”, “other than the norm”. Such distinction between official and unofficial is of course the result of an historical and political process and has a direct impact on the society where it is spoken. All the citizens need to learn it in order to be able to relate themselves with the central power and its institutions.

To speak of *the* language, without further specification, as linguists do, is tacitly to accept the *official* definition of the official language of a political unit. This language is the one which, within the territorial limits of the unit, imposes itself on the whole population as the only legitimate language, especially in situations that are characterized in French as *officielle* (...) The official language is bound up with the state, both in its genesis and in its social uses. It is in this process of state formation that the conditions are created for the constitution of a unified linguistic market dominated by the official language. Obligatory in official occasions and in official places (schools, public administrations, political institutions, etc), this state language becomes the theoretical norm against which all the linguistic practices are objectively measured. (Bourdieu, 1991 : 45).

The creation of a unified linguistic market is the core of the discourse carried on by Bourdieu. If we consider the situation in Finland starting from the reign of Gustav Vasa, we can see a progressive centralization of the political power that found its linguistic counterpart in the spreading of Swedish as the language of the law, of education and of the social elites, downgrading Finnish to the status of “minor” language. By the beginning of the Nineteenth century, the Finnish society used Swedish in most of the official occasions and it was, as already noted, the only language of educated people. When Finland became a Russian Duchy and a strong feeling of nationalism started to circulate among the upper and middle-class, the language debate took a new turn. Finland, now independent from Sweden, could stop the process of Swedization and use its own language. The birth of a nation coincided with the birth of a new language market where Swedish continued to be spoken and taught in schools, but where Finnish was meant to be the new official language. Like Törnudd points out: “the State should be

transformed into a nation unity: in the case of Finland, it was necessary that the country should be a Finnish-speaking nationale state.” (Törnudd, 1978 : 9)⁹.

We have entered one of the key-topic of the Finnish-Swedish cultural debate, the creation of a national identity. As mentioned before, this process started at the beginning of the Nineteenth century with Arwidsson, which firmly insisted on the necessity of making Finnish the only national language in Finland. His preaching was not in vain. Of course the transformation could not happen overnight and it took two generations before Finnish could gain almost the same status as Swedish in the political arena, in the economical life and in the academy. Many were the contributors to this process, which aimed not simply at creating – to use Bourdieu’s words – a new language market, but also to outline an entire national heritage. Among them, Elias Lönnrot (1802-84), Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804-77) and Johan Wilhelm Snellman (1806-81), all of them matriculated at the Åbo Academy in 1822 and active members of the Finnish Literature Society, played a fundamental role.

Lönnrot, who had studied medicine, traveled through the country between 1828-31, working as a physician and collecting folk-tales, legends and other stories. The result of his anthropologic, cultural and folkloristic research was impressive. When he finally ended his editorial work, trying to systematize and wave together what he had carefully studied and written down in Finnish, he could count twenty-five runos with a total result of 12,000 lines. The title he chose was *Kalevala*. The long poem was welcomed by the first generation of patriots as the national epos that would legitimate the literary use of Finnish and raise the folklore of the country to the rank of national heritage; its spreading was supported by the Finnish Literature Society, which sponsored the publication. In 1847 a second edition, with more than 25,000 lines, was released. The “national” character of the *Kalevala* was unmistakeable:

“To the generation of the Thirties the publication of the *Kalevala* was an event of outstanding importance (...). It was seen as an Homeric poem which the genius of the people had fashioned in times immemorial and which had been handed down from generation to generation (...). The *Kalevala*’s content was thought to be genuinely national; no foreign influences had marred it. (Wourinen, 1965 : 146).

The same procedure of “going back to the roots” of the Finnish identity, searching in the uncountable folk-tales of the oral tradition, was used also by Johan Ludvig Runeberg, who worked for some years in the Finnish countryside after taking his degree in Åbo. Runeberg – who belonged to the Swedish-speaking minority – became much interested in the agrarian life of his country and in 1832 published *Elgsskyttarne* (The Elk Hunters), a poem devoted to the

⁹ As we will see, once Finnish become the new “language of the master”, it rapidly developed a very strict policy, not so different from that adopted by the Swedish authorities in the past.

description of the humble and honest lives of the farmers, which soon became, together with the *Kalevala*, a wake-up call for the new national unity. In 1846 Runeberg composed also *Vårt land* (*Our country*), a poem with a strong nationalistic spirit, that two years later was chosen by the Academic Song Club to be sung for the festivities of “Flora Festival”, a celebration inaugurated by the students few years before. On the 13th of May 1848, students started to march from the University along Uniongatan, singing the poem written by Runeberg (the music was composed by Fredrik August Ehrström), turning the student celebration into a joyfull national parade. The events of that day, which has remained in the collective memory as the beginning of a new epoch, became legendary and, from then on, *Vårt land* was considered the Finnish national anthem¹⁰.

The third leading figure of the group enrolled at the Åbo Academy in 1822 was Johan Wilhem Snellman. Also an associated of the Literary Society, Snellman was more politics-oriented. He spent four years abroad between 1839 and 1842, but returned to Helsinki only in 1849. If Runeberg and Lönnrot (and some others, such as Zachris Topelius and Alexander Castrén) were more active on the cultural side of the construction of the national identity, Snellman tried to shift the focus to the political side, claiming that measures had to be taken to make Finnish the language of Finland. “In Snellman’s view, language is the basis and the distinguishing characteristic of a nation” (Wourinen, 1965 : 158). After being appointed a member of the government in 1863, Snellman became a key-figure in the political development of the Finnish national cause. His contribution for the concessions that Alexander II gave to the Duchy was extremely important. On the 1st of August 1863, the Emperor signed the Language Decree, stating that Finnish was to be considered on equal level as Swedish. The cardinal points of the Decree maintained that:

- 1) Although Swedish still remains the official language of the country, the Finnish language is hereby declared to be on a footing of complete equality with Swedish in all the matters which directly concern the Finnish-speaking part of the population. As a consequence hereof, documents and records in Finnish shall henceforth be freely accepted at all law courts and administrative offices in Finland.
- 2) Not later than the close of the year 1883, the aforementioned rights of the Finnish language shall have become fully operative even as regards the issuance of documents and records by law courts and administrative offices; judges and other servants of the state who already possess an adequate command of the language may issue records and other official documents whenever they are requested to do so. (Wourinen, 1965 : 159-160)

The Language Decree marked a turning point in the development of the Finnish national identity and it represents the ultimate result of a process that had started years before. In 1824 it was

¹⁰ Both Schoolfield and Wourinen give a precise reconstruction of the manifestation of 13th of May 1848 (Schoolfield, 1996 : 67-69), (Wourinen, 1965 : 158) and its contribution for the creation of the national identity.

established that clergymen appointed to Finland had to master the language, and four years later, in 1828, Finnish finally entered the academy with the first lecturership at the university, although it would take fifteen more years before it became a part of the curriculum of the secondary school (Wourinen, 1965 : 143). All these achievements paved the way to the first professorship of Finnish language at the University of Helsinki, held by professor Alexander Catrén. The final enfranchising of the Finnish language in 1863 created the condition for a transformation of what Bourdieu calls “the language-market”. Finland had now two official languages, both on the same political level, but with rather different amount of speakers (Finnish was by 1863 the language of more than 85% of the population) and social status. Anyway, things were about to change. The Swedish-speaker community would slowly shrink whereas Finnish, now strong of the political legitimation obtained during the first half of the century, was no longer the language of the farmers, of the poor and uninfluential mass, but the language of a country and a folk. If we go back to the theory of Bourdieu, we can see that also in Finland the development of the national language market went hand in hand with the development of a central political power. The State, now organized according to national principles, had to spread the knowledge of the *new* official language among its inhabitants. This fundamental part of the process required a stronger effort, because the message elaborated by the cultural and political elites had now to be transmitted to the masses. If we consider that the first Finnish secondary school was opened in Jyväskylä (central Finland) only in 1856, it seems clear that there was a long way to go. Nevertheless, during the second part of the century, and especially after the Language Decree of 1863, the complete enfranchising of the Finnish language speeded up. After a first reluctance of the school-boards, Finnish became the first language of more and more schools. In the same way, during the last two decades of the Nineteenth century, the bureaucracy was able to fulfill what had been claimed by the imperial Decree of 1863 and could provide Finnish translation of all official documents, as much as all judges and state-functioners had to be able to master the language. By 1917, the year of Finland’s independence, the scholastic situation was almost reversed: Finnish-language secondary-schools represented 75% of the total number (Wourinen, 1965 : 176).

These figures account for the rapid development of a national identity in Finland: a new official language, a new national anthem, a new cultural heritage that testified of a “national genius”. It is worth noting that the sparkle of this process was actually lit by some intellectuals who, most of the times, had a scarce – for not to say unexisting – knowledge of Finnish. Both Runeberg and Topelius only wrote in Swedish and the first one often regretted that he could not master Finnish (Schoolfield, 1996 : 72). Also the meetings of the Finnish Literature Society were held in Swedish for more than twenty-five years, until Elias Lönnrot for the first time officially

addressed the audience in Finnish in 1857. Wourinen notices that it is “fascinating” that Swedish “was no obstacle to the pursuit of patriotic goals considered important at the time” (Wourinen, 1965 : 151). These intellectuals were animated by a spirit of nationalism that would give Finland – which they considered their own country – a new social and political status, finally free from Sweden’s marker. This peculiar character of the Finnish nationalism during the Nineteenth century (a period characterized all over the continent by a wave of national pride) can be partly explained by the fact that the independence from Sweden was already a fact. The patriotic goal was to promote a national feeling of unity throughout the country. At the turn of the century, Finland found itself in a crucial moment: its national achievements could not but lead to a strong resistance to the “menace of russification” and the claim for political independence.

We will discuss later the war of independence and how the country developed during the Twentieth century. In this paragraph we have already touched upon some key-topics such as the formation of the national identity, the creation of a new “language market” where Swedish lost irreversibly its primacy and Finnish became the dominant actor; and the evolution of the country into a modern state. In this process, the foundation and development of Helsinki seems to be very significant: after becoming the new capital of the country, it began to host the most important cultural institutions of the time (the University and the Finnish Literature Society) and people of different origin. Russian soldiers and functionaries sent from Saint Petersburg lived next door with the Swedish upper-class and the rising Finnish bourgeoisie, creating an international and mixed social environment which would influence the character of the city for the decades to come.

PARAGRAPH THREE

BECOMING A STATE – INDEPENDENCY AND DEMOCRACY.

To try to give an account of Finnish history during the Twentieth century would certainly require more than a paragraph and surely a more extensive critical investigation. Furthermore, such a study would fall beyond the scope of our research, that primarily concerns the image of the city as a construction that secretly keeps in itself the traces of historical, social and economical developments and aims at showing how a modern writer tries to penetrate this invisible palimpsest in order to bring back to light what is hidden underneath the urban texture. As a consequence, the following pages are only meant to sketch the guidelines of the Finnish history during its first century as an independent democracy. These two elements, the independence and the democratic status, represent the pillars of the entire social and political adventure of the small country, which managed, within the interval of less than a century, to leave behind itself the subjection to the Russian empire and to become one of the most solid democracies in Europe.

Of course this process has been far from being linear and unproblematic. A civil war, two wars against Soviet Russia and a war against Nazi Germany in Lapland dotted the first decades of existence of the young State, leaving deep scars in the collective memory and requiring enormous sacrifices in terms of human lives and economical costs. Until the end of World War II, Finland had to face internal and external problems in order to enfranchise itself from the Russian dominance and to establish a stable democratic regime. Also the second half of the century, until the fall of the Soviet Union, was characterized by a careful but firm foreign policy, mostly embodied by the *ostpolitik* of President Kekkonen, who managed to protect and to strengthen the Finnish independence, even at the cost to keep the levers of democracy in his iron grip for more than two decades.

As we noted at the end of the previous paragraph, thanks to the works of many intellectuals and movements who promoted a national renaissance, time was ripe for a complete Finnish political independence. Nicholas II looked suspiciously at the situation on the other side of the Baltic, especially because the tsarist empire was going through a period of political turbulence following the assassination of Alexander II and the reforms that had partially changed the internal situation. There was a risk that the state of affairs would degenerate, involving the periphery of the empire. As a consequence, in order to re-affirm the imperial power, the Tsar promoted a series of reforms to tighten his grip over the political life of the Grand Duchy. On the

15th of February 1899 Nicholas II issued a manifesto, trying to formally subjugate the prerogatives of the Finnish Diet to the will of the Tsar, paving the way to a process that was perceived by the local authorities as a menace of *russification*. The tsarist edit stated as follow: “While maintaining in full force the prevailing statuses concerning the promulgation of local laws which relate exclusively to the internal affairs of Finland, we have found it necessary to reserve to Ourselves the final decision as to which laws come within the scope of general Imperial legislation” (Wourinen, 1965 : 202 - 203). The Finnish reaction did not delay and, in a week, a national petition was signed by 522,931 people (basically 1/5 of the entire population) to show that Finnish folk was united and ready to defend its rights, to challenge the *pukko* for fighting back the strokes of the *nagyka*.¹¹

During the following years, however, the process of *russification* came to a halt. First, the exhaustive war with Japan shifted the Tsarist attention to the eastern side of the empire. Second, the internal situation, with the constitution of the first soviets that claimed a change in the political life and the numerous strikes throughout the country, led to the Revolution of 1905, which resulted in the issuing of the October Manifesto. In it, the Tsar announced new political rights for the people and the election of a legislative body, the Duma. The winds of change blowing all over Russia soon arrived to Finland (as in most of the countries under the Russian influence) and the SDP (the Social-democratic party) promoted a general strike during the autumn of 1905. On November 4th Nicholas II issued another manifesto for Finland, “promising to restore Finnish autonomy and authorizing the Senate and the Diet to draft a constitution based on universal suffrage” (Upton, 1980 : 9). On the 20th July the following year the Finnish Diet presented a draft for the new Constitution, soon ratified by the Tsar. The core of the Finnish proposal provided universal suffrage for males and females (first country in Europe, second in the world), the creation on a national Parliament, which was called Eduskunta, and the adoption of a proportional voting-system¹².

¹¹ Like Anthony Upton points out, it was not only the subordination of the Diet to the court in Saint Petersburg that created the feeling of *Russification*. The tsarist manifesto also included other reforms that substantially limited the Finnish independence: “There was also a program for specific innovations that were more disturbing to the Finns, which included the extended use of Russian as an official language in Finland, the grant of full rights of citizenship in Finland to Russia nationals, and the introduction of the ruble as a legal currency alongside the Finnish mark” (Upton, 1980 : 5).

¹² Historians emphasize the characters of the Finnish constitution, which was one of the most liberal of its time. “Complete political democracy was established. A unicameral parliament, based on equal and universal suffrage – women as well as men were given the right to vote – replaced the antiquated four-estate Diet, and the earlier limitation of the right to vote, based on property, were removed” (Wourinen, 1965 : 206). “The Tsar confirmed the new constitution, based on a single-chamber parliament, universal suffrage, and a proportional representation, together with a law establishing freedom of speech, organization, and public meeting” (Upton, 1980 : 9).

During the following years, however, the situation in the country remained tense. Formally, Finland continued to be a Grand Duchy and – as such – was *de jure* a belligerent country, on Russian side, during the First World War. Nevertheless, its position was actually more that of a neutral country. Lacking a national army, Finland did not actively participate in the fighting, although approximately 2000 men joined the Russian troupes, included Marshall Mannerheim, who would become one of the leading political figure in Finland in the years to come.

The March Revolution in Russia in 1917, which led to the abdication of the Romanov dynasty (15th of March), gave Finland the chance to gain complete political independence. Since Nicholas II retained the title of Grand Duke, the country was practically left in a political vacuum. Therefore, on the 24th of March, the Eduskunta presented to the General Governor Korff a coalition government composed of six socialists and six non-socialists headed by Oskari Tokoi that would rule the country instead of the Tsar.

Despite the positive reaction from the Congress of Soviets, the Tokoi government was never acknowledged¹³. Anyway, the course of history came to a radical change later the same year, when the October Revolution put an end to the Tsarist empire, changing forever the destiny of Russia. At the same time, elections took place in Finland, and the new parliament, with a conservative majority led by Pehr Evind Svinhuvud, met for the first time on the 1st of November and followed closely the developments in Saint Petersburg. Two weeks later, on the 15th, the Parliament made a statement which has remained in Finnish history as the first proclamation of independence: “The Parliament hereby decides to exercise, for the time being, the powers which according to existing rules and procedure previously belonged to the Tsar-Grand Duke” (quoted in Wourinen, 1965 : 215). The motion was approved with 127 votes for and 68 against, sanctioning the end of the one-century-long existence of the Grand Duchy of Finland. On the 31st December the same year, Lenin ratified the independence, rapidly followed by the Scandinavian countries and the major European powers.

Nevertheless, the road to a stable political situation revealed to be particularly tortuous. The last months of 1917 saw an escalation of violence in the country. On the 12th of November, the Socialists and the unions summoned a national strike that lasted until the 20th. During those weeks, some socialists supporters organized spontaneously in squadrons, trying to destabilize the political power of the government: “lawlessness and violence on a large scale spread over many

¹³ “At the suggestion of the Finnish socialists, the Congress of Soviet in July came out in favor of transferring supreme power to the Eduskunta” (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 97). Until 1918, however, Finland was ruled according to the Kornilov Manifesto, issued on the 12th of September by the Provisional Government.

parts of the country; self-constituted Red ‘forces for maintaining the order’ made hundreds of arbitrary arrests, ‘expropriated’ properties, committed scores of murders, and became guilty of other forms of lawbreaking” (Wourinen, 1965 : 217). By the end of 1917, the Red Guards counted more than 30,000 men. Prime Minister Svinhuvud gave to Marshall Mannerheim, who had come back to Finland in December after the October Revolution, the task to re-establish the order in the country. Mannerheim became the head of the White Civil Guard, which was composed of approximately 50,000 soldiers. On the 27th of January 1918, while Mannerheim was in Ostrobothnia to disarm 5,000 Russian soldiers displaced there, violent riots broke out in Viipuri and in Helsinki, throwing the capital in complete chaos. The members of the government had to leave the city and moved to Vasa, where they established the “White Senate of Vasa”. Prime Minister Svinhuvud was forced to find refuge first in Tallin and then in Berlin. The Finnish civil war had begun.

The first move of the Mannerheim’s troops was toward the city of Tampere, which was taken by the Whites on the 6th of April after fierce fights. It was here that the Reds, which had become numerically superior but were less trained and worse equipped than the Whites, paid the highest tribute. More than 11,000 men were captured, “some were shot on the spot; other were transported to their home regions and executed there” (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 111). On the eastern front, the decisive battle was fought at Rauta, in the Karelian isthmus at the end of March. Between the 12th and 13th of April, Mannerheim entered Helsinki, which had been abandoned by the People’s Council four days earlier. The last outpost of the Reds was Viipuri, which fell unconditionally on the 24th of the same year.

Like all historians of Finnish history claim, the Civil war was short but incredibly bloody: “The actual fight lasted only two or three months, but the terror meted out by both sides and the subsequent settling of scores resulted in more than 30,000 deaths; of these 25,000 were Reds. The atrocities of the spring 1918 left deep scares in the people’s minds which did not heal for decades to come” (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 110). While Oskar Tokoi, the leader of the socialists, escaped to Russia, Svinhuvud returned to Helsinki and built a new government. However, the Eduskunta had to cope with two problems: on the one hand the parliament had no opposition, because the 92 socialists delegates were either in prison or had escaped to Russia; on the other, the conservative parties could not agree about the political status that the country should be given. Outside, in the rest of Europe, First World War was raging.

Svinhuvud was declared “temporary president”, although the monarchic phalanx preferred the term “regent”. Relying on a victory of Germany, in fact, the conservative parliament managed to get through a motion for the transformation of Finland into a kingdom

ruled by a German prince. Finland's royalist aspirations, however, were short-lived and frustrated by the turn of the last events of the conflict. On the 9th of October, the very same day when the Eduskunta elected the fifty-year-old Friedrich Karl of Hohenzollern to the throne of Finland, Germany signed the armistice, which put an end to the empire and led the way to a Republican constitution. On the 14th of December, Friedrich Karl announced that he would relinquish his position as king of Finland.

Between the 1st and the 2nd of March 1919 new elections took place, and the Social Democrats obtained the majority in the Eduskunta with 80 seats. During the same period, Mannerheim had become the "regent" after Svinhuvud and he was waiting for the committee headed by Professor K.J. Ståhlberg to finish the preparatory works for the new constitution. On 21st of June 1919 Ståhlberg was ready to submit the draft to the Eduskunta, which approved it with 165 votes for and 22 against. The new constitution claimed that Finland was a Republic headed by a President. The candidate of the conservatives for the highest seat was of course Marshall Mannerheim, but he had not enough support in the Eduskunta, where the majority was social democratic. On the other hand, the SDP had feeble chances to win: the memory of the civil war still too fresh and time was not ready for a complete rehabilitation of the party. A fundamental role, in order to solve what risked to become a political *impasse* when the newly-born Finnish Republic was cautiously moving its first steps, was played by the Agrarians, the centre-party, which proposed as candidate professor Ståhlberg. On the 25th of July, the former head of the constitutional committee obtained the majority in the Eduskunta with 143 votes, against the 50 votes given to Mannerheim. Like Hentilä underscores: "The agrarians came to occupy a key position between the right and the left. Mannerheim's aristocratic bearing and poor command of Finnish did anything but impress the Agrarian leader Santeri Alkio; he was looking for a President who was a Finn, a patriot and a modest civilian" (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999: 134).

The following decades, known as the "post-activism"-period, marked a radical development in the political life of Finland, both on domestic as much as on international level. Internally, the Social Democrats were constantly the major parliamentary force between the years 1919-1939. Like Hentilä notices: "For ideological reason it was almost impossible in the early 1920's for the Social Democrats to enter government, but in the Eduskunta they were the pivotal party (in the sense of holding the balance of power) throughout this period" (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 135). Nevertheless, in 1926, the Socialists were able to form their first minority government, headed by Väinö Tanner, sanctioning the final enfranchisement of the party in the Eduskunta. During the Thirties, and especially after the "landslide victory with

seventy-eight seats” (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 164) in the summer of 1933, the SDP managed to establish itself as the leading party, together with the Agrarians¹⁴. During these years many important reforms were approved, such as new municipal laws, the introduction of compulsory education, the establishment of a welfare program in order to diminish poverty, and also a law that totally prohibited the sale of alcoholic drinks.

As for the international relationships, the major preoccupation of Finland was to get on good terms with the Soviet Union. This was possible through the ratification of the treaty of peace signed in Tartu on the 14th of October 1920, which redesigned the borders between the two countries: “In it Soviet Russia once again recognized Finnish Independence, and at long last Finland also gained Petsamo as its corridor to the Arctic Ocean, but was obliged to relinquish the parishes of Regola and Porajärvi that had been occupied the previous years” (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 139).

If we go back to the motivation that – according to Hentilä – brought to the election of Ståhlberg as first President instead of Mannerheim, we notice that the “poor command of Finnish and the aristocratic bearing” were the Achilles’ heel of the Marshall, at least in the eyes of the large majority of the Finnish-speaking part of the population. This exemplifies a radicalization of the national feelings after the independence and the civil war. The consciousness of a “national spirit”, which had united the Swedish-speaking influential minority and the Finnish-speaking majority just few decades before, was now turning into a class-fight between an often privileged Swedish “upper class” and the Finnish “lower and middle class”, which was claiming more space in public life and institutions. Now that independence had been achieved, borders clearly marked and a national unity established, the Swedish element in the country was perceived more and more as something alien, synonymous of a privileged class and *memento* of a colonial past. Like noted before, the Swedish community reacted by closing itself in its own shell, funding his political party and claiming, at the dawn of the Twentieth century, to be considered a different *nation*, paving itself the way for a radical contraposition which is still going on today¹⁵.

The major topic of discussion was the status of Swedish language in the country. As stated by the Constitution, Swedish and Finnish had the same official value. During the Twenties and especially the Thirties, however, the language debate became harsher and took the form of a

¹⁴ Like Wourinen suggests, this was possible mostly thanks to the impressive efforts to create a stable social and political order after the war: “The early and complete rehabilitation of socialism during the interwar decades gave impressive evidence of the success of Finland’s internal reconstruction after 1918”. (Wourinen, 1965 : 239).

¹⁵ Like Törnudd notices, some people belonging to the Swedish-speaking community went so long as to consider Finland nothing but a “Östersverige”, a “Eastern Sweden”, suggesting how a part of the population still believed in a supposed historical superiority of the Swedish heritage.

språkstrid (language-fight). Although bilingualism was rather diffuse in the capital¹⁶, the general situation in the rest of the country presented a deep split-up, both as regards for the geographical displacement of the two language-communities, as much as for the frequency of bilingualism. At the beginning of the century, according to official statistics, 86,75% of the population was Finnish-speaking, whereas almost 13% was Swedish-speaking¹⁷. These figures present only one side of the situation. Most of the Finnish-speakers had, especially in towns and in the major centers, a general good command of Swedish, which was still indispensable for any kind of higher education and consequently for any intellectual job. The Swedish-speaking minority, instead, was more seldom bilingual and, outside Helsinki, it was mostly settled down in the area of Ostrobothnia and on the Åland archipelago, which were basically unilingual Swedish. The polarization of the language-debate was particularly evident in the capital (traditionally bilingual) and in the field of education. According to a law of 1923, the University of Helsinki was a “bilingual” institutions (Wourinen, 1965 : 341), but strong pressure was exercised during the following years to make it ‘truly national’, that is to say, unilingual Finnish. The moment of major tension was reached in 1934, when the Parliament discussed for the first time the possibility that all subjects at university should be given in Finnish, whereas Swedish should be limited to Åbo academy¹⁸. The final law enacted by the Eduskunta in 1937 was considerably more balanced, and sanctioned that there should be fifteen Swedish-language professorships, but that “all professors must possess sufficient knowledge of the other national language to give examinations in it” (Wourinen, 1965 : 341).

If we browse the numbers of *Studentbladet*, a publication of the Swedish-speaking students in Helsinki, we can see how great, during the years 1912-14, was the fear for the process of “förfinskning i städerna” (Finlandization in the cities). The young intellectuals discussed how they should protect themselves against the rising fennomania and which name was more suitable to express their cultural and linguistic “Swedishness”¹⁹. Shortly, the Swedish-

¹⁶ According to Arne Toftegaard Pedersen, the situation in Helsinki at the end of the Nineteenth century was still characterized by a diffuse bilingualism: ”Tvåspråkighet var utbredd i en stad som Helsingfors. Stadens arbetare fäste sällan uppmärksamhet vid om det pratades finska eller svenska”, ”Bilingualism was widely spread in a city like Helsinki. The city workers seldom paid attention if the language spoken was Finnish or Swedish” (Toftegaard Pedersen, 2007 : 84).

¹⁷ Statistics about the development of the population structure in Finland can be found on the web-site of the Finnish Statistic Bureau: http://www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_vaesto_en.html#structure. Today, more than 90% of the population is Finnish-speaking, whereas the Swedish-speaking minority is reduced to less than 5,5%.

¹⁸ See Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 165: ”The Government put forward a proposal in late 1934, that instruction in all university subjects should be given in Finnish; Swedish language instruction was to be transferred to Åbo Akademi.”

¹⁹ An account of the discussions appeared on *Studentbladet* about the definition of the concept ”Finnish-Swedish”, together with a survey of the general situation of the community in the country, can be found in Mustelin, 1983 : 50-70.

speaking community, in Helsinki as much as in other cities more than in the unilingual parts of the country, felt threatened and marginalized. The new political situation, with the universal suffrage and an elected parliament, had placed them implicitly in a minority position.

Of course, it was not only the political independence and the democratic reforms that changed the structure of the Finnish society. At the beginning of the century, Finland experienced the first real development of the industrial sector, which propelled, like anywhere else, a phenomenon of urbanization. If the independence from Russia and the universal suffrage became watersheds in the local history, also industrialization and the subsequent increase of the urban population contributed to change the social hierarchy of the country.

If we focus the attention on Helsinki, we can see how the new capital confirmed the pivotal role of the city as the place *par excellence* of these social transformations and cultural changes. During the decades straddling the two centuries, while the rest of the country experienced the process of industrialization and urbanization more slowly, Helsinki had a population increase of 20%, for a total number of 150,000 inhabitants²⁰. People from all over the country (mostly Finnish-speaking farmers, but also members of the Swedish-speaking middle-class) moved here in search of work and a better life. Helsinki experienced thus its first development towards modernity, not simply in terms of technical improvements, but mostly because it became the centre of the many conflicts (political, linguistic, social) that characterized those years. Like Massimo Ciaravolo states in his review of *Urbana Odysseer* for *Huvudstadsbaldet*: “På 1910-talet mötte Helsingfors moderniteten på riktigt. (...) Helsingfors blev modernt som de stora konflikternas centrum under en spänd tid. Konflikterna gällde språkfrågan, den sociala frågan och den nationella frågan”²¹ (Ciaravolo, 2007).

²⁰ Toftgaard Pedersen sums up the situation as follow: “Industrialisering, liberalisering och urbanisering – starka krafter förändrade strukturerna i Finland. Betraktar man landet i sin helhet gick utvecklingen mot ett modernt, urbant samhälle inte speciellt snabbt. År 1880 bodde 91,6% av Finlands invånare i landkommuner och endast 8,4% i städer och köpingar, år 1900 var siffrorna 87,5% respektive 12,4%. Men dessa siffror berättar inte hela sanningen: i Helsingfors och i en del andra städer steg befolkningskurvan brant. Därtill kom att samhället i sin helhet höll på att urbaniseras.” “Industrialization, liberalization and urbanization – strong forces that changed the Finnish structure. If we look at the country as a whole, the development toward a modern urban society did not go particularly fast. Year 1880 91,6% of the Finnish population live in municipalities in the countryside and only 8,4% in cities and middle-size centers; by the year 1900 the percentage was 87,5% respective 12,4%. But these number do not tell the whole truth: in Helsinki and in other cities, the population curve increased sharply. Consequently, the society as a whole was getting urban”. (Toftgaard Pedersen, 2007 : 88).

²¹ “During the 1910’s, Helsinki met modernity. (...) Helsinki became modern as the centre of big conflicts during a turbulent time. These conflicts regarded the language question, the social question and the national question”.

PARAGRAPH FOUR

THE *DAGDRIVARE* ON THE STREETS OF HELSINKI

At the beginning of the century, a group of young writers in Helsinki began to describe the new urban life in the capital creating a literary figure which has entered the Swedish-Finnish canon with the name of *Dagdrivare*, a local variant of the originally French *flâneur*. As mentioned in chapter one, critics like Keith Tester have already claimed that it is possible – no matter how tied the *flâneur* is to the urban environment of Nineteenth century Paris – to apply the critical discourse about this figure also to other historical and urban situations, because the *flâneur* has an intimate “local” sensibility, as much as a universal. Massimo Ciaravolo, who has devoted many studies to this period of the Finnish-Swedish literature, claims that the group of the *dagdrivare* was composed of about ten writers (among others Gustav Alm, Henning Söderhjelm, Henrik Hildén, Ture Jansson, Torsten Helsingius and Runar Schildt) who were mostly active during the crucial years of the Finnish history between 1907 and 1917:

Gustav Alms (pseudonym för Richard Malmberg) debutroman *Höstdagar* (1907) förblev en isolerad företeelse i några år. Känslan av att det rörde sig om en ny tendens och en hel författargrupp infann sig först när Henning Söderhjelm publicerade artikeln ”De unga” i *Argus* och Henrik Hildén, Ture Jansson och Runar Schildt debuterade med skönlitterära verk mellan 1910 och 1912. Gruppen fick sitt namn efter Torsten Helsingius roman *Dagdrivare* (1914), vars prosadebut skedde först år 1916. (Ciaravolo, 2000 : 47)²²

The *dagdrivare* aimed at catching the new urbanity flooding on the streets of Helsinki, describing the social and cultural turmoil of the capital from the periphery where the recent historical events had placed them. The *flâneur*'s “blasé” attitude enabled these Swedish-Finnish writers to look at the new epoch with an apparently distanced approach, often pessimistic and disenchanted, which found a correspondence in their new, marginal position on the social scale²³. At the same time, the parable of the *dagdrivare* intersects with the international literary axis irradiating from Paris to other European capitals, although, compared to these metropolis, the urban environment where it was unfolding was relatively small. Despite the impressive

²² The debut novel of Gustav Alm (pseudonym of Richard Malmberg), entitled *Höstdagar*, remained an isolated example for some years. The feeling that it was a new trend and a homogeneous group of writers emerged only when Henning Söderhjelm published the article “De unga” on *Argus* and Henrik Hildén, Ture Jansson and Runar Schildt debuted with literary works between 1910 and 1912. The group got its name from Torsten Helsingius' novel *Dagdrivare* (1914). Later appeared Erik Grotenfelt, whose debut in prose happened first in 1916). (Ciaravolo, 2000 : 47).

²³ Like Ciaravolo underscores, “Flanörens outsiderroll passade utmärkt i försöket att litterärt erövra Helsingfors just under ett skede då svenskan hänvisades i periferin” (The *flâneur*'s outsider role was perfectly fit in the attempt to conquer Helsinki in literature, during a moment when Swedish was pushed to the periphery) (Ciaravolo, 2000 : 47).

growth during the last fifty years, Helsinki could not compete either with the French capital, London or Saint Petersburg, which had already crossed the threshold of two million people. The Swedish-Finnish *dagdrivare* did not need, however, to look so far away. He could find a cultural and linguistic model on the western side of the Baltic sea, in Stockholm, where a “literature of asphalt” had already begun to flourish with some of the works of August Strindberg and the journalistic and narrative production of Hjalmar Söderberg²⁴.

Thus, the *dagdrivare* of Helsinki were able to express the feeling of fear and dismay in front of the urban crowd, the sense of alienation caused by the technical achievements and by the uncontrollable force of modern times. These topics bring back again the works of Janson, Hildén, Schildt and the others to the traditional representation of the city during the second half of the Nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the specific “local” perspective of these writers deeply marks their analysis of the Finnish growing modernity. The fearful crumbling down of the old world and the “construction” of a new, in fact, is intertwined with the isolation and marginalization which the Swedish-Speaking community was subjected to at that time. The individual’s confusion and distrust in front of the new urban environment overlaps an intimate feeling of sorrow for a new social order that is sweeping away the old system of values. This is already evident, for example, in Gustav Alm’s *Höstdagar* (1907), which depicts the confrontation of a man with the recent social changes in the country. The tension between the rising finnomania and the decadent aristocratic attitude of the Finnish-Swedish community, to which the protagonist belongs, informs the entire book, which is made up of a series of casual encounters on the streets of Helsinki. The protagonist of the novel wanders through the capital observing, with the typical distant and blasé look, the rapid changes on the urban environment, always keeping aside, powerless in front of the dynamism of the new society, which sometimes shows also its aggressive face (at the beginning of the novel, for example, he is attacked by two

²⁴ In another article about the *Dagdrivare*, Ciaravolo emphasizes the relationship between the experience of Stockholm described by Hjalmar Söderberg and the young Swedish-Finnish writers: “Per cercare i modelli di questa nuova letteratura urbana, I perdigiorno guardarono a occidente; se Parigi era lontana, l’esperienza di Stoccolma era letterariamente immediata per gli svedesi di Finlandia, grazie alle opere di August Strindberg e soprattutto Hjalmar Söderberg, che a cavallo dei due secoli era riuscito a guadagnare alla letteratura svedese il flâneur – anzi: il flanör – tanto come personaggio di finzione nei romanzi quanto come gesto e posizione dell’io narrante nelle prose brevi scritte per i giornali.” (Searching for models of this new urban literature, the *dagdrivare* looked westward; If Paris was too far away, the experience of Stockholm was literally immediate for the Finnish-Swedish, thanks to the works of August Strindberg and above all of Hjalmar Söderberg, who had managed to import to Swedish literature the flâneur – or rather the flanör – both as a fictional character in the novels as much as a gesture and a position of the narrative self in the shorter texts written for the newspapers) (Ciaravolo, 1998 : 154). A more extensive study about the importance of Hjalmar Söderberg for these writers and a whole generation in Finland can be found in Ciaravolo’s book, *En ungdomsvän från Sverige*, Svenska litteratursällskap i Finland, Helsinki, 2000. Also Toftegaard-Pedersen notices that Helsinki obtains a particular status in the Swedish-Finnish literature during the first decades of the Twentieth century, taking over a place that, not later than twenty years before, was occupied by foreign metropolis (Toftegaard-Peder, 2007 : 103).

strong Finns). Like Ciaravolo notices: “Den första moderna finlandsvenska Helsingforsromanen demonstrerar i själva verket den svenskspråkiga överklassens säkra förfall inför en ohejdbar fennomansk och populistisk våg”²⁵ (Ciaravolo, 2000 : 48).

Also in Ture Jansson’s short story *Knock me down* (1914) the pessimism for the imminent end of the world “as we know it” reveals a deeply critical approach of the Finnish *flâneur* towards modernity (an approach that very soon became a stereotype of this kind of literature). *Knock me down* relates the story of a young university student, Birger, originally from Åbo, who lives a bohemian life together with his fellow friends in Helsinki. Birger is weakly engaged in his academic career and attends the lessons mostly for avoiding to enter the family-company in Åbo. In the evening, well-dressed and with his hair perfectly fixed, he spends his time in the theatre or drinking with his friends at Catani, a famous night-club of the time. Birger has recently met the beautiful Swedish actress Ebba Hellqvist, with whom he has initiated a liaison. It is to her that Birger, although afraid of appearing a new Werther, confesses his concern for the society they live in:

Ser du, vi har en del bekymmer i vår framtid. Allt sviker under oss, och det är ingenting att företa. Vi ungdomar är en mellangeneration, som är till för att offras. Allt hvad vi gör smulas sönder. Allt är upprifvet omkring oss, vi känner att vi förlorar sambandet med det förflutna, och ingenting är mer ovisst än framtiden. Här står vi, smått förbryllade, med våra unga verksamhetslust. Vi är hemlösa i tiden. Vår generation är en bro över afgrunden²⁶.
(Jansson, 1914 : 33).

The fear for the future, the feeling to belong to a generation “in between” and for that reason condemned to be sacrificed, afflicts the young *flâneur*, who looks at the rapid fading away of the old world without being able to find a connection with modern time. For Birger, nothing is certain anymore, people like him have nothing to hold on to, because all that used to look solid in their eyes is now “melting into air”. The protagonist of *Knock me down* expresses the typical melancholic, resigned and passive behaviour of the *flâneur*, that primarily refers to that “universal” character of this social and literary figure. However, in this short-story too, although less explicitly than in *Höstdagar*, it is possible to detect some aspects regarding the situation of the Swedish-speaking minority. When Birger and his friends talk together, they sometimes criticize the new Finnish habits, they discuss about socialism and what happens in Sweden as if that was their real homeland and, even when he looks at himself in the mirror, he

²⁵ “The first modern Swedish-Finnish novel actually depicts the Swedish upper-class’ decay in front of the unstoppable wave of populist fennomania”.

²⁶ “You see, we have a lot to worry about our future. Everything fades away under us, and there is nothing to do about it. We young people are a generation in the middle, which is destined to sacrifice. Anything we do crumbles down. Everything is torn down around us, we feel that we have lost the connection with the past, and nothing is more uncertain than our future. Here we are, a little confused, with our young desire to be operative. We are homeless in our time. Our generation is a bridge over the abyss.”

notes that he has a typical Finnish-Swedish face: “Han konstaterade ånyo at than hade ett typiskt svenskfinskt ansikte. Det var kanske något grof hugget, men ärligt, solidt, med ett drag av vemod” (Jansson, 1914 : 40)²⁷.

The Finnish(-Swedish) *flâneur* thus presents a “universal” as much as a “local” character, the latter linking him tightly to the chronotope of Helsinki at the beginning of the century, when the capital of the newly-born state was staging radical changes in the society, in the cultural life and in the economy (that is to say, the arrival of modernity). The often aristocratic, usually rich and culturally dominant Swedish-speaking community could not but look at the vanishing old world with nostalgic and sad eyes.

The substantially negative and disillusioned approach of the Finnish-Swedish *flâneur* towards modernity also re-actualizes the dichotomy between the city and the countryside. In Paris, during the second half of the Nineteenth century, modernity implied a break with the past and the beginning of a new, transient, ephemeral present marked by the rise of the bourgeoisie and the development of a capitalistic economy in modern sense. Helsinki had basically not such historical or economical background behind itself and that is the reason why the confrontation with the past, in some of these writers, happens through a shift away from the city and towards the countryside, where the ancient times were embodied by manor-houses and land-property. This peculiar aspect emerged clearly in the first short-stories by Runars Schildt (1888-1925), considered the most talented writer of the group of the *dagdrivare*. Shortly before the publication of his debut collection *Den segrande eros* (1912), Schildt published on the newspaper *Dagens Tidning* an article devoted to the representation of Helsinki in modern prose significantly entitled *Helsingfors i skönlitteratur* (Helsinki in literature). Schildt claimed that the young Finnish capital was missing the sufficient historical consistency required to become an object of study for a local “asphalt literature”. Despite the neoclassical beauty of the heart of the city, not a single building – except the fortress of Sveaborg – reminded of the Swedish time and the old epoch. Moreover, its “middle-size” deprived it of the countryside fashion of small cities, but made it insignificant compared to the metropolises in the neighboring countries, Stockholm in first instance:

Ända till de allra senaste decennierna har staden spelat en mycket underordnad roll i vår inhemska diktning. (...) Orsakerna därom äro många. Först och främst är Helsingfors trots sin respektabla officiella åldern af trehundra femtio år är de facto en fullständigt parveny. Vi äga ju icke ett hus, icke en gata som vore äldre än, låtom oss säga från i förgår – således icke ett enda minne från svensktiden, om vi frånse Sveaborg; och det minnet är ju inte af vidare art. Därför har heller ingen författare kunnat utlösa de poetiska möjligheter, som ligga i känslan av samhörighet med längesen försvunna tider (...). Helsingfors är i detta nu en stad i slyngelåren; det har inget af småstaden charm,

²⁷ “Again, he had to notice that had a typical Swedish-Finnish face. Maybe it was a little heavy, but honest, solid and with a trace of melancholy”.

inga gamla kvarter med slingrande gränder och pittoreska kåkar. Det är icke heller en storstad, som i sin mikrokosm innesluter kvintessensen af samtidens lif och dess högsta resultat i godt och ondt (...). Vi äga ju ingen hof, ingen (egen) militär, ingen rik adel, inget judisk storfinans, ingen demimonde etc. etc. , d.v.s. vi saknar en god del af det som ger färg och särprägel t. ex. åt Stockholm²⁸. (Schildt, 1912 : 11)

Thus, according to Schildt, Helsinki was a too young city, not so much in terms of age (he names the city's "respectable age of three hundred and fifty years"), but in terms of big city glance. It hardly showed any trace of a glorious historical past on its urban garment; it hosted a social interplay not particularly varied (due to the absence of a court, of an aristocracy and of real slums populated with lower classes); it was not, in a word, the microcosm that big cities used to be. Despite that, Schildt is also apt to affirm that already writers like Tavaststjerna and Topelius started to depict Helsinki as a *city* by the middle of the Nineteenth century, and concludes his article with a positive critic of *Höstdagar* by Gustav Alm and *Inga medmänniskor* by Ture Jansson, praising their ability to describe the social changes straddling the end of the century and the big strike of 1905. If Helsinki was not able to provide a sufficient historical background, the past could be found somewhere else. Schildt claimed that the ancient time was represented by the countryside, the land of the fathers, which implicitly created a contraposition with the flourishing urban environment²⁹. His first book, *Den segrande eros*, represents an interesting example of this dichotomy. The six short-stories that the compose the book depict a generation of young men and women which find themselves at odds with the new times, and nevertheless are attracted to the capital by an irresistible force. Helsinki is not always the scenery of their juvenile adventures (four of the tales actually take place in different parts of the Finnish countryside), but is present also *in absentia*, as the place which incarnates the present, the modernity, with all its impetuosity and almost violent force, which is, nevertheless, *their* time. On the other hand, the countryside stands as the traditional past that unites them with the

²⁸ So far as to the latest decades, the city has played a subordinate role in our domestic literature. (...) There are many reasons for this. First of all, despite its respectable official age of three hundred and fifty years, Helsinki is de facto a complete parvenu. We do not have a house, not a street which is older, let us say, than the other day – consequently, not a single memory from the Swedish time, if we disregard Sveaborg; and that memory is not of the right kind. Thus, there has not been a single writer which had been able to trigger the poetic possibilities which lies in the affinity with long-gone times (...). In this moment, Helsinki is in its rascal years; it does not have the charm of the small towns, no old blocks with winding alley and picturesque shanties. It is not a big city either, which comprehends in its microcosm the quintessence of the life of modernity and its highest results, both good and bad (...). We have no court, not a (own) army, no rich aristocracy, no Jewish finance, no demi monde and so on. That is to say, we do not have a big deal of what gives color and characteristic to Stockholm, for example.

²⁹ Ciaravolo underscores the importance of this article in his works from 1998 and 2000: "La rappresentazione letteraria della città moderna non può fare a meno di un presente variegato, transitorio e composito – quello che potremmo definire il piano della contemporaneità – ma nemmeno dei luoghi carichi di memoria, ricordo e tradizioni, cioè di stratificazione storica. Helsinki, secondo Schildt, mancava di entrambe le cose." (The representation of modern city in literature can't do without a varied, transient and heterogeneous – what we could defined the contemporary level – but neither without places with memories and tradition, that is to say, the historical stratification. Helsinki, according to Schildt, lacked both), (Ciaravolo, 1998 : 162).

country, in a literal as much as in an abstract way. This contraposition emerges especially in the two stories *Ett nytt liv* (A new life) and *Mot skymningen* (Towards evening), where the protagonist, the young *flâneur* Åke and the cousins Birger and Mikael Weydel have to take the difficult decision whether they want to leave the city and rescue the manor-house of their ancestors in the countryside, or to continue living their exciting but also unresolved and meaningless urban life³⁰. The *impasse* of the protagonists emphasizes the loss of this generation at the beginning of the century and again underscores the inability of the Swedish-Finnish community to catch the spirit of the new epoch, retiring into itself.

The experience of the *dagdrivare* came to an end already between 1915 and 1916, when the radical pessimism, the decadent attitude and the self-indulgent behaviors of the *flâneur* soon turned into a cliché, an intellectual pose that proved insufficient to express the uneasiness of this generation. Nevertheless, this page of the Finnish-Swedish literature represents an important example of an aware “urban prose”, which offers us a snapshot of the social and historical changes that were taking place during that period in the country. If the majority of these writers were not able to further develop the intrinsic dilemma of their confrontation with modernity, at least Runar Schildt managed to depict a more many-faced image of the young city³¹.

Interestingly, in an article published on *Books from Finland* in 1997, Kjell Westö praises the role of Runar Schildt as “the man who saw Helsinki”. Westö recalls the first short-story he read by him, *Den svagare* (The Weaker), belonging to the collection *Perdita och andra noveller* (*Perdita and other tales*, 1918), which depicts the story of the shop assistant Blomqvist and how he is betrayed by his wife Manja. He also mentions *Raketten* (The Meat Grinder), the sequel that Schildt wrote to this short-story, which was published some years later and described the destinies of the two characters after the civil war. Westö emphasizes above all the ability of the writer to move around different social environments. He notices for example that one of the first scenes in *Den svagare* takes place nearby Tölö bay, which at that time “used to be the border between bourgeois and proletarian Helsinki” (Westö, 1997 : 128) and claims that the wide range

³⁰ For an accurate and precise analysis of these short-stories, together with a comparative study of Arvid Mörne’s *Den svenska jorden* and of Erik Grotenfledt’s *Bengt Walters’ lycka* and *Det nya fosterlandet*, see Ciaravolo, 1998 : 163 – 177).

³¹ Some of the *dagdrivare* continued to write for some more years, but with different results. Runar Schildt published his last collection of short stories, *Häxskogen och andra noveller* (The bewitched wood and other stories) in 1920, five years before committing suicide. Gustav Alm’s literary career ended already in 1924, when he published his third and last book, *Fångstmän*. Ture Jansson, instead, worked as a writer all his life and published his last book in 1953. He continued to use Helsinki as his favorite setting and source of inspiration, but his urban investigation became more and more descriptive. *Boken om Helsingfors*, for example, from 1928, portrays different situations in the everyday life of Helsinki (the political activity, the student-life, the touristic sight-seeing, the people gathering in glamorous restaurants or shabby bars), without any critical approach or solid narrative structure, so that today it only appears as a collection of yellowed literary postcards, only interesting for the anecdotes it contains.

of social types he is able to depict represents his fundamental characteristic: “His stories carries a simple but important message: irrespective of whether a person lives at the bottom of the society, at its top or somewhere in the middle, that person is a person. From this it follows that the life of that person, his sorrows and joys, ought to be taken seriously, and an effort should be made to understand his motives” (Westö, 1997 : 129).

Schildt is a writer who managed to catch Helsinki in a specific moment, and, at the same time, to populate its street with situations and characters that are timeless. This is also due to the fact that the Finnish capital has been experiencing a urbanization which started relatively late, at the turn of the century. This process has involved a substantial part of the city-dwellers, which originally – just few generations back in time – came from another part of the country. Westö underscores how this common denominator makes Schild’s stories still alive today:

Above all, Runar Schild’s stories opened my eyes to Helsinki. When I read them for the first time, they were already 60 years back. But the people in his Helsinki were real and touching, and I suddenly realized that the city my parents had moved to had a long history – a history full of people cast in my likeness. Helsinki is not a city with an aura of fable and legend. It is more than 400 years old, but for a long time was not much more than a wretched, poky village. Then it quickly expanded, and large sections of its population have traditionally – both before and after the last war – consisted of lost people with roots somewhere else. (Westö, 1997 : 129).

Despite its relative little dimension, Helsinki too presents a “melting pot” composed of people coming from different places, speaking different languages and representatives of different segment of the social scale. One of the most specific characters of the modern city was certainly its bilingualism, which had a strong influence on its social development. As noted, the tension between the Finnish-speaking majority and the Swedish-speaking minority in the capital was one of the topics often discussed by the *dagdrivare* (which clearly looked at it from their perspective) during the Tens’ and Twenties’. Later, the language debate became even more virulent and took the form, as already mentioned, of a *språkstrid*. However, the political situation of the country changed radically during the second part of the Thirties, when the international situation in the rest of the continent worsened and led to the beginning of World War Two.

PARAGRAPH FIVE

FINLAND'S HISTORY 1930-1990: FROM WINTER WAR TO THE LAME YEARS.

In autumn 1939, after Germany's invasion of Poland and the subsequent declaration of war by France and Great Britain, the Finnish parliament understood that it will soon have to handle more burdensome tasks than deciding, for example, the official language of public universities. When Soviet Russia militarily occupied the Baltic Republics between the 24th of September and the 10th of October, it seemed clear that the declaration of neutrality, signed by all the Nordic countries in 1938, would soon be in peril. According to the secret protocol Ribbentrop-Molotov, signed by the foreign ministers of Nazi Germany and Soviet Union on the 23rd of August, Finland should fall within the Russian "Sphere of influence".

Twice, on the 12th and the 21st of October 1939, the Finnish delegate Paasikivi went to Moscow to meet with Stalin. Paasikivi firmly refused, like previously agreed by the Parliament, the request of militarization of the Finnish territory. A last attempt to find a diplomatic compromise was done on the 9th of November, but the meeting's negative result irreversibly broke down the negotiations.

Not later than two weeks after, the Soviet Union accused Finland of attacking the village of Mainila, on the Karelian isthmus and, even before receiving the Finnish denial, interrupted all the diplomatic relationships, considering the previous agreements between the countries defunct. On the 30th of November 1939, the Soviet Union army crossed the Finnish border and officially started what has gone down in history under the name of Winter War.

The disparity between the Soviet's war-machine and the young Finnish army was enormous and for this reason the fierceness and the impressive resistance of the latter appeared even more heroic. "The attackers' military strength was superior in every way. When the fighting began, the Red Army deployed nineteen infantry division and seven armored brigades on the front line, totaling 450,000 men. Even greater was Soviet superiority in heavy armament, with 2,000 tanks and armored cars, a similar number of artillery pieces and 1,000 aircrafts" (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 181). Almost completely alone, Finland made an incredible military effort and managed, under the leadership of Marshall Mannerheim, to resist the Soviet's advance³². The fighting went on, during an incredibly harsh winter, until the beginning of

³² Sweden did not officially support the former colony, despite a deep split in the public opinion and the creation of a committee, whose slogan 'Finlands sak är vår' (Finland's cause is ours) became very popular. However, over 8,000 Swedes volunteered to fight in Finland, although only two battalions reached the front.

February 1940. On the 11th, the Soviet troops broke through the Finnish lines at Summa, forcing Mannerheim's soldiers to retreat. The coalition government, led by Rysto Ryti, who relied on help from France and the UK, initially refused the terms of surrender which the Soviet had sent to Helsinki through the embassy in Stockholm. On the 29th of February, though, after a successful Russian attack to Viipuri, the war cabinet decided to accept the proposal from the Soviet. A delegation headed by Ryti flew to Moscow and signed a peace-treaty at one o'clock in the night of the 13th of March.

The devastation and the huge number of casualties caused by the fighting, the loss of 10% of the territory, including Viipuri, and the consequent stream of refugees, could not overshadow the pride of little Finland, which did not to lose its sovereignty. The cost of the war in terms of human lives was dramatic: 24,000 Finnish soldiers and 1,000 civilians died during the three-months-fighting (whereas Soviet Union suffered more than the double, with 49,000 casualties³³) and the whole area west and north of lake Ludoga became Soviet territory. Despite that, the Finnish David had managed to blind the Soviet Giant Goliath and to retain its independence: "The Winter War has affected the Finns' awareness of their history and national identity more than any other critical event or period in recent history" (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 188).

Only one year later, however, Finland found itself at war again, though in a rather different position. Its involvement in World War II began when Nazi Germany broke the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement and organized the Operation Barbarossa against Soviet Union. How Finland became actively involved is still a matter of debate for historians. Apparently, secret talks between the Finnish army and the German war cabinet started long before June 1941, without Prime Minister Paasikivi's knowledge. Few days after the beginning of the hostility (Hitler declared war to Russia in the early morning of 22nd of June), when the troops of the Third Reich crossed the Soviet's borders, the Red army hit some Finnish military objectives. Paasikivi understood that the involvement of the country in the fighting was unavoidable and the displacement of the Finnish forces was impressive: "(compared to the population) Finland mobilized more fighting men than any other country that took part in Second World War" (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 198).

The name given to this military intervention was "Continuation War". Finland meant to emphasize how his participation basically aimed at conquering back the territories lost after the Moscow treaty of March 1940 and consequently never considered itself an ally of Germany,

³³ This figure refers to the Russian official statistics. According to Finnish studies, however, the total loss of Russia should amount to 200,000).

but only a “co-belligerent” country, although Germans troops were regularly present on its soil until the end of the war. Germany asked Mannerheim to participate to the siege of Saint Petersburg and to break off the diplomatic relationships with the UK. Mannerheim refused the first proposal and eventually interrupted the negotiations with Great Britain only after RAF bombed Petsamo. However, as the fate of the Soviet’s campaign turned against Germany, Finland found itself in a tricky position. Despite the personal visit of the Führer on the occasion of Mannerheim’s birthday, the country could not continue to show a too friendly relation with the Reich. In January 1944, three aerial raids of the Red Army bombed Helsinki. The attack would have continued, if Paasikivi had not promptly contacted Alexandra Kollontay, the Soviet Ambassador to Sweden, and expressed the Finnish will to open a negotiation to discuss the terms of peace.

During the Teheran Conference in November-December 1943, Stalin had already anticipated that the condition should be particularly severe for Finland. The former border should be completely restored (the Finnish army had managed to win back Viipuri) and the country was to pay 600 million dollar for war damage. Fortunately, during the meeting in Moscow on the 19th of September 1944, Great Britain convinced the Soviet Union to cut the total amount that Finland was supposed to pay by 50%. However, this was only one side of the situation. After breaking the relationship with Germany already on the 2nd of September, Soviet Union demanded that all German troops should be expelled from the country. This was the last stage of the conflict on the Finnish territory and it turned out to be extremely violent, especially for civilians. Almost all the fighting took place in the northern region of Lapland, where the German soldiers had organized their withdrawal. The situation for the Finnish troops was worsened by the scorched-earth tactics adopted by the Germans. Entire villages were destroyed or burnt down and, when the last Nazis left Rovaniemi, the regional capital was nothing but a smoking pile of rubble. When finally the country could put down the weapons and start the reconstruction, more than one hundred thousand people were homeless .

Despite the dramatic costs in terms of human lives and war damage, Finland was able to recover very fast: “After the demobilized forces had returned to work, Finnish production was soon well under way, and reached pre-war levels as early as 1948” (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 237). Despite an additional bill of 48 million dollar, it took only seven years before all the debts were paid back, without the aids of the Marshall plan.

The post-war years were marked by a radical change both in the social and the political life. Marshall Mannerheim, who had been elected President in 1944 after the end of the mandate of Rysto Ryti, resigned from his post two years later, on the 4th of March 1946, officially for

”health reasons”. His successor, Juho Paasikivi, was elected only five days later with a large majority of 157 votes, a recognition of his efforts during the war years. Paasikivi had been the negotiator with the Soviet during the Winter War, Minister without portfolio in the coalition government that ruled the country during the conflict and finally Prime Minister himself during the crucial years of 1944-46. For the next ten years (Paasikivi was re-elected in 1950), he dominated the Finnish political life, giving his imprimatur on the relationship with Soviet Union, which became known as ”the Paasikivi line”. Like Nevakivi asserts:

Paasikivi, born in 1870, was only three years younger than Mannerheim, but was to remain head of State for ten years. As conservative as the old Marshall of Finland, he nevertheless meticulously followed the Soviet-friendly *Ostpolitik*, known as ‘Paasikivi line’, the purpose of which was to avoid any conflict with Moscow unconditionally but to defend Finland’s basic interests, above all its national right to self-determination. (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 236).

During Paasikivi’s presidency another political figure, that of Uhro Kekkonen became more and more prominent. Born in 1900, Kekkonen had entered politics early in his life, holding the post of Justice Minister for the Agrarian Party already at the age of 36. Educated abroad (he studied in Germany, where he obtained a PhD in Economy), Kekkonen was elected Prime Minister for the first time in 1950, and formed five different governments during the Paasikivi’s mandate. Already in 1950, though, Kekkonen challenged Paasikivi for the Presidential election, and finally beat him in 1956, for only one vote. During his years as Prime Minister, however, Kekkonen followed closely the indication of the President. He thus strengthened the good relationship with Soviet Union, signing economical agreements that guaranteed a certain prosperity to the exports of the Finnish industry, especially those of the metallurgic sector.

The first post-war years were mostly devoted to reconstruction. In 1947, when the Soviet Commission supervising the war damage-payment left Hotel Tornii in Helsinki, Finland could take a deep breath and start to think about the future without the heavy yoke of a direct foreign interference. At the beginning of the Fifties the country could finally turn page. The year that best represents the optimism and the enthusiasm of the post-war period is surely 1952, when Helsinki hosted the Olympic games³⁴. During the following period the country experienced the strongest economical growth of its modern history, which absorbed most of the unemployment that still affected the country’s economy until the late fifties. The labor-force in the agriculture sector dropped substantially, whereas the secondary and tertiary sector grew. This implied of

³⁴ Helsinki had been earlier given the organization of the Olympic games of 1940, which never took place because of the war. We will return later, in the chapter devoted to *Vädan av att Vara Skrake*, to the social and political meaning of this *annus mirabilis* in the Finnish history. Like Nevakivi claims: ”In 1952, Finland completed its reparations to the Soviet Union, the only one of the defeated to do so. (...) The Helsinki Olympic Games in 1952 had political significance in that the Soviet Union participated for the first time in the history of the games” (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 284).

course a phenomenon of urbanization: "In the 1960' the population of Finnish towns increased by over 600,000, more than ever before within a corresponding period" (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi: 300). Some people decided however to cross the border and move to Sweden, where salary, at that time, were 50% higher.

Kekkonen, who was re-elected President in '62 and '68, led the economical and political development of the country with his charismatic style. Detractors called him "demagogue" and "tyrannical" and criticized his influence on the Eduskunta as excessive and on the edge of undemocratic. Supporters emphasized instead his fundamental role as a shrewd and skillful diplomat, who managed to maintain good (and lucrative) relationships with both Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. When the international economical crisis at the end of the Seventies reached Finland, he was quick enough to promote a new energetic politics and to pave the way for a closer integration of the country into the European Economic Community. When Kekkonen retired from public life in 1981, due to health problems, and passed away the year after, Finland entered a new political era, which is still called today "the post-Kekkonen" period. During the last thirty years, the political scene in the Eduskunta has been characterized by the an alternation between the most important parties, the Social Democrats, the National Party and the Centre Party. The post of the President, instead, has been occupied only by Social democrats: Mauno Koivisto (1982-94), Marti Ahtisaari (1994-2000), and Tarja Halonen (2000-incumbent).

During the Eighties Finland experienced also a radical change in its economy. Up to this moment, in fact, the country had developed a system similar to that of the other Nordic countries, where the State had a rather strong role in the economic system and a Keynesian monetary policy. Like Nevakivi suggests, few traditional pillars where sustaining the economic system: "bilateral Eastern economy provided many business with secure markets, agriculture relied on state subsidies, and the domestic market was dominated by a few wholesale firms" (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 334). Already during the Seventies, however, the Finnish monetary policy underwent a change, with a deregulation of the financial market³⁵. During the Eighties, the Finnish mark was greatly overvalued, but the economic perspectives seemed to be more than positive. During these years, in fact, the country climbed the international statistics of the richest countries in the world. In 1986, Finland reached the 13th place in the OECD's

³⁵ See Pekkarinen, Vartiainen, 2001 : 137, "Under 1970-talet blev inflationsdämpningen och värnandet om den yttre balansen viktigare än den konjunkturpolitiska finjusteringen. Samtidigt blev de monetariska ideerna populära. (...) Finans- och valutamarknaden avreglerades". "During the Seventies, the control over the inflation and the safeguarding of the external balance became more important than the economic policy fine-tuning. At the same time, the monetary ideas became more and more popular. (...) The financial and the stock market was deregulated".

statistics of the richest countries in the world, and the 8th place in the World Bank Bulletin of the richest countries according to GDP.

This incredible performance proved to be ephemeral, and based on risky loans and financial speculation, something that was very unusual in the country. By the end of the Eighties, the financial sector had become such a gamble that this period was later called the period of the “casino economy”. Well representative of this capital adventure is the story of Pentti Juho Kouri. Considered the *enfant prodige* of the Finnish economy, Kouri obtained his master in Economy at the University of Helsinki already in 1970 and, one year later, at the age of twenty one, he was employed by the International Monetary Fund. After a short and brilliant career in many universities in the US and in Finland, he became famous, at the end of the Eighties, when he drove the greatest financial speculation of the Finnish history, known as the “Kouri-deals”. Together with other investors, he made a takeover bid over the two biggest banks of the country. The operation, though, was conducted with money coming from risky loans.

Kouri became the eponymous of an economic situation which was unsustainable in the long run, and that was already showing fearful cracks at the end of the decade:

The story of the investor Pentti Kouri's rise to wealth – during one year, in 1989, he made hundreds of millions of marks by stock exchange speculation, hitherto a little-known art in Finland – gave many people the idea that anyone could amass a fortune without working or producing anything. Loan money, readily advanced by the bank, were invested in mountain hotels, tropical spas and shoppers' paradises. (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999 : 334).

The wake-up call from the sweet dream of the casino economic was as dramatic as the speculations had been furious. When the colossal house of cards built only under few years was blown away, a long period of economic stagnation, unemployment and recession was ahead. In 1993, 20% of the labor force was without occupation, the deficit in the balance of payments exceeded 25 billion marks (5% of the GDP) and the government was forced to devalue twice the currency to promote export, which also suffered from the collapse of Soviet Union, which used to be one of the fundamental partners of the Finnish economy. The “lame years”, after the dissipation of the Eighties, left deep scares in the collective memory. When more and more people were forced to queue outside the charities and the spiral of recession seemed never-ending, it appeared clear that a final curtain had fallen over the casino economy.

This brief overview of the history of Finland during the Twentieth century is far from being exhaustive, nevertheless it seemed important to give at least an account of the most important events during the century. In the same way, it seemed important to give also an overview of the *dagdrivare* generation during the Tens and the Twenties, as an expression of how some intellectuals tried to describe the arrival of modernity in the Nordic country, with all

its output of inventions and progress, as much as with a nostalgic look towards a past irreversibly lost.

As we will see, Westö's early works primarily deal with an analysis of the fuddle of the Eighties, emphasizing the supremacy of economy and the rise of consumerism in the country. In his first long novel, *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, the investigation of Finnish history will start with the years of the post-war reconstruction and will end with the gambles of the casino economy, whereas the second, *Vådan av att vara Skrake*, is set during the second half of the century, but goes back with some flashbacks to the events of the Winter War.

CHAPTER IV

NOTES FROM THE SUBURB – THE EARLY WORKS OF KJELL WESTÖ

PARAGRAPH ONE

TANGO ORANGE, EPITAPH ÖVER MR NACHT AND AVIG-BÖN

While working as a journalist, Kjell Westö entered the literary scene of the Eighties as a poet. If we consider his following works – the long family-novels *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, *Vådan av att vara Skrake*, *Där vi en gång gått* and *Gå inte ensam ut i natten* – this might seem rather surprising. In his three collections of poems (but especially in the first and the second), Westö primarily investigates the decade of the Eighties, describing the crisis of an agency that sharply criticizes the society he has grown up in and that tries, passing through a “purgatory of decadent adventures and crashed illusions”, to elaborate a critical discourse about the modernity unfolding in front of him¹. Westö’s poems thus depicts the crisis of a young and disillusioned personality which finds himself in conflict with the specific reality of his time. At a closer look, however, it is possible to detect many aspects that will reappear later in his novels and that will become cornerstones of his literary production, so that the critical investigation of the Eighties becomes a starting point for the itinerary through the Finnish history that so strongly marks his later works. By claiming this, we suggest that Westö’s passage from poetry and short-stories to novels – novels that usually stretch themselves over a long span of time and over many generations – does not imply a radical change, rather a different way of developing the chosen topics. Although this will hopefully be clear at the end of the present analysis, it is possible to assert that Westö’s topics – the enchantment for the urban setting (especially the suburbs), the Finnish and Finnish-Swedish national identities, the use of the language as a social marker, the critic of the consumer society and the refuse of the postmodern critical thinking – is already fully present, though *in nuce*, in his poems and short-stories. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the formal difference between the poems, the short stories and the novels also affects how the author’s ideas are transmitted. What can be

¹ In an article published in *Huvudstadsbladet* in June 2002 (and re-published in *Sprickor* in 2011), Westö writes a review of his own book using the pseudonym of Anders Hed. Hed detects some influences from Martin Enckell, David Lindholm and Tuomari Nurmio, criticizes the abundance of metaphors, but claims that the young poet has sufficient inspiration to become a good writer. The most interesting part of the review is about the structure of the collection: “Trots att samlingen är osovrad kan man skönja en tydlig narrative struktur: den arketyppiska resan från barndomens oskuld och förväntan via en skärseld av dekadanta äventyrer och krossade illusioner, fram till ett tillstånd av besinning och avklarnad visdom” (Westö, 2011 : 290). ”Despite the fact that the collection is not filtered, one can notice a clear narrative structure: the archetypical voyage from childhood innocence and expectation, through a purgatory of decadent adventures and crashed illusions, to a condition of self-control and clear wisdom”. However, Hed is very quick to underscore that, mostly due to the young age of the poet, the final part is not so convincing.

suddenly caught in a line of a poem is, so to speak, more intrinsic and diffuse in the plot of a novel.

Kjell Westö's first collection of poems appeared in 1986 with the title *Tango orange* and it made a case because it was one of the few collections of Swedish poems that got sold out (Rönholm, 1995 : 136). The title belongs to the opening poem, which can be considered a manifesto for the entire book. Written among parentheses, it depicts Noveros, an imaginary city of "concrete and glass" ("betongen och glaset", Westö, 1986 : 6), where the sun sticks on the facades of the buildings and the traffic-lights dance their colorful tango:

(I Noveros skymningsland
möts betongen och glaset; vinklarna
följer med våra resor, de frusna.
I Noveros skymningsland
klistrar solen som läppstift
sig på stenhusens ögonlock, slutna.
Längs matarlederna tonar dröjande septimackrod
ostörda dansar trafikljusen
sin Tango Orange.

I Noveros skymningsland
härskar gårdars svarta rektanglar;
långt borta hörs grantoppars sus.
längs matarlederna tonar en dags slutackord
ostörda dansar trafikljusen
sin Tango Orange.)
(Westö, 1986 : 6)²

The urban vision of Noveros rapidly outlines what seems to be a modern suburb. The concrete and the glass, the houses of stone, the traffic-lights switching color, and especially the "black rectangles" of the yards contribute to give the impression of a grey, anonymous modern suburb seen from above. That we probably find ourselves in a Nordic country can be guessed by the presence of the distant "grantoppars sus" (the buzz of the firs' tops). As we will see, the suburb represents the space *par excellence* in the early works as much as in the first novels of Kjell Westö, and the quickly-drawn description of this urban outskirts at the very beginning of his first book is probably more than a coincidence. Already Lars Gustaf Andersson, in his review of *Tango Orange* for the literary magazine *BLM* (Bonniers litterära magasin),

² "In the crepuscular city of Noveros / concrete and glass meet; the angles / follow our travels, those frozen. / In the crepuscular city of Noveros / the sun pastes itself like lipstick / on the eyelids of the stone houses, those closed. / Along the feeding leads the seventh chord plays hesitantly / undisturbed the traffic-lights dance / their tango orange. / In the crepuscular city of Noveros / the black rectangles of the yard rule / in the distance you can hear the buzz of the firs' tops. / Along the feeding leads the final chord of the day plays / Undisturbed the traffic-lights dance / their tango orange.

emphasizes the central role played by the urban scene, both in this collection of poems and in the whole modernist tradition:

Fascinationen inför staden, Urbs, finns mycket markant i den tidiga modernistiska dikten; man besjunger asfalten och motorerna och neonljusen och biograferna (...) Den modernistiska erfarenheten har uppenbarligen aldrig klingat av i den finlandssvenska poesin, och ett exempel på detta är debutanten Kjell Westö, som med sin samling *Tango Orange* mycket medveten placerar sig i en litterär tradition som har valt att försöka bli en stämma för det industriella eller till och med post-industriella samhället³. (Andersson, 1987 : 67)

Andersson stresses two important elements in his review: the enchantment for urbanization and the industrial/post-industrial character of the collection. The urban-theme runs deeply through the poems and is often intertwined with the socio-economical critical discourse. Although it might seem strange that Helsinki is not explicitly mentioned – whereas three other cities are named – one can easily feel that the Finnish capital is immanently present. Westö describes in fact the reality of his time, which is deeply marked by increasing consumerism, *comme-il-faut* attitude and an irreversible loss of innocence and authenticity.

The first urban environment described in the book appears in the poem “Amsterdam”, which sketches two streets in the red-light district of the Dutch city⁴. The closing lines sound as follow: “Nästa gata är den kvällsöppna shoppinggatan. / Finns i alla välförsedda europeiska huvudstäder. / Ain’t Europe wonderful, säger Mildred och Edith från Oklahoma. / Dödsriket bara fortsätter. / Vi hör det nog”⁵. Westö approaches one of the themes that mostly characterize his poems, namely the process of commodification in the western European societies, where the production and the consumption of goods emerge as the fundamental segment of the economical model of later capitalism. The shopping-street thus turns into a landmark of the city-centers, present in “every well-equipped European capitals”, suggesting that the concept of market, now expanded on an international scale, is one of the dominant factors of the urban-

³ The enchantment for the city, the Urbs, is much evident in the early modernist poetry; one sings about the asphalt, the engines, the neon-lights and the movie-theaters. The modernist experience has never died out in the Finnish-Swedish poetry, and an example is the debut poet Kjell Westö. With his collection *Tango Orange* consciously places himself in a literary tradition that has chosen to try to become a voice for the industrial and even post-industrial society.

⁴ The other two cities are mentioned in the poem *Nutcracker*, belonging to the same section of the book, *Verklighetsvisiter* (Visits in reality). Here Westö links together Saint Petersburg in 1892, when Tchaikovsky composed the music for the homonymous Christmas ballet, and Los Alamos in 1945, where the US government had developed the so-called Manhattan Project and tested for the first time the nuclear bomb. The issue of the Russian and the American influence on Finland’s recent history emerges in other short-stories, so this reference to Saint Petersburg and Los Alamos should be considered a precious hint, although it seems hard to claim that “Nutcracker” deals with the fascination for the urban environment.

⁵ ”Next street is the shopping-street open in the evening. / You can find one in any well-equipped European capitals. / Ain’t Europe wonderful, says Mildred and Edith from Oklahoma. / The death reign just goes on. / We can hear it well.”

life. Even more explicit in this perspective, although without a specific geographical connotation, is the poem “Herrarna” (Gentlemen):

1.

Mina Herrar!
varför gömmer ni er här
på detta sjaskiga kafé
i detta sjabbiga köpcentrum
i denna gråtrista förort
i dessa förgättna norra delar
av vår vackra stad?
Mina Herrar!
jag anbefaller er
att ta bussen till centrum!
Ni har inte! Inte en aning!
om hur sunda affärscentra
hur himmelska promenadstråk
hur ivrigt internationella krogar
vi byggt åt er!
Mina Herrar! Visa lite respekt!
lite konstruktivare attityd, om
jag får be! Sitt inte här och tjura
vid er mellanöl! Vi lever ändå
in en expanderande ekonomi!⁶

The ironic and rhetoric tone of the poem is underscored by the abundance of exclamation points and the use of short, catchy expressions that seem to be taken from a TV-advertisement. The voice speaking encourages the people in the poor suburb to take the bus and go downtown, where they will find all the wonders of the growing economy. Instead of sitting in a shabby bar, drinking beer, they are solicited to go to the shopping-street and take part in the big party of the new capitalistic economic miracle. It is important to note that the urban scene depicted in “Herrarna” brings together two different parts of the city: on the one hand the poor, grey, anonymous suburb and, on the other, the sparkling, opulent and internationally-fashioned city-center, the first representing a disturbing memory from the past, the second standing for the happy richness created by the current economical growth. The poem rapidly sketches the scenario of the consumer-society of the Eighties, with an economic model based on massive retail-selling, the internationalization of trade and the apparently endless expansion of the market.

⁶ Westo, 1986 : 44. ”Gentlemen! / why do you hide yourself here / in this shabby mall / in this sadly grey suburb / in these forgotten northern parts / of our beautiful city? Gentlemen! / I pray you / to take the bus downtown! / You have no, no idea! / how healthy business-centers / how heavenly pedestrian street / how crazy international restaurants / we have built for you! / Gentlemen! Show some respect / A little constructive attitude / please! Do not sit here and frown / with your light beer! We live anyway / in a growing economy!”

Between “Amsterdam” and “Herrarna”, whose themes will be further developed in the central section “Hotell Intet”, Westö inserts a composition entitled “Finlandia återsedd” (Finland revisited). The protagonist of the poem is a man called Johan, who reviews the history of his country through some simple images. “Jag såg de väldiga barrskogarna som bredde ut sig över inlandet, avbrutna endast av sporadiska björkskogarna, alsnår och insjöar fyllda av lommars tjut och lodjurs tysta steg vid stränderna”⁷ (Westö, 1986 : 41). The traditional, slightly idillic picture of the majestic nature of Finland is soon replaced by some violent historical scenes: ”Jag kände de kristna erövrarnas rädsla inför de buttra stammarna kast mellan svårmod och vrede. / Biskop Henriks skräck när Lalli hann upp honom”⁸ (Westö, 1986 : 41). Westö seems to give credit to the traditional account of the events of the second crusade (about which we talked already before) and the arrival of the Christian missionaries is depicted like the landing on a savage country. The poem then concentrates on Helsinki: “Jag kunde se hur stockholmare, valloner och Hansaköpmän bidrog till att den påtvingade staden vid Vanda å långsamt blomstrade upp. / Jag såg Akademin brinna och mödosamt byggas upp igen, jag såg den flyttas och döpas om till kejsarligt universitet.”⁹ (Westö, 1986 : 42). ”Finlandia återsedd”, with its brief overview of the local history, introduces the topics of the national perspective and the urban space. Westö has a strong, complex and contrasted bond with his country and a particular relation with his city. Almost everything in his literary production, included the first poems, bear the stigmata of this and contribute to elaborate a specific chronotope that finds its epicenter in Helsinki during the second half of the Twentieth century. Like Michel Ekman noticed already in 1992, in the prefatory remarks to an anthology about the most significant Finnish-Swedish poets of the Eighties, Westö is an “utpräglad Helsingfordsdiktare” (Ekman, 1992 : 15), a poet with a distinctive feeling for the urban environment he has grown up in. Already in these juvenile compositions, Helsinki, though unnamed (there is only one reference to Mannerheimsvägen and another to Alvar Aalto’s Finlandia House), is silently present. In fact, Westö mostly depicts the urban reality that surrounded him at that time, a reality dominated by an economic growth that was changing at unprecedented speed the face of the capital through a suspiciously easy economical boom.

“Hotell Intet”, the central section of the work, is a psychedelic account of an age characterized by futility, self-satisfaction and hedonism. The newly-rich society seems too

⁷ ”I saw the enormous coniferous forests which opened up in the inland, interrupted only by sporadic forest of birches, elm-thickets and lakes full of howls of the loons and the silent steps of the lynx on the shores”.

⁸ ”I felt the fear of the Christian conquerors in front of the cast of the sullen tribes between sadness and rage.”

⁹ ”I could see how Stockholmers, Walloons and the merchants of the Hanseatic league contributed so that the forced city at the Vanda river slowly bloomed up. / I saw the university burning and laboriously rebuilt, I saw it moving and being baptized again as imperial university.”

much occupied in embellishing the glossy façade (significantly, the section is made up of a part called “interior” and another called “exterior”) to be able to understand that behind it there is nothing but emptiness:

Bara beundra!
Elegansen, den nyfunna,
Cigarettmunstycket av platina
Det violettskimrande håret
Den långa spröda Benson&Hedges
Snittet i min Haute couture
Mina mondäna åsikter
Om Le Vie Detachée beundra!
Detta tomma etui
där det glider över blänkande golv
i sin avmätta sensualism¹⁰
(Westö, 1986 : 64)

The feelings of distrust and disillusion are clearly perceptible under the ironic tone of the composition (very similar to “Herrarna”), as if the poet were listening to the invitations of a barker. The dominant image coming out from most of the poems in *Tango Orange* describes a period of socio-economical changes that have an immediate reflection on the surface of the urban environment. Already Claes Anderson, in his review of the book for *Huvudstadsbladet*, emphasizes how much Westö’s debut is intimately tied to the atmosphere of the Eighties: “Kanske en bok djupt symptomatisk just för åttiotalet, i hela sin rikedom på motstridiga, sinsemellan antagonistiska känslor och åtbörder, samtidigt privat och socialt känsligt och medkännande, arrogant och ömsint, kryddad med både livslust och vämjelse”¹¹.

Westö’s critical approach towards his time is not simply a “youth rebellion”, but it has a specific philosophical anchorage in the poet’s refuse of postmodernism. This appears in a very clear way from his essay *Meddelanden från dvärgkastningens tidevarv* (Messages from the midget toss era), published on the literary magazine *KLO* in march 1986. Here Westö attacks the postmodernist slogan “Acceptera!” (Accept), which preaches an uncritical acceptance of the state of affairs as something unavoidable. According to it, the modern agency, unconditionally

¹⁰ Just admire! / The elegance, newly-found, / the cigarette holder of platinum / the violet iridescent hair / the long and delicate Benson&Hedges cut in my Haute Couture / my mundane opinions / about La Vie Detachée admire! / this empty case / while it slips over the shining floor / in its distant sensuality.

¹¹ “Maybe a book deeply symptomatic for the Eighties, in its richness of contradictory, reciprocally antagonistic feelings and gestures, privately and socially sensitive and compassionate at the same time, arrogant and tender, spiced with both joy of life and disgust”. Andersson praises Westö’s ability to portray the social circumstances around himself, leaving the narrow fence of the introvert and “metapoetic” attitude of so many poets of the period. Thus, he welcomes him as “en alltigenom originell och självständig poet, okonventionell och ibland “antipoetisk”. En ny och en stark röst i vår unga dikt”. (A completely original and independent poet, unconventional and sometimes “anti-poetic”. A new and strong voice in our young poetry). (Andersson, 1986 :).

split and contradictory, is liberated by the responsibility to act in order to get things changed and by the feelings of guilt that keeps its soul chained. Westö does not deny the contradictory, stratified, problematic nature of the agency, but claims that it still has a responsibility for its acting, and that it cannot be simply charmed by a philosophy that promises liberty “med hjälp av ironin, pastichen, självparodi, karnevalen, snabbköpet” (Westö, 1986 : 58). When this happens, in fact, the agency loses the perception of its deepest dimension, and remains floating on the surface, at the mercy of events that it perceives as uncontrollable. On the other hand, Westö is aware of the existence of a postmodern “livskänsla”, a postmodern feeling, that ineludibly impregnates our time: “Den postmoderna livskänsla är någonting annat; den bara finns där, oavsett om du formulerar den eller inte”¹² (Westö, 1986 : 55). Thus, like Rönnholm suggests, Westö’s relationship with this “postmodernist feeling” creates a dilemma that belongs not only to him, but generally to his entire generation. How to find an answer to it, a way to resist or challenge its force, to elaborate a way of thinking that enables the subject to overthrow its dogmatism without denying the intimate complex nature of the agency is what Westö struggles with in his poems as well as in his articles and essays of these years¹³.

In the same period, the young poet explained the problematic relationship with the postmodern *livskänsla* in his contribution to the book *Rockad* (1986), where he discussed with Johan von Bonsdorff the situation of the country during the fuddle of the Eighties¹⁴. Kjell Westö stands as the representative of the “60-talister”, the generation born in the Sixties and now protagonist of the urban scene. Westö appears disappointed by the political left (or rather by the intellectuals of the left) and, at the same time, skeptical in front of the carnival of the consumer-society. Despite that, he seems to be aware that a valid alternative to political engagement has not come out yet and that the economic growth he is criticizing largely represents what made possible great achievements such as mass-education, health-care and a general improvement of the standard of living in the whole country. In his first letter addressed to von Bonsdorff, Westö gives voice to his concern about the apparently unstoppable triumph of consumerism and company-economy in Finland over any critical thinking: “Jag är istället

¹² ”The postmodern feeling is something else; it’s just there, no matter if you formulate it or not”.

¹³ “Men om Westö förkastar postmodernismen som filosofi och handlingsprogram, är han å andra sidan beredd att fullt ut erkänna existensen av en postmodern känsla. Den kan han se omkring sig och den hittar han hos sig själv. Dess yttringar och konsekvenser är ett personligt problem för Westö, men han upplever och gestaltar den också som ett tids- och samhällsproblem, ett dilemma som speciellt hans egen generation brottas med” (Rönnholm, 1995 : 135).

¹⁴ *Rockad* is a miscellaneous essay made up of four sets of correspondences between writers and journalists of different generations. Johan von Bonsdorff, the addressee of Westö’s letters, was a famous journalist and pamphleteer of the radical left. Born in 1940, he started to work for the newspaper *Huvudstadsbladet* in 1964 and was correspondent from the Vietnam war and the Middle-east during the following years.

(spekulativt, medges) intresserad av, om det i dagens Finland skulle finnas någon möjlighet att filosofens krav på långsiktig moral kunde segra över konsumistiska och företagsekonomiska aspekter? (...) Finns det idag i Finland någon starkare kraft än konsumismen?”¹⁵ (Westö, 1986 : 174-175). According to Westö, the strength of consumerism is particularly visible in the urban environment, where the centre becomes more and more sophisticated and elegant, whereas the suburbs are degraded and colorless, suggesting a fragmentation and a featuring of the city’s different parts according to economical factors:

Det är märkligt. Helsingfors, min hemstad, får ett allt vackrare anlete. Allt elegantare krogar, allt fler och allt mer glänsande köpcentra, allt fler tidningar med glänsande fyrfärgstryck och allt fler bodybuildingsalar och solarier. Men fortfarande sitter råbarkade män och svär på trista barer i förorterna, fortfarande snubblar du på lodisar i varje park, fortfarande ser du knäckta människor med tvångsrörelser i de blå bussarna.¹⁶ (Westö, 1986 : 175).

Here Westö approaches a crucial point of his analysis, that considers the capitalistic economical development as the force propelling the social transformation and looks at the city as the place where it mostly becomes visible. The “new face” of Helsinki, made up of modern cafés, fancy restaurants and gyms, together with a more “mundane” flare, is a symptom of a society that has begun to cultivate an hedonic and self-referent life-style. That the protagonist of this state of affairs is principally the generation he belongs to, Westö does not try to hide away. He is aware that his generation comfortably sits in the opulence built by its fathers:

Jag var inte med i krigen, de som tryggade det här landets självständighet. (...) Jag deltog inte i den mödosamma uppbygganden av det här landet på 50- och 60-talen. Fäderna och mödrarna gjorde det. Jag är alltså ansvarslös, då jag sitter i mitt lånta välstånd och kritiserar. Jag deltog inte i de ungdomliga protesterna mot samhällets orättvisor, de som flammade upp på 60-talet. (...) Jag deltog inte, och är därför ansvarslös när jag väljer ultraindividualismen i mitt 80-talistiska självförhållande. (Westö, 1986 : 175)¹⁷

The image of a society squandering a fortune without regrets is represented by the central part of the collection, which is composed of a tracking shot of portraits describing a bourgeois and drunk-of-excitement generation: Carita (Du löper naken skälvande jagande /

¹⁵ “Instead, I am more interested (let’s say in a speculative way) in the question if there is any chance for the philosopher’s requirements for long-term morality to win over the consumerism and business administration? (...) Is there today, in Finland, any stronger strength than consumerism?”

¹⁶ “It’s weird. Helsinki, my home city, is getting a more and more beautiful face. More and more elegant restaurants, more and more numerous and shining malls, magazines with glossy four-color printing and body-building gyms and solariums. But still rough-mannered men sit and swear in shabby bars in the suburbs, still you can stumble over tramps in every park, still you see broken-down people with jerky movements on the blue busses.”

¹⁷ “I did not participate to the wars that secured the independence of this country. (...) I did not participate in the arduous construction of this country during the 50’s and 60’s. Fathers and mothers did that. I am therefore irresponsible, sitting here in my loaned welfare and criticizing. I did not participate in the young protests against the injustice of the society, those that flamed up during the 60’s. (...) I did not participate, and therefore I am irresponsible, when I choose ultra-individualism in my self-glorification of the 80’s”.

genom de nyinredda klubbarna som lilar neofunk / och erbjuder en gratis Rainbowdrink åt alla invidga / och du har VIP-kort åt alla!)¹⁸; Sebastian (när du dricker / ser jag hur din blick / tappar i melankoliskt avstånd / växer i villrådighet)¹⁹; Fat Molly (Fat Molly var arvtagerska. Hon hade ärvt / två bröst som kvävande meloner / och ett blomstrande företag i textilbranschen)²⁰ and the anonymous "man", who has forgot his dreams at the table of the bar of the Hotell Intet.

It is true that the picture emerging from *Tango Orange* is mainly that of a lost generation, mercilessly doomed to fade away together with the excesses of its behaviors. On the other hand, this would be a unilateral, too simple interpretation of the decade of "yuppism" that comes out of this work. Together with the description of a fallen generation, of a time of decadence, it winds the urge to contrast the seductive siren-song of consumerism. If we go back to *Rockad*, we can see that Westö refuses to label his generation as a "innehållslös studentgeneration", a student generation without substance. Such definition is only partly true. The young poet underscores that many people of his age try to find a different way "to resist", a way which discards an uncritical adherence to the paradigms of old ideologies (the young Westö feels uncomfortable with slogan such as "anti-imperialism"), as much as a diffuse "alternative"-movement that usually goes no longer than criticizing the status quo, without challenging its essential structure. The agency's search to find its own way in the modern time, without being subjugated by the dominant ways-of-thinking (mainstream or alternative) requires the ability to resist the temptation, stronger and stronger in a time of conformism as Finland was experiencing during the second half of the Eighties, "to accept" (Acceptera). As noted before, the firm refusal to "accept" the state of affairs means for Westö to question the postmodern *livskänsla*. Westö explains to von Bonsdorff what this means to him by using the metaphor of "den svarta duvan", the black dove, that he borrows from the Swedish sociologist Ola Tunander:

Den svarta duvan är en symbol för åttiotaletsanarkismen, som *inte* bara består av att man klär sig extravagant och föraktar förnuftet och allvaret, även om diverse tidskrifter tycks tro det.

I mina ögon är 'den svarta duva' ett letande efter vettiga sätt att göra motstånd på, i en tid då det inte längre är fråga om de dogmatiska revolternas kris, utan om deras omöjlighet.²¹ (Westö, 1986 : 179).

¹⁸ You run naked trembling hunting / through the newly-furnished clubs that play neo-funk / and you invite all the initiated for a Rainbow drink / and you have VIP-card for everybody!.

¹⁹ When you drink / I see how your eyes / get loose in a melancholic distance / grow in perplexity.

²⁰ Fat Molly was a heiress. She had inherited / two big boobs like chocking melons / and a flourishing factory in the textile-field.

²¹ The black dove is a symbol for the anarchism of the Eighties, which does not only mean to dress in a extravagant way and disregard rationality and seriousness, even if some magazines seem to think so.

The impracticability of dogmatic (and obsolete) ideologies and the refusal to hide himself behind the inconsistent, fashion-like doctrines (Westö claims that it is not enough to create the nth underground movement to get things changed), place in fact the agency in a position of radical alienation. In Westö's critical outline, this approach assumes the character of intimate loneliness, a vacuum where it becomes a personal task to find one's own way out. Being well aware that such a position outside the mainstream/alternative dichotomy could be easily misunderstood as a "passive" way to go roundabout the question of the agency's role in modern society, he gives some – slightly idealistic – examples of what he practically means: "Låt inte lura dig på grund av din ungdomliga kärrierystnad och ditt behov att bli accepterad. (...) Försök göra nåt i det lilla: ta ett fadderbarn någonstans, smyg in Greenpeacepressmeddelande i Hbl:s utrikesnyheter, säg vad du tycker när du reser till USA eller Sovjet"²² (Westö, 1986 : 184). In *Tango Orange*, in his article for *KLO* and in *Rockad*, Westö describes in different ways the same feeling of estrangement towards the social and economic climate of his time. In the poems, it takes the shape of the crisis of the agency that refuses the dominance of an economical model based on consumerism. In the *Midget toss*-essay and in the letters to Bonsdorff, it appears as a political and cultural homelessness: now that the traditional ideological contraposition is not practicable anymore and the alternatives seem to be too weak to be able to resist the state of affairs, the young intellectual has to find his own way, even if it means to be left in a marginal position. We can notice here an anticipation of one of the central themes of his later works, namely the radical questioning of the status quo, the attempt to change the norm from the inside, and to find a way to look at things differently. This can be a stringent critic of the consumer society as much as a melancholic description of a childhood where the crisis of the agency is related to class and linguistic-identity. However, in its essential structure, the crisis derives from the agency's refusal to conform to the imperative norm, which, in turn, goes back to the refuse of the postmodern "acceptera".

As Michel Ekman suggests in his presentation of Westö's early works, "Westö är lika capabel att exakt beskriva sextiotalets medelklassuppväxt i en ospektakulärt förort, som att gestalta nuet i det Finland som under åttiotalets på lånade pengar byggda högkonjunktur, med en självöverskattning som idag ter sig fullkomligt osannlikt, kallade sig själv för 'Nordens

In my eyes, 'the black dove' is the search for intelligent ways to oppose resistance, in a time when it is not anymore a question of the crisis of the dogmatic revolts, but of their impossibility.

²² Do not let yourself be fool by your youthful career greedy and your need to be accepted. (...) Try to do something little, take a godchild somewhere, sneak a Greenpeace-newsletter in Huvudstadsbladet's foreign news, say what you think when you travel to the US or to Soviet Union.

Japan”²³ (Ekman, 1995 : 15). When Ekman talks about the “unspectacular suburb”, he refers to the short novel entitled ”Mellan, Mallinen och jag” (see next paragraph). So far, however, it is the glittering façade of contemporary Finland that interests him most, that façade rapidly erected during the short golden age of the financial speculation and that would dramatically collapse just few years later.

The second collection of poems, *Epitaph över Mr. Nacht*, published two years later, shares some similarities with *Tango Orange*, but also presents significant peculiarities and a generally different tone. Like Rönholm suggests: “Man skall ändå akta sig för att alltför lättvindigt knippa ihop de två första diktsamlingarna. Det finns viktiga skillnader – och en tydlig utveckling. Gemensamt är gestaltningen och problematiseringen av den postmoderna livskänsla och den egna generationens situation och överlevnadsstrategier”²⁴ (Rönholm, 1995 : 139). In this new collection, in fact, Westö continues his critical investigation in the reality of his time, where the agency feels oppressed under the wheel of the invasive capitalism that turns the society more and more into a market and individuals into consumers: “Jag konsumerar, därför är jag”, was the punch line of the first collection, and also *Epitaph över Mr. Nacht* follows in the aftermath of the critical discourse conducted so far. This is well represented by the poem “något äger rum” (Something takes place), in which the agency seems incapable of deciphering the reality around: “Var det dagen som inte förstod min förträfflighet eller jag som inte förstod dagens väldighet? Vem utnyttjar, den som äter eller den som får vara tillfredställd när den blir uppäten?”²⁵ (Westö, 1988 : 21). Again, it looms a situation where the agency finds itself at a crossroad, either to take a seat at the rich banquet of consumerism or to try to get away from it before turning itself into a commodity. An expanding capitalistic economy requires individuals that constantly increases their consumes and adopt a throw-away life-style that can enable the market to continue prospering²⁶. In order to keep the economy dynamically active and to avoid the specter of stagnation, people have to consume more and more, until it gets to the point where to shop is not a choice anymore, but becomes an obligation in order to

²³ “Westö is able to describe exactly his middle class’ childhood during the Sixties in an unglamorous suburb, as much as to represent contemporary Finland, a county that, during the eighties’ economical boom built on lent money, with an overestimation which today appears incredible, called itself ‘the northern Japan’”.

²⁴ “Nevertheless, one should be careful not to tie together the two collections of poems too casually. There are difference – and a clear development. Common is the representation and problematization of the postmodern sense of living and the situation and surviving-strategies of his own generation.”

²⁵ “Was it the day that did not understand my excellence or was it me who did not understand the immensity of the day? Who is the one using the other, the one who eats or the one who gets to be satisfied when it is eaten up?”

²⁶ This is ultimately what Bergman means with his concept of the innovative self-destructive force of capitalism discussed in chapter 2.

permit the further expansion of the market. Once that line is crossed, the agency assumes a subaltern position to capitalism and becomes itself a part of the commodification process. The agency's needs are thus dictated by the market, creating a circle where individuals are commanded to consume faster and faster, in an alienating mechanism that goes beyond the agency's own will. The poem "Augusti" illustrates this problematic relationship between the agency and consumerism:

IV

I staden var jag mörk men ljus, jag skimrade.
Dansade till en kosmisk videoindustrins dova order,
Naturlig som en svart pärla i en dallrande
Aladåb. Någonstans satt en styrelseordförande som kallade
Sig gud, och de facto var det, i bristen på
Konkurrens
Här dör jag av överflödet i min tystnad
(...)

VI

Jag var någon som var många.
Jag handlade, handlades och försåldes.
Ibland förhandlade man om mig och mitt varande.
(Westö, 1988 : 24-25)²⁷

The reduction of the agency to a mere consumer, silently choking in the sinking sands of goods purchased by order of an almighty corporation-chairman, is one of the most expressive and significant image of the first part of the collection. In the same way, the annihilation of the individuals' will in the name of the market's prosperity is efficiently described by the use of the verb *handla* (to shop) conjugated first in its active and then in its passive form (Jag handlade, handlades).

Like in *Tango Orange*, the unspoken question of how the agency can disentangle itself from the invisible threads of consumerism runs deeply through the lines, with a tone which is still critical, but generally less broken and aggressive²⁸. The "howl" of *Tango Orange* is here partly replaced by a more distanced and meditative approach and, in the same way, the

²⁷ In the city I was dark but luminous, I shimmered. / Dancing to the deaf orders of a cosmic video-industry, / natural like a black pearl in a quivering / aspic. Somewhere a chairman sat, calling / himself god, and de facto he was, in the absence of / competitors. / Here I die of opulence in my silence. (...) I was someone who was many. / I shopped, was shopped and sold. / Sometimes they negotiate about me and my existence.

²⁸ Like noted by Bror Rönnholm, "Epitaph över Mr Nacht är redan betydligt mindre spretig än debuten, mera eftertänksam och lågmäld" (Rönnholm, 1995 : 139) "Epitaph över Mr Nacht is significantly less sprawling than the debut, more thoughtful and quiet".

excesses of the young protagonists of the casino-economy give way to a more delicate description of the urban environment²⁹.

The fifth section of *Epitaph över Mr Nacht* is entitled “De osynliga städerna” (The Invisible Cities). Curiously, whereas in *Tango Orange* Helsinki was never named, in this section it is the only city mentioned. In fact, the first poem is – rather explicitly – entitled “Helsingforsvinter” (Helsinki’s winter) and depicts the streets of the Finnish capital wrapped up in the whiteness of the long Nordic winter: “Staden inte längre mustig mörkbrun av melankoli. / Inte svartmuskig av halsstarrighet. / Inte randig av närhet till kontinenten. / Inte beige, inte vitrappad som under livligare himmel. / Staden vit vit som vinter själv.”³⁰ (Westö, 1988 : 51). More significant is the following poem, whose title, “Helsingfors 080188 16.45,37” immediately reveals a chronotope of extreme precision. The text depicts an exchange of glances between two passers-by in the crowd of a regular January-afternoon on Explanaden, which lasts only for one second:

En kvinna kommer gående
längs Espen, hennes längtan skramlar som lösa kulor
i hennes höfter, det är något stelnat i hennes gång.
Hon fastnar. Jag styvnar. (...)
Vi kryper in i varandras ögon, krymper
till små pepparkornssvart, försagda pupiller.
(...) Vi bor infattade i våra städer, bara
med stor möda sliter vi oss loss, stiger in genom dörren
till nästa sekund³¹.
(Westö, 1988 : 53)

The setting of the poem, the Esplanaden, the only real boulevard of the Finnish capital, connecting the harbor with the city-center, becomes here eponymous of the modern crowd. The encounter between the narrator and the woman is a snapshot in the early afternoon rush that lasts no longer than the blink of an eye. It emphasizes of course the speed of the urban life, the alienation of modernity that brings people’s lives closer but somehow deprives them of the possibility to really interconnect, but above all, in the exactness of the temporal axis, shows that

²⁹ Like Rönholm underscores, “*Tango Orange* är det mera registrerande och speglade; om också ibland ironiserande, *Epitaph över Mr Nacht* är redan mer avståndstagande och kritisk”, (*Tango Orange* is more a record of the time and specular; although sometimes ironic, *Epitaph över Mr Nacht* is more distanced and critical” (Rönholm, 1995 : 139).

³⁰ “The city, no longer grossly dark-brown of melancholy. / Not swarthy of obstinacy. / Not striped of being near the continent. / Not beige, not stucco-white like under a more lively sky. / The city white, white like the winter itself”.

³¹ “A woman walks / along Espen, her desire Rattles like loose balls / around her hips, there is something solidified in her walk. / She stops. I stiffen. (...) We crawl into each others’ eyes, shrink / to small pepper-corn, timid, pupils. / (...) We live mounted in our cities, only / with big effort we break us free, walks through the door / to next second”.

the urban experience – that is to say how each person perceives the urban context he or she moves in – has an inescapable transient nature. It is important to notice that, like Westö himself suggested in *Books from Finland* in 1997, the transitory character of the urban space is not primarily due to the physical changes of the cities (cities change constantly, but not so rapidly), but to the “inner look” of the city-dweller, which experiences the city in a way that is hardly repeatable³². Not only cities change, but also the way we perceive the space is subjective and inevitably tied up to a specific moment (this is also the passage where we can find a possible convergence between the Helsinki of the January afternoon and the invisible cities of Calvino, in the attempt to catch the glimpse of an impression that rapidly fades away).

The same atmosphere of intimate and personal experience of the city pervades the last poem of this section. It is a confession of disillusion in front of the consumer society and a painful but stubborn claim to call himself out of the economical tyranny. The protagonist of the poem is in fact a solitary and poor wanderer who walks on the streets of the city with a feeling of uneasiness towards the consumerism imposed by the new economical model and intimate pride about his own condition.

Ni såg mig stå och fingra på de märkesfria
lågprisvarorna, men jag är inte fattig.
Ni såg mig sitta på det gamla vanliga ölsjappet,
men jag har inte stagnerat.
Ni såg min klädd i samma skjorta som för 15 år sedan,
men mycket har hänt sedan som ni kan inte se.

De osynliga städerna bor inuti, under vattnet.

Min skomakare såg att sulorna var slitna, men jag har
inte vandrat färdigt.
Du tittade över min axel i banken, såg mitt tomma konto,
men jag är inte bankrutt.
Hon tyckte att min kropp smakade invariant, men jag är
fortfarande kryddad.
(...)

Jag är bara en osynlig stad, som vi alla-
Jag växer under vattnet, vittrar sedan³³.

³² In his article about Runar Schildt, Westö claims: ”For cities don’t change as rapidly as the more contemporary-fixed of us would like to believe. They sometimes change their faces quickly, but under the make-up they still look the same.” (Westö, 1997 : 129).

³³ You saw me touching the label-free / low-priced goods, but I am not poor. / You saw me sitting in the old beerhouse, / but I haven’t stagnated. / You saw me dressed with the same shirt I had 15 years ago, / but much has happened that you cannot see. / The invisible cities are inside, underwater. / My shoemaker saw that my soles were

(Westö, 1988 : 62)

The images of the low-cost goods, the empty bank-account, the old shirt, seem to depict a reality in contrast with the glamour of the casino-economy. In this perspective, poverty appears as a protest of the agency against the materialism of its time, but it could also be interpreted as a metaphor for the yuppism itself, of the real Helsinki covered under the heavy make-up of the financial speculation. In this sense, “De osynliga städerna” becomes also an anticipation of the “lame years” that would drag Finland down in the spiral of recession just few years later. With sharp clairvoyance, Westö seems to notice the fatal cracks of a system already breaking down and that will turn the dream of easy and unlimited richness into a nightmare of inextinguishable debts.

The third and last collection of poems is the very thin book entitled *Avig-bön*, published in 1989 under the pseudonym Ander Hed. Westö will use this name also in other circumstances (for the self-review of *Tango Orange* in *Huvudstadsbladet*, in an interview for *Books from Finland* in 2002 and more), so that it could be considered an heteronym, or at least an “alter-ego” of the writer himself³⁴.

Despite that, *Avig-bön* should hardly be read as a break with the previous works. Even here, for example, we find a agency cast in the turbulences of its time, trying to find a way among the overwhelming supply of possibilities produced by the capitalistic machine. This agency, like Westö expressed in *KLO*, is able to look inside itself and to face its inner contradictions, but nevertheless refuses to give up its intimate unity, as it emerges in the final lines of the *Porträtt* (Portray):

Man ser ett förvrängt själv, och
är inte säker på att inte någon
iakttar därifrån. Man
fortsätter ändå, håller upp
en febrig strävan mellan
jag och slut, är mycket
ovillig att falla isär.

consumed, but I have not / stopped wandering yet. / You looked over my shoulder, saw my empty bank-account / but I am not bankrupted. / She thought that my body tasted the same, but I am / still spicy.

³⁴ The article “Ett etos under eposet” first appeared in *Huvudstadsbladet* in June 2002 and has been recently republished in the book *Sprickor*. Here Westö, in a fote-note, adds some details about the biography of Hed: “Ander Hed är poet och har doktorerat med en avhandling om den franske postmodernisten Jean-Henri Quedec. Hed är för närvarande writer in residence och gästföreläsare vid universitetet i Kalamazoo” (West, 2011 : 292). ”Ander Hes is a poet and has obtained a PhD with a dissertation about the French postmodernist Jean-Henri Quedec. Hed is currently writer in residence and guest teacher at the university of Kalamazoo”.

(Hed, 1989 : 3)³⁵

Like in the previous collections, the modern time is depicted like a vicious, almost kafkian, circle, where the agency is dragged by opposite forces, constantly fighting to break free and irreversibly chaining itself. Modern urban individuals are like irresolute Houdinis, that laboriously manage to break free from the chains, just to tie themselves again the moment after, like he writes in the poem *Curriculum Vitae*: “De vankelmodiga Houdinis / bröt sig loss / för att kedja sig fast / bröt sig loss / kedjade sig fast” (Hed, 1989 : 5)³⁶

On the other hand, the general tone of *Avig-bön* is less angry and declamatory compared to the previous collections of poems and is characterized by a more intimate and delicate style. The rage of the first compositions, which still characterized some parts of *Epitaph över Mr Nacht*, melts here almost completely. After the “infernal” crisis of *Tango orange*, where the agency seemed powerless and helplessly disarmed in front of the circus of the raging consumerism, going through the purgatorial poems of the second work, finally Westö arrives to a sort of peace of mind. This does not mean that he is able to give an answer to the crisis he has been depicting during his years as a poet, but surely he has understood how to better resist the pressure of the time, without surrendering to the postmodern blind acceptance of the state of things³⁷. In the end, the agency has to take his personal burden of responsibility and try to find its own way, which can be considered, like Rönnholm suggests, the “postmoderna livskänslas positiva pol: öppenhet, rörelsefrihet och den vägran att låta sig inordnas i totaliserande och förenklade system, som i sin förlängning – i bästa fall – leder till en individualism med beredskap för nyanserade ställnings- och ansvarstagande”³⁸ (Rönnholm, 1995 : 141).

For Westö, the importance to “going through” the crisis – like we suggest with the metaphor of the passage from the underworld to purgatory and the final rise to heaven – is of course intimate but never separate from the social environment and the historical moment where the agency finds itself. As already noticed before, Westö’s poems do not only depict a youth rebellion, but also a sharp critic against the dominant ways of thinking in a specific chronotope that he will further explore in his short stories and novels.

³⁵ You see a distorted self, end it is / not sure that someone is not / looking from the inside. You / go on anyhow, you keep up / a feverish seek between / I or the end, it is very / unwilling to fall apart.

³⁶ “The irresolute Houdinis; / They broke free / to chain themselves / broke free / chained themselves.

³⁷ During my interview with Kjell Westö on the 24th of November 2011, he emphasized how the more quite tone of *Avig-bön* can be explained also with a biographical detail. During the elaboration of the poem, in fact, Westö became father for the first time. “Jag var en glad tjugosjuårig pappa”. (I was an happy twenty-seven year-old father”.

³⁸ “The positive pole of the postmodern feeling: openness, liberty of movement, and the refuse of being classified according to totalizing and simplified systems, which in the long run – in the best case scenario – leads to an individualism which enables one to take varying position and responsibility”.

PARAGRAPH TWO

HELSINKI CHILDHOOD AROUND 1970

If there is one early work that can be used as a map to approach the literary production of Kjell Westö, that would undoubtedly be *Melba, Mallinen och jag*. The word “map” can be interpreted with a double meaning, because the text both contains a map of the key-topics of Westö’s works and a cartographic map over a part of Helsinki. Of course these two maps often overlap each other, because the literary discourse elaborated by the author usually refers to the urban environment of Helsinki not simply as the setting of the narration, but as the architectural counterpart of the social and economical transformation that he aims at analyzing.

Melba, Mallinen och jag was published for the first time in the collection of tales entitled *Fallet Bruus (The Bruus-case, 1992)*, together with two other short-stories, *Iiro och pojken (Iiro and the guy)* and *Fallet Bruus (The Bruus-case)*. As Kjell Westö himself explains in the preface of the collection *Lugna favoriter (2005)*, he decided to write this semi-autobiographical story because he felt the urge to come to terms with the experiences of his childhood and adolescence. Soon after turning thirty, he realized that he still had a feeling of dismay regarding those years, especially what mattered his relationship with the social and linguistic environment where he had grown up in: “När jag laser *Melba, Mallinen och jag* (1992), ser jag tydligare än förr hur svårt jag ännu i trettioårsåldern hade att acceptera den för många av oss finlandsvenskar så typiska balansgången mellan svenskt och finskt” (Westö, 2005 : 7)³⁹. This statement introduces one of the main themes of the story (and a cardinal point in Westö’s literary experience), that is to say the question of the social identity of the Finland-Swedish community in Helsinki.

As noted before, in his poems and articles, Westö already engaged himself with the crisis of the subject in modern times and discussed how complex it is for the people of his generation to disentangle from the consumer society of the Eighties in order to find a personal identity. In *Melba, Mallinen och jag* he goes some years backwards and describes his experience as a Swedish-Finnish teenager during the Seventies, bringing the identity-discourse on an autobiographical level and giving to it an even stronger national-linguistic resonance. The

³⁹ ”When I read *Melba, Mallinen och jag* (1992), I see more clearly than before how difficult it was for me, even in the thirties, to accept the balance between Swedish and Finnish, so peculiar for many of us Swedish-speaking Finns”.

theme of the subject's crisis is therefore still present, but developed according to a different paradigm. As a consequence, this topic finds a new anchorage in a another space-time perspective, or – to use the definition of Michael Bachtin – another *chronotope*: Helsinki during a small spun of time during the Seventies. It is with *Melba, Mallinen och jag* that Westö – after describing the current reality of the Eighties – enters the invisible palimpsest of the city and goes back in time to the previous decade.

Melba, Mallinen och jag consists of a long flash-back about the childhood and early youth in the life of Kenneth Backman. The story takes place in an imaginary suburb (called Marracott Hill) built in the outskirts of Helsinki after World War II, when urbanization brought people from the countryside to the major cities of Finland. Kenneth comes from a Swedish-speaking middle-class family that has moved to the capital from Österbotten, the region on the coast where the majority of the Finland-Swedes outside Helsinki is concentrated. The suburb of Marracott Hill, together with the more refined Marracott Beach, is described as a microcosm that hosts people with different origins, opposite social backgrounds, varying incomes and employments, and two different language-groups, the Finnish-speaking and the Swedish-speaking.

I Marracott Hill bodde arbetare, lägre medelklass och Medelklass Som Sannerligen Vill Uppåt Snabbt. Där fanns infödda Helsingforsare som använde gamla ryska ord som buli, snads, lafka och sofka. Där fanns folk från Raumo-trakten som sa roliga saker som "lunta tuli aivan kränsmätinäs". Där fanns människor från norra och östra Finland som sa mie, sie, myö, työ istället för minä, sinä, me, te och he. Det fanns också en del svenskar, men inte i huset där jag bodde i. (Westö, 1992 : 16-17).⁴⁰

Marracott Hill and Marracott Beach exemplifies the social mobility that characterized the Finnish capital during the first decades after the war and confirms some of the features of the modern city that we have illustrated before, namely that of the social and cultural interaction and the evolution of the economy in the post-war society. The passage above touches also another peculiar aspect that marks the entire story: the presence of two linguistic communities and how the suburb becomes the territory of their new co-existence.

Kenneth belongs to the "minority" of the Finland-Swedish community of Marracott and, for this reason, he encounters the hostility of some other guys, especially Melba, a violent teenager that bears no sympathy for the Finland-Swedes. In the playground, where kids meet for playing football, Kenneth learns very quickly how vital it is for him to learn some Finnish,

⁴⁰"In Marracott Hill used to live workers, the lower middle-class and the Middle Class That Wants to Go Upwards Quickly. There were natives from Helsinki, who used old Russian words such as buli, snads, lafka and sofka. There were people from the Raumo-region who said funny things like "lunta tuli aivan kränsmätinäs". There were people from the North and the West of Finland who said mie, sie, myö, työ instead of minä, sinä, me, te and he. There were also quite a lot of Swedish, but not in the house where I lived in",.

although he is well aware that it would probably be not enough to avoid the persecution of Melba and his friends:

Det första jag lärde mig på finska var: Mun-mini-on-Kenneth. Det förenklades snabbt till: Mun-mini-on-Kenu. Sedan lärde jag mig utropen Pallo! Tänne! Syöta! Ammu! Och Ota se! [...] Vepsäläinen, som i brist på gestalter av Melbas och brödernas Karttunens kaliber var ledare för oss i Elvan, var korrekt mot mig, men inte mer. Han älskade inte svenskar, men eftersom jag lärde mig finska snabbt dög jag [...]. Melba behövde inte anstränga sig överhövan för att lista ut vad som felades mig. Det räckte med att öppna dörren och kasta en blick på namntavlan i trappan F. Det räckte med att han upptäckte att jag inte förstod annan finska än ”Ge mig bollen!”, ”Passa!”, ”Sjukt!” och ”Ta honom!”. (Westö 1992 : 18-19)⁴¹

Kenneth elaborates a linguistic strategy of surviving and becomes friend of Mallinen, a boy who has recently moved to Marracott Hill and who, despite his being Finnish-speaking, attends the Swedish School. The friendship with Mallinen gives Kenneth some security, although he knows that his belonging to a minority places him in a subaltern position compared with the ruling majority: “Jag har ofta undrat över vilket slags människa jag skulle ha blivit om jag hade vuxit upp med känslan av att höra till en enkel majoritet och ha obestridlig bosättningsrätt”⁴². As Kjell Westö himself explained in the interview with his alter-ego Anders Hed, the story told in *Melba, Mallinen och jag* is meant to relate how deeply this feeling of exclusion has affected him for many years.

In ‘Melba’ [...] there's a primary theme, or rather crucial issue, hanging over it - very important for me personally and tormenting - and that is: What happens to a person who's always getting bullied and beaten up in childhood because of his mother tongue? This subject - childhood shame and fear through being a Swedish-speaker in Helsinki - has long been taboo in Finland-Swedish writing: even though young boys, certainly including many later writers, have in their time been beaten up like Kenu Backman in my story. That you can be beaten up because of some external fact, a fact you can do nothing about, is bewildering. The feeling of total helplessness... the feeling that you could try to become a better, friendlier, more loveable person, but it would be no use, because that one external fact is decisive, and you'll get beaten up time after time. (Westö, 2000 : 2).

With *Melba, Mallinen och jag* Westö thus wants to give a picture of a generation that has been afflicted by mobbing and labeled as “different” because of its language and the historical past that it evokes. Even Mallinen, since he attends the Swedish school and is friend of Kenneth, is considered by the other Finnish guys a “förräddarn”, a traitor (Westö : 1992, 26). The social-linguistic environment described in *Melba, Mallinen och jag* is therefore marked by the

⁴¹ “The first thing I learnt in Finnish was: My-name-is-Kenneth. Soon it was simplified with: My-name-is-Kenu. Then I learnt some exclamations such as Pallo! Tänne! Syöta! Ammu! and Ota se! [...] Vepsäläinen, who used to be the leader for us of the Eleven building when guys of the caliber of Melba and the Karttunen’s brothers were not around, was loyal to me, but nothing more. He didn’t like Swedes, but since I picked up Finnish fast, then I was ok. [...] Melba didn’t need to make a big effort to figure out what was wrong with me. It was enough for him to open the door and give a look at the list of the surnames in building F. It was enough for him to discover that I didn’t understand any other Finnish than “Give me the ball!”, “Pass it on!”, “Shoot!” and “Take him!”

⁴² “I have often wondered what kind of person I should have become if I had grown up with the feeling of belonging to a clear majority and of having an undeniable right of abode”.

presence of a majority that constantly pushes aside another group. The feeling of being excluded, marginalized and stigmatized because of something that cannot be changed follows Kenneth all along his childhood and early youth and causes a “disorder/crisis of identity”.

The fact that the ability of mastering a language becomes a social marker that splits a relatively close environment such as a suburb in a modern city offers an interesting example of how the relationship between a *norm* and something perceived as *other* than the norm can be complicated. If we go back to the language-theory elaborated by Bourdieu, we can see that the Finnish situation is characterized by the existence of two “official” languages, Finnish and Swedish, as stated by the 14th paragraph of the Constitution of 1919. During the second half of the Twentieth century the language-debate in Finland entered a peaceful period, famous as “språkfred” (linguistic peace, Törnudd, 1978 : 14), with no attempt from the majority to make Finnish the only “official” language in the country, like it had been claimed during the first decades after the independence. On the other hand, the development of the modern national identity became more and more normative and tried to define in different ways what it meant to be “Finnish” through the elaboration of cultural concepts such as national literature, national language and national heritage, and popular phenomena like the national teams for different sports. In this perspective, the Swedish element was recognized as constitutive of the Finnish historical past, but with an alien character that placed it in a subaltern position. In the same way, the Swedish-speaking community, at the dawn of the country independence, quickly developed its *own* identity, starting with the creation of the adjective *finlandsvensk* (Finland-Swedish), which was proposed by Hugo Rudolf Pipping, professor of philology at Åbo University, in an article published in 1912 on *Studentbladet*⁴³. Just few years before, in 1906, the Swedish-speaking community had founded its political party, the *Svenska Folkpartiet i Finland* (the Swedish Popular Party in Finland), which still today runs a politics of protection of minorities and in defense of bilingualism.

This process of codification of two different linguistic communities (as early as 1922, the Swedish-speaking community claimed to be considered a *nation*) in the same territory can be considered an interesting example of the creation of a “mixed” language market, albeit not completely exempt from problems. The Finnish community, now the dominant group – both numerically and from a social point of view – is more and more reluctant to learn Swedish and

⁴³ Like mentioned before, an account of how the term *Finlandsvensk* became popular can be found in Mustelin, 1983 : 50-70.

to keep it as a national language⁴⁴. Swedish, once the language of the master, finds itself threatened and tries to defend itself. A fundamental roll in the elaboration of a language market (like Bourdieu notices) is played by the education-system and Finland is no exception in this regard. Since the Seventies, the study of Swedish is mandatory for three years in every Finnish school as much as all the Swedish-speaking pupils have to learn Finnish for the same number of years. This situation, which has been a constant matter of debate in Finland until today, is defined by some detractors as *pakkoruotsi* (enforced Swedish) versus *pakkosuomi* (enforced Finnish), two charged terms that show how the reciprocity of learning is far from being an unproblematic solution.

We do not need to analyze in detail the political debate about the national languages or to examine the reasons that both sides claim for their causes. What is clear instead is that the language represents a fundamental political power, which is intertwined with the definition of cultural and national identity. Basically, the hostility of the Finnish community toward the Swedish language resembles the hatred of a former colony for the old conquerors, whereas the stubborn defense of the Swedish community indicates a refuse to give up its supposedly “higher” social status. We approach here a crucial point in the analysis of how a relationship between two communities can change through history. Finnish, once the oppressed group, has become the dominant social class and tries to impose its model, which largely replicates the same structure of the norm that it has been victim of in the past. The slave – Derrida would say – becomes a new master. On the other hand, the Swedish community, claiming a sort of “internal national independence”, draws a line that turns the language into a social marker and affirms, by virtue of that, to be different, something *other*. In the end of this process, the new majority becomes dominant and craves to exert a mastery over the other group, whereas the minority is often not aware that the safe-guarding of its own identity (constituted by the language and the *otherness* that it denotes) sets up a barrier that isolates the community and creates a counter-norm that makes the exchange with the other rather difficult (note that the concept of “otherness” is reciprocal) and sometimes hostile.

It could be argued that such situation is not necessarily negative. Once the borders are clearly marked, it can be possible to co-habit and co-operate whenever it is necessary, especially when – like in the case of Finland – the two communities retain the same “official” character. Nevertheless, it is exactly here that the problem lies. The officiality acknowledged to a minority is a double-edged weapon that gives to the minority the right to exist, but makes it

⁴⁴ Recent surveys show that almost 65% of the population is in favor of a free choice of Swedish as a school subject, or against the mandatory Swedish.

easier for the majority to recognize it. Once a group codifies its own peculiarities, it tacitly excludes whomever does not possess them. Also when it recognizes other groups, it does so by virtue of something considered different from itself (language, religion, sexual orientation etc), assuming a normative role. This is where the invisible line between toleration and acceptance goes. Moreover, from the construction of the national identity derives the national pride as well as national stereotypes. To be Swedish means to be *like this*, to be Finnish means to be *like that*, and both the sets of denotations can be distorted by the other community and create a contraposition that might stretch itself from innocent jokes to violent conflicts. In “Melba, Mallinen och jag”, for example, Melba gives to Kenu the nick-name of “Håkan”, a typical Swedish name, and claims that all Swedes males are homosexuals and wear tights: “Melba hade många åsikter om svenskar, och ingen av dem var smickrande. Han döpte mig snabbt till Håkan. Det var från honom jag lärde mig om det svenska språkets intima samhörighet med strumpbyxan. Alla svenskar var Homo-Håkan och strumpbyxmannekänger, menade Melba” (Westö, 1992 : 18-19)⁴⁵.

This is a typical example of a stereotype that links together a nationality with a supposedly negative sexual orientation. The Swedish-Finnish actor Gusse Andersson, who traveled through Finland with a theatre-play entitled *Hurri* (the Finnish word that indicates the Finland-Swedes) in order to promote the studying of Swedish in schools, tried to summarize the most popular stereotypes that he had learnt about the Finland-Swedish minority. After performing two hundred times for more than twenty-thousands Finnish students, Andersson came to this conclusion: “Vad säger man då om ”hurrina”? Här följer det jag mest stött på: svensktalande är bättre folk (”herroja” eller ”satelistoa”) och går med näsan i vädret, de är rika (hurrinas barn säger: Pappa betalar och mamma lagar mat), de håller på Sverige på idrott. Och kanske det mest populäraste är att alla hurrir är ”homor.” (Andersson, 1995 : 12).

On the other hand, also the Finland-Swedish group has developed a negative approach toward the other linguistic community. In “Melba, Mallinen och jag” this topic appears clearly when the family of Kenneth moves to the more elegant district of Marracott Beach. In the new place, Kenneth meets other Swedish-speaking guys and soon figures out that they consider

⁴⁵ “Melba had many opinions about Swedes and none of them was alluring. He quickly baptized me as Håkan. It was from him that I learnt the intimate connection between the Swedish language and tights. All Swedes were homo-Håkan and wear tights, claimed Melba.” Åsa Stewall already underscored this nationalistic prejudice in her analysis av Westö’s short novel: “Benämningen kan också ses som uttryck för en stereotyp i den finska nationella självbilden; den finske mannen anses mera maskulin och emotionellt begränsad än den rikssvenske, och Kenu som svenskspråkig får därmed stå som representant för den svenske mannen” (Stenwall : 146). ”This designation can also be seen as an expression for a stereotype in the Finnish national image: the Finnish man is considered more masculine and emotionally discreet than the Swedish and Kenu, being Swedish-speaking, has consequently to represent the Swedish man”.

themselves superior, “bättre folk”, compared to the Finns: “Jag lärde dessutom bröderna Morin. (...) Berndt Morin gick i klassen ovanför mig och Wolf i klassen under mig. Berndt och Wolf var de första svenskar jag träffat som använde uttrycket “*ugrerna*” om sina finska landsmän. Mallinen gillade inte Morins, han sa att de var sånt där bättre folk” (Westö, 1992 : 57)⁴⁶. This passage illuminates a fundamental aspect of the national discourse: what is at stake is not only the acceptance of a minority by the “dominant” group, but also the fact that the minority is more willing in sharing some benefits than in really questioning the norm. Kenneth becomes aware of this problem when he finally moves away from Marracott Hill, convinced that he will find some security in the more calm and rich part of the suburb. When he settles down in Marracott Beach with his family, he feels more comfortable with the new environment, but gains at the same time a new perspective on the problem:

Via Bernt och Wolf och deras bruk av ordet “ugrer”, hade jag förstått att mitt problem inte enbart handlade om att människor som talade mitt språk måste göra allt för att bli accepterade – det fanns också en högdraget självtillräckligt falang bland mina egna, en falang som vägrade ge till och med min forna vän och idol Mallinen fullt människovärde. (Westö, 1992 : 68-69)⁴⁷.

This new awareness makes the identity problem even more complex. Although he belongs to the same group as brothers Morin, Kenu would never use the word “Ugrian” with the same pejorative connotation; in the same way Mallinen, who belongs to the other language-group, shows no empathy for Melba and mixes up with the Finland-Swedes. Kenu and Mallinen are able to be friends because they place themselves outside the restrictive borders of the groups they are supposed to belong, that is to say, they question the norm in its essential imposing character. What happens to Kenu, is that he ends up in a grey zone, in an uncomfortable position of in-between, because the other community, in most of the cases, denies him a full acceptance and does so also *because* of the official character recognized to his language and to his group. When a minority group obtains an “official” character, it is placed on the same juridical level as the majority but, at the same time, it is recognized as officially *different*. As noted before, the minority is often not aware that, by asking to be included in the norm (that is to say to be considered “official”), it implicitly acknowledges its ruling power. The minority, in the end, is given a specific social space where it can cultivate its own independence but that also makes it visible and clearly recognizable from the outside. Such dynamic appears more

⁴⁶ “I also got to know the Morin brothers. (...) Berndt Morin went in the class before me and Wolf in the class after. Berndt and Wolf were the first Swedish I ever met who used the expression “*Ugrians*” about their Finnish compatriot. Mallinen did not like the Morin, he said they were that better people”.

⁴⁷ “Through Bernt and Wolf and their use of the word “Ugrian”, I had understood that my problem not only mattered that the people who spoke my language had to do everything for being accepted – there was also an haughty self-sufficient phalanx among my owns, a phalanx that even refused to consider my former friend and idol Mallinen fully human”.

evident when two communities happen to be within the same national borders, like in the case of the Finland-Swedes.

Kenu also notices how his language is radically different from that spoken by his relatives from Österbotten, who usually do not command any Finnish:

Mina släktingar talade en svenska som jag emellanåt inte förstod.

Mitt eget språk (om man kunde tala om ett sådant, jag hade redan gjort erfarenhet att imitation och efterapning hörde till överlevandes dygder) var redan uppblandad med en stor mängd finska ord och med de genuine, gamla helsingforsuttryck som ofta härstammade från ryskan eller svenska.

Flera av mina närmaste, däribland min farmor och min moster, talade ingen finska alls.

När de ville gå till posten eller för att handla kläder, följde jag med som tolk. (Westö, 1992 : 49-50)⁴⁸.

It is quite interesting to notice that Kenneth has developed his *own* language, which enables him to move in the bilingual environment of the capital and represents the most evident sign of distance from the group of the Finland-Swedes, although insufficient to get free access to the other community. The frustration deriving from this exclusion deeply affects Kenneth, especially because he considers himself as much a Finland-Swede as a Finn and looks at the city where he lives as the only place where he could feel at home: “För mig var Helsingfors världens navel, och jag betraktade uttrycket ‘resa ner till Helsingfors’ som ren hädelse. Till världens navel klättrade man upp” (Westö, 1992 : 49)⁴⁹.

Another good example of Kenu’s feeling of confusion/exclusion is given by the international sport-events. On the occasion of the Olympic Games of Munich in 1972 Kenneth – which is supposed, according to the general opinion, to cheer for Sweden – has no doubt about the country he should hold for, and his support for Finland is definitely patriotic. When the athletes Lasse Virén and Pekka Vesala win two golden medals within half an hour respectively in the 5,000 meters and 1,500 meters, making that day memorable in the Finnish sport-history, Kenneth feels himself a part of the national pride. Nevertheless, as soon as he meets Melba and the brothers Kartunnen, he is reminded of his Swedish background, that does not allow him to consider himself completely Finnish:

Jag lyssnade till Anssi Kukkonens hysteriskt spruckna röst, mitt hjärta bankade och jag var finländare, en femmiljontedel ungefär av en stark och mäktig idrottsnation.

Men när jag senare rundade skitdammen och passerade kyrkan på väg till Primulas café, var jag inte längre den mäktiga och uthålliga finländaren. För vid träkiosken i

⁴⁸ “My relatives spoke a Swedish that I could not understand from time to time. My own language (if you could speak about something like that, I already got some experience that imitation and faking belonged to the virtues of surviving) was already mixed up with a lot of Finnish words and with genuine and old expressions of Helsinki, deriving from Russian and Swedish. Some of my dearest, among the other my grandmother and my aunt, spoke no Finnish at all. When they had to go to the post or to buy clothes, I used to follow them as interpreter.”

⁴⁹ “For me Helsinki was the navel of the world and I considered the expression ‘to go down to Helsinki’ as pure blasphemy. To the navel of the world you were supposed to climb to.”

ändan av Marracottallén stod Melba och bröderna Kartunnen, och för dem var jag bara en biskop Henrik eller Klas Fleming eller Herr De la Gardie som en gång råkat lemlästa deras bröder.

Men segrarna hade stämt dem till generositet. De kastade bara till mig en fråga: När hade Sverige senast vunnit två OS-guld inom loppet av en timme? (Westö, 1992 : 60)⁵⁰

A crisis of identity thus emerges anytime a subject is brave enough to move outside the borders of his/her own community and tries to interact with another, but without being completely accepted by the latter because of something considered *different*, something that unequivocally pushes him/her back. The sense of exclusion, of being an outsider, a stateless in his own country becomes so strong that Kenneth, after turning eighteen, decides to move to Stockholm, hoping to find a new homeland. The experiment lasts for sixteen months and the result turns out to be scarce. Kenneth does not feel at ease in the new social environment and his sense of alienation is even stronger than in Helsinki. Again, it is the language that marks the difference with the *Rikssvenskar* (the Swedes living in Sweden) and makes him feel like an emigrate, longing back to the place he comes from.

Det var inte bara min accent som formats av kantighet, utan hela språket, jaget. Jag var lite arkaisk och oborstad, och jag märkte att jag trivdes med det. Att träffa en stockholmare på en fest var som att med förbundna ögon försöka fånga en oljad tvålbit som dinglar i snöre.

Jag sällskapade några månader med en flicka. Hon var svenskspråkig, men från Karis i västra Nyland. Jag fick också en kompis. Han var från Soklot utanför Nykarleby. Jag försökte lyssna på den musik svenskarna lyssnade på, men det var som att få sirap i öronen. (Westö, 1992 : 94)⁵¹.

It is quite interesting to notice how the language is perceived as a defining feature of the self, that denotes not only a geographical origin, but also the belonging to a certain community, history and behavior. Kenneth basically experiences in Stockholm the same feeling of diversity in another environment that he hoped it would be more friendly. In the end, he moves back to Helsinki and accepts his marginal position, constantly moving between two communities bordering with each other but closed inside the fences of their norms, and trying to turn his precarious balance on the thresholds into a privileged watch-tower, a bridge-head toward the

⁵⁰ “I listened to the hysterically hoarse voice of Anssi Kukkonen, my heart was beating fast and I was a Finn, one of the five million people of a strong and powerful sport nation. But when I later went around Skitdammen and passed by the church on the way to the Primula Café, I was not anymore the strong and powerful Finn, because near the kiosk at the end of Marracottallén I met Melba and the Karttunens brothers, and for them I was only a bishop Henrik or a Klas Fleming or Herr de la Gardie, who once had mutilated their brothers”.

⁵¹ “It was not only my accent that was sharp-edged, but the whole language, my own self. I was archaic and unrefined, and I noticed that I felt comfortable with it. To meet a person from Stockholm at a party was like to blindfold catch a piece of soap dipped in oil and hanging from a cord.

I dated few months a girl. She was Swedish-speaking, but she came from Karis, in West Nyland. I also had a friend. He was from Soklot, just outside Nykaleby. I tried to listen to the music Swedes listened to, but it was like pouring syrup in my ears”. Both Karis and Soklot are small town in the Finnish territory where a majority of the Swedish-speaking population is displaced.

other(s). Uncomfortable as it might be, this is the only situation where the interaction is possible, depending on the ability of the individuals to challenge their own identity and to cross over the social barriers. This is the reason why Kenu's identity crisis remains unsolved, because he questions the categories that define the identity itself. Refusing to be labeled only as "Finland-Swedish" (thus excluding himself from the norm established by his own group), he turns into a solitary city-wanderer that hopes to be accepted regardless his language and the ethnicity it denotes "Jag ler fortfarande mot människor i hopp att de ska acceptera mig" (Westö, 1992 : 101)⁵². Michel Ekman, in his review of the book, underscores how Westö elaborates a narration that suddenly stops and remains suspended, signaling that his wandering has led him to a still unknown zone. "Kenus uppväxt leder ingenvart, han lämnas vid novellens slut i ett existentiellt tomrum" (Ekman, 1992 : 249)⁵³. Kenneth has no specific place to return, because he inhabits a marginal position that still has no name.

Because we are dealing with a specific national situation and with the analysis of an urban environment, it is important to note that Kenneth actually finds for himself a definition as "helsingforsare", although this is rather a non-definition, a blank page that needs to be courageously written: "Jag blev en gång för alla helsingforsare, vilket på grund av stadens diffusa karaktär betyder att vara ingenting alls, och vara stolt över det" (Westö, 1992 : 96)⁵⁴. The "diffuse" character of Helsinki refers to its fragmented social and linguistic situation⁵⁵. In here frictions and conflicts are more evident than in other parts of the country, this could also be the place where the birth of a new paradigm could happen. Such a task requires a critical analysis that constantly questions the norm, without trying to find easy roundabouts like creating a constellations of "minorities" or to replace the norm tout court, because this would inevitably lead to the creation of another similar construction that operates according to the same rules. The only way to go is to question the norm from within, trying to bring the concept of minority inside the majority and refund it according to new premises. In the case of nationalism, this process is particularly difficult because it has to mediate between a general principle – that tries to comprehend an entire folk – and the single individuals that have to fit

⁵² "I still smile at people, hoping that they would accept me".

⁵³ "Kenu's childhood leads nowhere, at the end of the short-story he is left in an existential vacuum".

⁵⁴ "I became once and for all a inhabitant of Helsinki, which due to this city's diffuse character, means to be nothing and to be proud of it".

⁵⁵ The situation in the rest of the country is more homogeneous. Österbotten (the coastal region in the centre-north of Finland) is bilingual, whereas the Åland Islands, which also retains a special territorial status, are almost unilingual Swedish. The south coast, from Åbo (Turku) to Lovisa, and especially Helsinki is characterized by the presence of minor groups of Finland-Swedes. Allardt and Stack report in their book a precise statistic about the number of Finland-Swedes and the percentage in the entire population (10,6% in Helsinki in 1970); (Allardt, Stack : 119).

into that principle. Terry Eagleton, in his essay “Nationalism: irony and commitment”, claims that nationalism, like social class or sexual politics, cannot simply be wished away, because this would mean “to play straight in the hands of the oppressor” (Eagleton, 1990 : 24). Instead, what it is required is “to get through it” and to elaborate a critical thinking that is able to reconcile the particular specificity of the subject and the universal claim of human sameness. What is at stake in the definition of the subject’s identity, according to Eagleton, is not what it means, for example, “to be Irish” or “to be a woman”, but to have the liberty to determine one’s own identity regardless those labels that might be a construction of the oppressor or a creation of the victim:

To attempt to bypass the specificity of one’s identity in the name of freedom will always be perilously abstract, even once has recognized that such an identity is as much a construct of the oppressor as one’s “authentic” sense of oneself (...). For the freedom in question is not the freedom “to be Irish” or “to be a woman”, whatever that might mean, but simply the freedom now enjoyed by certain other groups to determine their identity as they may wish (Eagleton, 1990 : 30-31).

The crisis of identity derives from the disruption between the claim for equality and the unavoidable peculiarity of the subject, so it is in the dialectic of these abstract categories that a possibility can be found: “The *telos* of the entire process is not, as the Enlightenment believed, universal truth, right, and identity, but concrete particularity. It is just that such particularity had to pass through that abstract equality and come out somewhere else on the other side, somewhere quite different from where it happens to be standing now.” (Eagleton, 1990 : 30).

Translated into the urban vocabulary of Westö, this means to be able to embrace the entire Helsinki, with all the incoherencies and contradictions it contains, trying to develop a new dialectic that transcends the idea of a language-community by starting with the firm refuse of being labeled exclusively as Finnish-Swedish. In an interview published on Göteborg-Posten in 1993 regarding the publication of *Fallet-Bruus*, Westö claims that he refuses a strongly marked Finland-Swedish identity and that he has always considered the possibility of living between two languages and two cultures as a privilege. “Jag vill inte ha någon väldigt finlandsvensk identitet, säger Westö. Jag vill förstå hela det här landet. Detta dubbla seende är för mig en rikedom” (Jordhal, 1993)⁵⁶. The author has recently confirmed his point of view about the relationship between the two groups in an interview for *Nordisk Tidskrift*: ”Jag vill inte att finlandsvenskheten isolerar sig från det finska Finland. Det känns bra att så många

⁵⁶ “I don’t want to have any stronger Finland-Swedish identity, says Westö, I want to understand the whole country. This double-seeing is for me a richness.” In the same interview with Anneli Jordahl, Westö underscores how the Finland-Swedes in Helsinki have very different attitudes about this topic. “Somliga lever som ett indianreservat. Sedan finns det andra som lägger sin själ i att vara finländare” (Some people live as if they were in an Indian reserv. Then there are others who put his/her own soul for being Finnish).

finskspråkiga läser mina böcker. Och det händer ganska ofta att folk säger att de läst boken på svenska trots att de är finskspråkiga”⁵⁷ (Wilén , 2011 : 142).

It is rather significant – like Bror Rönholm suggests in the final part of his essay – that Kjell Westö contributed to the anthology *Adress : Helsingfors* (a collection of short-stories inspired to the Finnish capital published in 1994) with the autobiographical text “Resan utan Ithaka”. Here Westö draws a map of the city by giving the addresses and describing the places where the salient moments of his youth happened. The title indicates that none of these places can ultimately be called home, a place to return to, because each of them is inescapably tied up to experiences that sooner or later become memories belonging to the past. Westö emphasizes here the transitory nature of the personal relation with the urban environment, confirming the particularly *precise* character of the urban chronotope⁵⁸. As we noted at the beginning, cities are invisible palimpsests whose outer morphology constantly changes, apparently cancelling the under-texts. When a writer tries to recreate such construction through the use of memories, which are one of the most powerful means for this purpose (albeit not the only one), he or she will inevitably commit himself/herself to his/her personal experience. That is why, in its essential structure, also *Melba Mallinen och jag* shares the same urban re-creation of the autobiographical work of Benjamin: the development of a urban chronotope that places a

⁵⁷ ”I don’t want that Finnish-Swedish culture isolates itself from the Finnish-Finland. It feels good that so many Finnish-speaking read my books. And it happens rather often that people tell me that they have read the book in Swedish although they are Finnish-speaking”. Westö has claimed the same opinion also in Finnish, for example in the article “Jag, en hurri” (Me, a hurri), first written in Finnish and published on *Yhteishyvä* in July 2009 and then republished in Swedish (translated by Westö himself) for the book *Sprickor* (2011). Again, the writer claims the right to place himself outside the restrictive contraposition that sets Swedish-speakers against Finnish-speakers and brings his own personal experience as an example of how it is actually possible to live the two cultures at the same time. “Jag är inte tvåspråkig från början, jag växte upp i en helt svenskspråkig familj. Mina egna barn har vuxit upp på svenska även de. I den bemärkelse är jag en tvättäkta *hurri*. Min tvåspråkighet har vuxit fram under årens lopp och fått sitt prägel av mångahända omständigheter: arbete, hobbyer, djupa vänskapsrelationer. Jag har aldrig dolt min svenskspråkighet, men jag har inte heller velat dölja min kärlek till det finska språket och den finska kulturen. I dagens spända språkpolitiska atmosfär känner jag mig ofta som i en skruvstad. Finlandsvenskhetens bekymrade ideologer förväntar sig ovillkorliga lojalitetsförklaringar från de sina, men mitt lynne reagerar instinktivt mot isolationssträvanden varifrån de än kommer” (Westö, 2011 : 129). (I was not bilingual from the start, I grew up in a Swedish family. My own children have grown up speaking Swedish too. In that sense I am a genuine *hurri*. My bilingualism has developed during the years and got its character because of manifold circumstances: work, hobbies, deep friendly relationship. I have never hidden my Swedish origin, but I have never wanted to hide my love for the Finnish language and culture neither. In the tense linguistic-political atmosphere of today, I often feel like in a vice. The worried ideologues of the Swedish-Finnish culture expect unconditional declaration of loyalty from their owns, but my disposition instinctively reacts against this striving for isolation from wherever it comes”. As for the “tense linguistic-political situation, Westö refers to the political campaign of the “Sannfinländare” (the Real Finns, *Perussuomalaiset* in Finnish), a national party already mentioned in the introduction.

⁵⁸ Interestingly, *Resan utan Ithaka* has been republished in a revised version for *Sprickor*. In a foot-note, the author affirms that he has included this text in the collection (*Sprickor* is supposed to contain only his articles written in Finnish) because “den ger en bakgrund till de stadsromaner jag började skriva några år senare. Eller åtminstone en ledtråd till mina motiv för att skriva dem” (Westö, 2011 : 100), “It gives a background to the city-novels that I started to write few years later. Or at least a clue of my motives to write them”.

personal experience (the childhood and adolescence) in a specific city (or even a specific part of the city) during a limited span of time.

Discussing the topic of national identity we have lingered on the language problem in Finland, partly because of the inescapable meaning that the debate concerning this topic still has in this country, partly because Westö himself has claimed – like noted before – the central character of this feature. In her analysis of *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, Åsa Stenwall suggests that the question posed by the text is actually not the problem of the language, but the development of a *mansideal* (man ideal) that Kenu is not able to fulfill.

Det är alltså inte enbart en språkfråga, att behärska den rätta vokabulären, utan det handlar på längre sikt om Kenus problem att identifiera sig som en finsk man. För den finlandsvenske Kenu blir pojkkuppväxten extra komplicerad därför att han tvingas förhålla sig till och anamma ett i miljön förskrivet mansideal, en kulturell könsord, som han i grunden och botten känner sig främmande inför. Här ligger det centrala utanförskapet. Inte i själva språket.⁵⁹ (Stenwall, 1996 : 142)

It is true that language represents only one aspect of the identity-discourse and of course the definition of the national identity is not simply represented by the choice of one or more official languages and how they might interact. On the other hand, I would suggest that both the national language and a national *mansideal* both sprout from the same concept of identity that Kenneth first tries to penetrate and then rejects. The model that we have tried to develop, which considers nationalism as the codification of a norm that aims at defining a group according to certain criteria (and thus labeling as different whomever does not fulfill those criteria, even if they are officially accepted, albeit as a “minority”), can also be used as a pattern, a general structure that can be applied to other circumstances. The subtly normative character of nationalism is common to many other social constructions, such as patriarchy, hetero-norm or religion. The real challenge, in order to re-define the complex net of meanings of these constructions, is to quest their essentially normative nature. This is also why, I believe, *Melba, Mallinen och jag* has been compared with the novel *En komikers uppväxt* (1992) by Jonas Gardell, a novel that relates how the little Juha is mobbed by his class-mates and how the only way for him to find salvation is to turn into the clown of the school (Stenwall, 1996 : 151). What the novel by Gardell (which deals with another social environment, namely the Swedish suburb in the Seventies) really shares with *Melba, Mallinen och jag* is the description of

⁵⁹ ”It is therefore not only a question of language, to be able to master the right vocabulary, rather it regards, on the long run, Kenu’s problem to identify himself as a Finnish man. For the Finland-Swede Kenu, his adolescence is more complicated because he is forced to relate and accept an ideal of how to be a man, a cultural sexual code, prescribed in a certain environment that he feels deep inside alien to. It is here that lies the central alienation. Not in the language itself”.

bullying as an example of the implacable mechanism that authorizes a majority to ostracize a supposedly inferior – or simply different – minority. All other similarities, that Westö himself has commented, are more formal: ”Jo, det finns likheter. Djupt allvar och komik, pennalism mellan förortsbarn, en huvudkaraktär som, pressad av de tuffa killarna, sviker sina vänner samt ett njutningsfyllt grävande i 70-talets livsmönster och dess vulgära rekvisita.”⁶⁰ (Jordahl, 1993 : 27).

Westö’s commentary about the ”njutningsfyllt grävande i 70-talets livsmönster och dess vulgära rekvisita” is particularly useful to introduce another dimension of *Melba, Mallinen och jag*. So far we have dealt with topics such as nationalism, social conflicts, the relationship between majority and minority and the analysis of the unwritten rules governing it. However, Westö’s short story contains another important aspect: the investigation of the Finnish society during the Seventies through the description of the everyday-life in the suburbs of Marracott Hill and Marracott Beach. The second chapter of the novel describes the political intrigues behind stage for the construction of the suburbs, which reflects the political frame inside which the novel unfolds and that has been scarcely debated by the critics. The opening lines of the chapter sound as follow: “Efter kriget började Helsingfors börja växa på allvar (...) De stora byggföretagen hade lärt sig behärska tekniken med betongcement. Allt gick mycket snabbt. Stadsplanerarna räknade med att Helsingfors skulle ha 1 500 000 invånare vid millennieskifte” (Westö, 1992 : 13-14)⁶¹. In order to plan the construction of a new suburb, the Bureau for Urban Planning in the west district of Helsinki instructs a commission to evaluate different proposals:

En kommission tillsattes. Nio månader senare födde den två (eller snarare tre) namn: Henry S. Marracott III hade studerat vid MIT och Harvard, arbetat för Gropius i New York och senare varit tongivande i berömda ”housing project” på Manhattan och i St. Louis; Marracott’s konkurrenter var det ryska konstruktivistparet Pavel Jefimovitj Pavlinskij och Irina Maximovna Pavlinskaja, som kort därefter skapat två förorter om 50 000 invånare vardera i den stad alla då trodde att för all överskådlig framtid skulle heta Leningrad.⁶² (Westö, 1992 : 15)

⁶⁰ ”Yes, there are similarities. Deeply serious and comical topics, bullying between the kids in the suburbs, a protagonist who, pressed by the tough guys, betrays his friends, together with a pleasurable investigation of the life-style of the 70’s and its trivial properties”

⁶¹ ”After the war Helsinki started to grow for real. (...) The big constructing company had learnt to master the technique of concrete cement. Everything went very quickly. The urban-planners counted that Helsinki would have 1,500, 000 inhabitants by the turn of the millennium”.

⁶² “A commission was instructed. Nine months afterwards it gave birth to two (or rather three names): Henry S. Marracott III had studied at MIT and Harvard and worked for Gropius in New York. He had been an influential figure of the “housing project” in Manhattan and Saint Louis. Marracott’s competitors were the Russian constructivist couple composed by Pavel Jefimovitj Pavlinskij and Irina Maximovna Pavlinskaja, who shortly before had created two suburbs, each of them for 50,000 inhabitants in that city that everybody thought it would be called for all the foreseeable future Leningrad”.

Marracott III wins the tender and the construction of the suburb is quickly set in motion. The victory of the project of Marracott (strongly influenced by functionalism and the American housing project) marks the architectural development of Helsinki according to the paradigm of the Western urban-planning and contains an obvious political significance. The result of the tender sets against each other not only two different ideas of architecture but also the political ideologies that they implicitly incarnate. Architecture thus becomes the most visible symbol of the new turn of the political situation in the country. That the Bureau of Urban Planning had to choose between two diametrically opposed projects is rather significant of a development which is not linear. As discussed in the previous chapter, Finland found itself constantly poised between Western Europe and Russia throughout its modern history. One century of mild subjection to the Tsarist empire, followed by a civil war that placed the Whites (who sought the support of Germany and wanted to turn the country into a Kingdom ruled by a German King) against the Reds (who claimed that the independence of Finland should be thought in the frame of a league of states faithful to the Soviet) and three different stages during the Second World War (when Finland first fought against Russia the Winter War and the Continuation War and against Nazi Germany during the Lapland War) have left deep scars in the political consciousness of the Finnish people. Although the country managed to maintain its independence, the turbulent decades of the first half of the Twentieth century were not so easy to forget and created a split in the public opinion regarding the bulky neighbor as well as its position in post-war Europe.

During the Sixties Finland went through a period of economical growth and decisive opening towards a capitalistic-oriented economy, which had started already a decade before, leading to radical social changes. At the same time, the *Ostpolitik* of President Kekkonen was aiming at securing the neutrality of Finland through the renewal of the YYA treaty with Russia. The suburbs of Marracott thus become the symbol of the social and economical mobility of Finland during the post-war years and, with its Western-oriented architecture, express a clear sign of the political shift away from Russia and closer to the West.

It is important to notice that Marracott Hill and Marracott Beach do not exist in reality and the suburbs that Westö has in mind are called Munkshöjden and Gamla Munksnäs, in the North-West part of the city⁶³. This “invented topography”, which only apparently seems to

⁶³ The similarity has been noticed for the first time by Michel Ekman: “(Marracott Hill) har anmärkningsvärt mycket gemensamt med Munkshöjden – t.o.m. fotbollsplanen tycks vara den där jag själv spelade för 25 år sedan” (Ekman, 1992 : 248). ”It is worth noticing that (Marracott Hill) has very much in common with Munkshöjden – even the football field seems to be the one where I used to play twenty five years ago”. A technically precise account of the construction of this suburbs and a description of the social groups living there can be found in

clash with the otherwise very realistic description of the actual places, gives to the chronotope that the author is investigating a stronger political relevance. In “Melba, Mallinen och jag” it is possible to detect a political undercurrent that goes through the entire text. The description of the further development of capitalism, with its outcome of pop-music, fashion, cinema is set in contrast with the grey collectivistic life of socialism. Behind the glittering façade (which Westö had already sketched in his poems), however, it already winds the suspect that such economical growth is not exempt of problems and that it feeds a greedy which will become evident with the speculation of the casino-economy of the second half of the Eighties. So far, anyway, Finland was experiencing the same growth, charged with optimistic hopes for the future, that many European countries were going through during the post-war reconstruction-years. Such economical development also propelled the raising of a new middle-class, occupied in carrying the country into the new market-economy and to climb the social scale through hard work. Westö does not hesitate to call it “den illusoriska, amerikanska drömmen” (Westö, 1992 : 16)⁶⁴. In the microcosm of Marracott the dynamic of this historical passage in modern Finnish society is represented by the inhabitants of the suburb. Kenu’s and Mallinen’s fathers are hard-working self-made men, the former has just obtained a Master in Economy and the latter is an engineer who partakes the project of building the country’s first highway from Helsinki to Åbo. The character of the dissident Iso-Hiisi is instead a representative of the radical left.

Ingenjör Mallinen, min far och Iso-Hiisi var de som Var På Väg. Varje morgon studsade de med fjädrande steg ut från trappa F likt energiska arbetsbollar märkta Framtiden. Fars och ingenjör Mallinens Framtider liknade varandra, medan Iso-Hiisi var på väg mot en helt annat. (...) Men oavsett skillnaden var deras Framtider Fjädrande, och de kom alla hem sent. Dagarnas duster var långa och gällde, förstod jag långt senare, Ekonomin, Tillväxten och Riktingen.⁶⁵ (Westö, 1992 : 24)

Åsa Stenwall was probably the first to consider Kjell Westö as a ”förorternas diktare”, “a poet of the suburbs” (Stenwall, 1996 : 133) and to underscore how Marracott Hill is a symbol itself of the new socio-economical period that Finland had entered.

Westö lägger mycken vikt vid den fysiska miljön och visar hur samhälls- och bostadsplaneringen, ja hela arkitekturen, präglar barns uppväxt och erfarenheter. Kenus generation är barn av optimistiska ritbordsingenjörer och tekniker i en tid, då

Turpeinen’s, Herranen’s and Hoffman’s book *Helsingfors stadshistoria*. Like the authors underscore: “Bland förorterna var Drumsö, Munksnäs, Haga, Kånala, Mellungsby, Brändö och Degerö områden med förhållandevis stor svenskspråkig befolkning”, (Turpeinen, Herranen, Hoffman, 1945 : 27). (Among the suburbs, the areas of Drumsö, Munksnäs, Haga, Kånala, Mellungsby, Brändö and Degerö were those that hosted a relatively big Swedish-speaking community).

⁶⁴ ”The illusory, American dream”.

⁶⁵ ”Engineer Mallinen, my father and Iso-Hiisi were those who were ON THEIR WAY. Every morning they bounced with elastic steps down the stairs of building F like energetic working-balls marked with the word “Future”. Dad’s and engineer Mallinen’s futures were similar, whereas Iso-Hiisi was on going toward one completely different. (...) But, regardless the difference between their elastic futures, they all came back late. The struggles of their days were long and regarded, as I understood much later, Economy, Growth and Direction”.

förortsbyggandet bryter igenom och elementhusen i rasande takt omvandlar det finska landskapet som aldrig förr. (...) Ett sådant område är Marracott Hill, som har många likheter med Munkshöjden, där författaren själv växte upp⁶⁶. (Stenwall, 1996 : 147).

Westö certainly belongs to the first generation who grew up in the modern suburbs of Helsinki, those suburbs that represent the architectural counterpart of the post-war years in the country. At the same time, it is important to underscore that Marracott Hill is not so homogeneous as it seems. The character of the dissident Iiso-Hisi (as much as the strange Mr. Sunila, re-baptized by the kids “the invisible Sunila”) is a good example of how these suburbs originally hosted a very mixed social environment. If today we are mostly used to read these marginal zones according to other parameters, such as ethnicity or income, we should not forget that places like Marracott/Munkshöjden were once eponymous of modernity, with houses built with modern techniques and well-equipped with comforts and facilities. People who moved there had different backgrounds, jobs and expectations, but they were all coping with the same thing, namely the advent of a new epoch, of a new social hierarchy, of a different economical system. If we assume, following Marshall Bergman’s theory, that Modernism is the movement *par excellence* of the urban streets, because it is here that the social and cultural clashes take place and the economic force of capitalism takes form, it does not seem unreasonable to add the post-war suburbs to the list of the places where modernity enfolded, like the Nevsky Prospect in Saint Petersburg or the boulevards of Paris during the second half of the Nineteenth century. The chronology of the economic development of the country goes also in this direction, since industrialization arrived in Finland rather late, at the beginning of the Twentieth century (Wourinen, 1965 : 192) and the capitalistic economy’s breakthrough dates back to the Mid-Fifties.

One episode in *Melba, Mallinen och jag* is rather significant in this regard, because it concerns the social and political differences existing in Marracott Hills and involves at the same time the issue of the relationship between Finland and its mighty neighbor. The episode, described in chapter ten, takes its cue from the donation from Russia to Finland of a statue to celebrate the good relationship between the two countries. The ceremony, where the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Stepanov meets the famous Finnish President Uhro Kekkonen, awakes mixed feelings in the population. In Marracott Hill, Kenneth’s father and engineer Mallinen dislike the monument and find the welcoming of the Russian delegation rather

⁶⁶ “Westö gives much attention to the physical environment and show how the social and urban-planning, the whole architecture, characterized the experiences and the childhood of the kids. Kenu’s generation is son of optimistic engineers and technicians in a time when the construction of the suburbs breaks through and the elemental building at astonishing speed transforms the Finnish landscape as never before.”

arguable. The memories of the Winter war and the Continuation War have not yet faded away in their minds. On the other hand, Iso-Hiisi appreciates the donation and claims that the modernity of its style and material aesthetically exceeds the old statue of Marshall Mannerheim.

Monument bestod av en rad vridna stålrör, inte olika borrbett. Mitt bland borrbetten stack en knuten näve upp, och högst uppe tronade ett grovt tillyxat manlig huvud med karaktärsfasta haka, troligen en arbetets hjälte. (...) Min far gillade inte borrbetten heller, och hans åsikt delades av ingenjör Mallinen.

Lutte Iso-Hiisi, vars relation till de flesta övriga på gården började bli ansträngd, gillade dem däremot. En lördagsförmiddag påpekade han ute på Gården att den Nya monument i estetiskt avseende slog bögen Mannerheim och hans krake med flera hästlängder. (...) Medan Iso-Hiisi med guppande mustasch och tovig skägg slungade ut sina sarkasmer, hann Lauri Sonetti knyta sina skrivarhänder, lyfta dem och ta de få steg som skilt männen åt. Han knackade Iso-Hiisi på axeln och slog till medan huvudet ännu vreds mot honom. För att komma från en poet var det ett bra slag.⁶⁷ (Westö, 1992 : 41).

The provocation of Iso-Hiisi and the prompt reaction of Lauri Sonetti (backed by Kenu's father and Mallinen) describe the radically different point-of-views that can inhabit the same stripe of urban texture. In Marracott Hill the raising middle-class shares the same space with the lower classes, the new capitalistic-oriented small-bourgeoisie lives next door with the new proletarians. It is in the *gård*, on the yard, that the differences between the inhabitants become visible (the richest, like Kenu's father and Mallinen already have a car, whereas the poorest, like Mrs Sunila and Iso-Hiisi take the bus) but it is also the place where a confrontation is possible, because the new social hierarchy has not yet completely solidified and the modernization of the country still appears as a work in progress. In the autobiographical text *Har aldrig hittat hem*, Westö described his contrasted feelings about the suburb of Marracott/Munknejden, emphasizing how the social contraposition during his childhood was so strong that he thought he was punished because he was Swedish-speaking and *also* because his family had become richer, *bättre folk*.

Jag flyttade från Munkshöjden till det finare Munksnäs i tioårsåldern, och samtidigt blev språkslagsmålen vanligare. (...) Dessutom var gränsen mellan de två stadsdelarna flytande och vi rörde oss naturligtvis fram och tillbaka över den. Men jag, som just hade flyttat från den modesta Munkshöjden till den traditionsrika Munksnäs, hade dåligt samvete över familjens upphöjelse och drog slutsatsen att

⁶⁷ The monument consisted of a row of twisted steel pipes, not so different from drill bites. In the middle of the drill bites a fist popped up, and on the top of it a man's head, roughly hewn, was enthroned, with its characteristic chin, probably a working hero. (...) My father didn't like the drill bites neither, and his opinion was shared by the engineer Mallinen.

Lutte Iso-Hiisi, whose relationship with the others on the yard was starting to be tense, liked them instead. One Saturday morning, out in the yard, he claimed that the New monument esthetically beat that puff of Mannerheim and his weakling by many lengths. (...). While Iso-Hiisi was his mustache going up and down and his matted beard threw out his sarcastic commentaries, Lauri Sonetti managed to close his writer-hands, lift them and take the few steps that separated them. He knocked on Iso-Hiisi's shoulder and punched him while his head was still turning towards him. For coming from a poet, it was a good blow.

språkslagsmålen var en klassfråga. I Munkshöjden hade alla, såväl finnar som svenskspråkiga, bott i likadana trerummare med ganska lågt i tak. Men Munksnäs var ett klassamhälle, det insåg jag genast⁶⁸. (Westö, 2009 : 237)

Although economically Finland had already turn towards the capitalistic market, the political opinion was not unilateral. On a broader international perspective, we should remember that these were the years of the Cold War, when Europe was still divided into two blocks, each representing a different ideology. Also in Finland, the only country in northern Europe that had a civil war confronting the pro-German Whites and the pro-Soviet Reds and that fought two wars against Russia during the Twentieth century, some people tried to develop a critical approach as regard of the new course of the economic policy, which was expanding outside the realm of economy and was about to become a life-style. One example is offered by Kenu's young teacher of History and Music, Hällqvist, who works temporary at the Swedish school of Marracott. Hällqvist sings "Blowing in the Wind", "Avanti popolo!" (the latter being a famous Italian song of the worker's movement), shows to his pupils some slides representing the iron-plant of Krasnojark, in Georgia, and explains Marxist concepts such as "capital" and "production means": "Historien skrevs i nuet, varje dag, sa Hällqvist, och till skillnad från forna tidens dystra mörker av kungahus och kolonialism hade vi idag en genuin Folkens Historia att glädjas åt. Han bad oss fästa speciell vikt vid de ekonomiska inslagen, ty det var Ekonomin, och särskilt Ägandet av Produktionsmedlen, som var alltings grund och styrde människornas liv"⁶⁹. Hällqvist goes as long as to take four students to a tv-panel about international politics, where the young boys faithfully repeat the historical credo of their teacher. On the other hand, the arrival in Finland of the American capitalism brings along a corollary of gadgets that attract young people much more than any other economical consideration about the market. Junk-food, pop-music, tv-shows, exotic fruits are only few examples of how Finland embarks on the adventure of capitalism and international trade. It would take fifteen years, before capitalism will start to show its cracks, and then Kenu will think again about Hällqvist's words:

Femton år senare, när de rika i världen blivit så rika och de fattiga så fattiga att sjuka rika köpte eller tog ögon och njurar av friska eller mördade fattiga för att få leva

⁶⁸ I moved from Munkshöjden to the more refined Munksnäs when I was ten, and at the same time the language-fights became more usual. (...) Moreover the border between the two district was not clearly marked and of course we moved back and forth. But I, who had moved away from the modest Munkshöjden to the traditional Munksnäs, had had consciousness over my family's progress and came to the conclusion that the language-fights were a matter of class. In Munkshöjden everybody, Finnish as much as Swedish-speaking, lived in the same three-room-apartments with quite low roof. But Munksnäs was a class society, I saw that immediately".

⁶⁹ "History is written now, every day, used to say Hällqvist, and unlike the obscurantism of Royal Houses and colonialism of the past, today we had a real People's History to be happy about. He asked us to devote special attention to the economic intervention, because it was Economy, and especially The Property of Production Means which was the base for everything and steered the life of the people"

längre, och när mitt eget land först haft en lång högkonjunktur som (påstods det) var bankernas och spekulanterna förtjänst och sedan fått en djup lågkonjunktur som (påstods det) var de dumma konsumenternas och smålångtagarnas fel, förstod jag att Hällqvist (trots grusierna och stålkonbinatet) hade haft en poäng; ägandet av produktionsmedlen var inget att skratta åt, och Ekonomin styrde människornas liv.⁷⁰ (Westö, 1992 : 65)

Similarly to what he had expressed in his collections of poems, Westö points his finger against the capitalistic model of the "expanderande ekonomi", the "growing economy", which requires a constant increase of production and consumption in order to survive. The Finnish post-war economical boom, which brought richness and an unquestionably better standard of living in Finland (Westö himself discussed how his generation mostly took profit of it in his contribution to the anthology *Stolt som eken*, which will be discussed in the next chapter), was however unsustainable and, when the financial speculation turned the national economy into a gamble, the people – or better: the consumers – were the ones to blame.

Like Westö himself affirms⁷¹, *Melba, Mallinen och jag* has a special place in his early authorship, because it contains *in nuce* many topics that he will later develop in his novels. If chronologically this long tale can be considered an investigation of the invisible palimpsest of Helsinki in the Seventies (whereas the poems were anchored in the present, that is to say, in the Eighties), with the novels the temporal boundaries will be further extended and many generations, as we will see, will be involved in the analysis.

Finally, we need to spend some words about the other two tales of the collection, *Iiro och pojken* (Iiro and the boy) and *Fallet Bruus* (Bruus case). The first one is the bittersweet story about a young bohemian musician, Iiro, who has had a son from a relationship (now ended) with a girl named Marjut. One day the woman pops up during the rehearsal of the band and asks his ex-boyfriend to take care of the child, whose name is Markus, during a few

⁷⁰ "Fifteen years later, when the rich in the world had become so rich and the poor so poor that sick rich people bought or took eyes and kidneys from healthy people or killed the poor in order to live longer, and when my own country first had a long economical boom which (so it was claimed) was the merit of banks and speculators and then it went through a deep economical depression which (so it was claimed) was the stupid consumers' and the little borrowers' fault, I understood that Hällqvist (despite the Georgians and the steel mine) had had a point: the possession of production means was nothing to laugh about, and that the Economy steered people's lives."

⁷¹ In an interview with his alter ego Anders Hed, Kjell Westö underscores the intimate relation between the two works as follows: "**Am I wrong in thinking your almost hundred-page-long story, 'Melba, Mallinen and I', was a sort of preliminary run-through for your novel *Drakarna över Helsingfors* ('Kites over Helsinki', 1998)?**

You're not completely wide of the mark. Only after finishing the novel did I realize there were certain motifs in 'Melba' that later turned out to be important in the novel: a sketch of the Sixties and Seventies, evocating the atmosphere of that time from a child's point of view with a gently ironic tone, the portrayal of an upwardly-mobile family, and so forth. But there are also great divergences. 'Melba, Mallinen and I' is a story about childhood and adolescence. It's about the closed and cruel world of these unripe individuals, where the adults have a supernumerary role. In *Drakarna*, on the other hand, all the generations are important." (Westö, 2000 : 7).

summer-weeks. Iiro accepts unwillingly, because he has never taken care of his son before. He takes him to the cottage of a friend on the coast outside Helsinki, where they spend the days fishing. The holiday turns for Iiro into a confrontation with a reality quite distant from the life he is used to, made of night-concerts, frequent excesses in alcohol consumption and morning head-aches. The figure of the father as an absent, far-from-reality personality will re-emerge in the novel *Vådan av att vara Skrake*, together with the fishing, a sport that becomes a metaphor of the “misfortune” of being a Skrake.

The third tale, “Fallet Bruus” has been praised for its technical refinement. It also represents an interesting re-elaboration of the political and economical themes that Westö had developed in his contributions to *Rockad* and some articles published on *KLO*, namely the critical discourse against, on one hand, the consumerism of Finland during the Eighties and, on the other, his skepticism toward the supposedly alternative movements that were unable to cope with the problems of modern times. The insufficiency of the current political and ideological thinking to understand and even “resist” the reality caused the identity crisis that we have discussed in the previous paragraph. In *Fallet Bruus* Westö seems thus to return to the Eighties and to the topics he discussed with von Bonsdorff and on his columns for *KLO*. The subject, here incarnated by a promising man of letters unable to disentangle himself in the jungle of symbols he lives in, goes through an identity crisis that not only tears down his literary aspirations and destroys his carries, but that also undermines his psyche and leads him to craziness.

Fallet Bruus tells the story of a group of friends, Marla, Michael, Jeremy and Bruus. Michael Strand is the protagonist and the narrator of the story, whereas Marla is an attractive young woman, who first has a relationship with the charismatic and hypercritical Sören Bruus and then, tired of his endless abstract questioning of the society they live in, decides to break up and marries Jeremy. Soon their marriage runs dry and, at the same time, the group of friends splits up. After some time, Michael discovers that Bruus and Marla got together again. Although they both work with literature (Michael has published a novel and studies literature at the university, while Bruus has gained some success as a poet), the young men have developed a different critical approach towards the modern society. Bruus lives like an ascetic, showing a disparaging attitude against the rampant capitalism, whereas Michael is going through a period of identity-crisis, but stubbornly refuses to give up to the credo of his former friend. After some years, when Bruus and Marla had broken up again, Michael, whose academic carrier seems to have come to a premature end, decides to make an investigation about Bruus’ unpublished

works, that the poet has left in the attic of the house where he used to live. It is here that the story takes a sudden, fantastic, turn⁷². Michael becomes so obsessed by the drafts of Bruus (of which the reader is given some samples), that the personality of the former friend starts to take over his consciousness. When finally Michael finds out where the friend has moved and pays him an unexpected visit, he grabs a bottle and hits him. Michael reaches a point of total disconnection with his identity and he is not able to tell if he is the one who attacks or the one lying bleeding on the floor: “Men rösterna uttalade inget namn, och plöstligt flöt allt ihop. Jag kunde inte se vem det var som låg på golvet, jag visst inte om det var Bruus eller jag själv, jag visste inte om jag låg eller stod, förövare och offer hade blivit ett”⁷³ (Westö, 1992 : 198). Like Rönnholm suggests, ”Ju längre berättelsen framskrider, desto mer invaderas Michaels tankevärld och identitet av Bruus; till dess de i slutraderna glider samman på ett sätt som öppnar möjligheten att se dem som två sidor av samma person”⁷⁴ (Rönnholm, 1995 : 145). Rönnholm notices correctly that Michael turns into a symbol of the crisis of his own generation, ”a generation präglad av ideologiskt tomrum, värderativism, materiellt välstånd och frihetsillusioner” (Rönnholm, 1995 : 145)⁷⁵. In the light of the critical discourse we carried on so far, however, it is also important to notice that Michael finds himself at odds not only with the attitude of his friend Bruus, which embodies all the supposedly “alternative” movements of his time, but also with the seductive song of the capitalistic casino economy, that is personified in the tale by Dr. Kauffmann-Jamagusta, a sort of guardian-devil that he creates in his own mind. Dr. Kauffman-Jamagusta is a spokesman of the raging consumerism of the Eighties, who disregards democracy and only believes in selling and consuming: “Ja, vi skall sälja! Vi skall sälja företagen, kommunerna, städerna, länderna, kontinenterna, planeten och Universum! Så skärp dig, Michael! Upp med hakan! Allt går att sälja bara det finns en marknad”⁷⁶. The critic against the consumerism and the neo-liberism of the Eighties, which Westö had already depicted in his first two collections of poems and in his activity as a

⁷² I use the term “fantastic” like Todorov explains it in his essay *The Fantastic: A structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, where the French-Bulgarian critic claims that the fantastic in literature arises anytime it is not possible to discern if the event described in a text is rationally comprehensible or belongs to the realm of magic. Only if this suspicious remains unsolved until the end (that is to say if there is no explanation that clarifies the supposedly magical character), we can talk about the fantastic.

⁷³ “But the voices spelt no name, and suddenly everything smelt together. I could not see who it was who laid on the floor, I did not know if it was Bruus or myself, I did not know if I stood on my feet or if I was the one lying, the criminal and the victim had become one.”

⁷⁴ “The more the tale goes on, the more Michael’s mind and identity are invaded by Bruus, to the point that, in the final lines, they slides together in a way that opens up the possibility to see them as two sides of the same person.”

⁷⁵ “A generation characterized by ideological vacuum, relativism of value, material well-being and illusion of liberty.”

⁷⁶ “Yes, we shall sell! We will sell companies, parishes, cities, countries, continents, the planet and the universe! So Come on, Michael! Up with your chin! Everything can be sold if only there is a market for it.”

journalist and pamphleteer, confirms his intention to sketch the moral drift of the current Finnish society, which has turned the Country into a Market and the Citizens into Consumers, whose only task is to adopt a throwaway-life-style, enabling the market to prosper more and more. Already at the beginning of the tale, Michael felt uncomfortable with the rampant behavior of some friends, who could not understand his dreams of becoming a writer:

Jag snubblade på gamla kamrater i gathörn och på fester. De var alla på väg att bli jurister eller ekonomer. Det var högkonjunkturen, och de berättade att de redan tjänade stora pengar.

En av dem, en färsk revisor, frågade mig: ”Och vad sysslar du med, annat än skriver lite?”

Jag ställde motfrågan. ”Och vad gör du då, annat än reviderar lite?” Men min ironi trängde inte genom hans elefanthud. Han bara log, väl medveten om att pengarna talade i de årens Finland⁷⁷.

On the other hand, Westö seems aware that the a real resistance against the hungry monster of consumerism is more difficult and complicated than it seems, and that cannot be fought with the already worn-out weapons of old ideologies. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of Soviet Union two years later created an ideological vacuum in the radical left. At the same time, Finland would taste the bitter consequences of the risky gambles of casino-economy. If communism is dead, capitalism is not so healthy either, especially in the Finland of the “lame years”.

As in *Melba*, *Mallinen och jag*, also in *Fallet-Bruus* the narrator ends up in an unexplored space, suggesting that the crisis of the subject in the modern society – like Westö had expressed in his early poems and in his articles – is not solvable with a blind trust in the constant growth of the capitalistic market that secures job, profit and a subsequent comfortable life, but neither with a postmodern uncritical turn inward, that Westö previously defined as the “acceptera”-way of thinking. How the subject can disentangle itself in the jungle of symbols of modernity, how it can oppose itself to the intriguing voice of Dr. Kauffmann-Jamagusta without simply putting its fingers in its ears remains an open question that Westö will further explore in his first novel, widening the spectrum of his analysis both in a temporal and spatial perspective. Like Rönnholm predicted, Westö is “knappt klar” (hardly done; Rönnholm, 1995 : 146) with the analysis of the identity-discourse, with his task of being “barn av sin tid”, son of his time, both from a postmodern, urban perspective as much as from a national-linguistic

⁷⁷ “I bumped into some class-mates at the street corners or at some parties. They were all about to become attorneys or economy-consultants, That was the time of the economic boom, and they said they already earn a lot of money.

One of them, who had recently become a consultant, asked me: “So what do you do except some writing?”

I asked the same question: “And what do you do except some consulting?” But my irony could not get through his elephant-skin. He just smiled, well aware that it was money that talked during those years in Finland.”

point-of-view. In the same way, the investigation in the invisible palimpsest of Helsinki during the Seventies and Eighties will be again central in his first long novel, *Drakarna över Helsingfors*.

CHAPTER V
THE NEW URBAN EPOS

PARAGRAPH ONE

DRAKARNA ÖVER HELSINGFORS, *FINANSVALPARNAS EPOS*

After the publication of *Fallet Bruus* in 1992, Kjell Westö imposed himself as one of the most promising writers of his generation. At the age of thirty-one, he had already published three collections of poems, worked as journalist and editor for national newspapers and magazines, and had written two collections of short-stories. Both critics and readers showed appreciation for his works: *Tango Orange* had been one of the few works of poetry to be sold out, and *Utslag och andra noveller* (1989) was candidate for the prestigious Runebergspriset. On the other hand, though, Westö had twice interrupted his university studies and tried to maintain himself with his work as a translator and free-lance journalist. At the same time, he was impatiently struggling to produce that work of art that everybody seemed to be expecting from him. His inspiration, however, often betrayed him, like he confessed himself in an article written for *Books from Finland* in November 2007¹:

At twenty-five, I was a drop-out from two-faculties. I come from an upstart family, and although my parents were interested in arts, especially music and literature, there were no deep traditions to extract self-confidence from. Hence my exaggerated need to show off and prove to the world that I was able to create art and Literature with *very* capital letters, a need that caused my nervous system to crumble under the pressure.

There were countless writer's blocks and other deadlock situations. (Westö, 2007 : 319)

It took some years before the young writer could finally free himself from the straitjacket of expectations and need to impress. The sudden turn took place in the mid-Nineties, when Finland was laboriously trying to overcome the financial crisis following the Casino-economy which had brought the country on the verge of bankruptcy and paved the way for the long recession. Like Westö suggests, his personal situation seemed to follow the same pattern of Finland's economical *debacle*, until it came a moment of epiphany, on a cold January evening, when he decided to stop listening to his "interior monologues" and wrote down a half page. Not surprisingly, what he managed to squeeze out of his pen was a little fragment where he described the feelings of solitude and perplexity he had experienced during his childhood years:

If there were a pivotal moment in my transformation from an ambitious but erratic young writer in the making to a craftsman with a mission, it came during the years

¹ The article has recently been republished in Swedish (translated by the writer himself) in *Sprickor*, with the title "Om att skriva och inte skriva" (Westö, 2011 : 296-298).

between my first short story collections and my first novel. The country's economy went into recession and my own life seemed to conform to the general mood. There wasn't a lot of writing assignments on offer, and if an opportunity presented itself the pay was always poor. I didn't earn any money, I wrote very little and my drunken binges became more and more frequent.

Then, suddenly, I got a grip on myself. There was dark, crisp January night when I just got tired of my writer's blocks and my rambling inner monologues and the self-pity expressed in them. I had a few glasses of wine, shed a tear or two and then wrote a short passage that seemed finally capture the feelings of loneliness and wonder I had had as a boy in the suburbs of Helsinki. (Westö, 2007 : 320)

That half page would constitute the embryo of his first long novel, *Drakarna över Helsingfors* (Kites over Helsinki). The work proceeded faster and faster and, after six months, the little fragment had expanded to almost five hundred pages. No doubt, the seed of this book was the short novel *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, where the tale of the childhood years in Marraccott/Munksnejen turned the environment of the suburb into a metaphor of the tension between the Swedish-speaking minority and the Finnish-speaking majority during the Seventies. Already in that case, Westö had proved to be able to approach the matter in a different way, challenging the strictly normative structure of the minority/majority discourse that encapsulates the subject into a pre-defined alternative and leaves no option to consider an individual *regardless* the language spoken and the historical past and social belonging that it denotes. Westö's final statement, after years of mobbing and controversial feelings, was the acceptance of a position of "in-between", considered as a privileged threshold on two different cultural environments. The continuity with *Melba, Mallinen och Jag*, however, is more detectable in other aspects, especially in the precise and storytelling representation of the social and economical developments in Finland during the post-war decades. The span of time covered by *Kites over Helsinki*, in fact, is notably longer than in the previous work, where the events occupied only a handful of years during the Seventies. The novel stretches instead from the end of World War Two until the beginning of the Nineties, depicting the epos of two generations that ultimately embody the country's rise and fall from the ruins of the Winter War and Continuation War to the bacchanalia of the Casino economy and the following spiral of recession. Nevertheless, the Seventies (and the early Eighties) retain a special place in *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, being the moment when the post-war generation accomplishes its mission to rebuild the country, and a new generation – rebellious, spoilt and less scrupulous – is taking over. As already noted in the analysis of *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, this is also the decade when the pop-culture, the American life-style, the final establishment of a capitalist and market-oriented economy landed in Finland. All this emerges not only in the development of the plot, but also in a string of uncountable details related to music,

cinema, clothes, houses, cars, which already were the most refined narrative device for recreating the atmosphere of that epoch in *Fallet Bruus*.

Tuva Korsström, who reviewed the novel for *Huvudstadsbladet* on the 6th of October 1996 and in *Nordisk Tidskrift* a few months later, immediately noted the connection between *Melba, Mallinen och jag* and *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, emphasizing the central role played in both texts by the suburb of Marracott/Munksnejden during the Seventies: “Miljö- och tidssmässigt är romanen en utvidgning av Westös långnovell *Melba, Mallinen och jag* i hans senaste novellsamling. Beskrivningen av en tvåspråkig pojkvärld i en Helsingforsförort på 70-talet hälsades som genial exotiskt, som något okänt i den finlandssvenska litteraturen” (Korsström, 1996)². In her review for *Nordisk Tidskrift*, Korsström underscores also how the investigation of Westö in *Kites över Helsinki* extends the temporal axis up to the contemporary years, giving to the novel a character of epos. “*Dragons över Helsinki* is an expansion of almost 500 pages of *Melba, Mallinen and I*. The bilingual children in the Helsinki suburb of Munkkiniemi/Munksnäs are given parents whose families come from Ostrobothnia and Tampere. The children’s lives are traced through their youth to early middle age, bringing the eighties and early nineties into the picture” (Korsström, 1997 : 82-83)³.

From the title of the review by Korsström in *Huvudstadsbladet* I have also borrowed the subheading of this chapter, “Finansvalparnas epos” (The epic of the high finance’s whiz-kids). The journalist refers to the second part of the novel, where the generation born in the Sixties and grown up during the boom of the Seventies take up the levers of power and, with what resulted as dangerous speculative operations, turned the Finnish economy into a gamble. In the present analysis, though, the words epos/epic retain another connotation, which mostly stems from the discourse elaborated by Mikhail Bakhtin in the essay entitled *Epic and novel*. Here Bakhtin first underscores the formal differences between the epic tale and the novel emphasizing how the first is characterized by an “absolute epic distance” (Bakhtin, 1981: 13) that places it on a temporal axis completely disjointed from the present, whereas the latter represents “the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its open-endedness” (Bakhtin, 1981 : 11). The eposes of the Iliad or the Odyssey take place in a remote, absolute, past which has no connection with the real human time; everything inside of

² “As for the setting and the temporal perspective, the novel is an expansion of Westö’s short-story “*Melba, Mallinen och jag*” in his latest collections of tales. The description of the bilingual children world in a suburb of Helsinki during the Seventies was welcomed like something genuinely exotic, something unknown in the Finnish-Swedish literature”.

³ Korsström’s review on *Nordisk tidskrift* is published both in Swedish and in English. Curiously, the Swedish title *Drakarna över Helsingfors* is translated literally into *Dragons över Helsinki*, whereas the correct translation is *Kites över Helsinki*.

it has a peculiarly *definite* character that makes it unreachable and impenetrable both for the singer and the listeners (the author and the audience) which are consequently placed on the same time and the same evaluating plane. The world depicted by the epos is the world of the ancestors, of the national history, of the immutable destiny of the heroes. The gap between the epos and the human experience is unbridgeable and thus preserve the epic tale from any contamination with the present reality.

The epic world is an utterly finished thing, not only as an authentic event of the distant past but also on its own terms and by its own standards; it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value. This defines absolute epic distance. One can only accept the epic world with reverence, it is impossible to really touch it, for it is beyond the realm of human activity, the realm in which everything humans touch is altered and re-thought. (Bakhtin, 1981 : 17)

The novel, on the other hand, stands at the opposite pole. It is the only genre born after literature, its skeleton has not yet solidified and represents the literary dimension where the present can be depicted in the very moment of its unfolding. The novel disintegrates the absolute epic distance, bringing its content down to contemporary present. This evolution, according to Bakhtin, started to take place with the Socratic dialogues and the menippean satire. The Socratic laughter (irony plays a central role in this development) “bring the world closer and familiarize it in order to investigate it fearlessly and freely” (Bakhtin, 1981 : 25).

The novel thus becomes the genre that slowly but relentlessly permits to investigate the fluidity of the present, it is the only place in literature – due to his “plastic” structure – where the world-in-the-making can be represented. Once a situation is brought in contact with the present reality, it loses its definite character: “Every event, every phenomenon, every thing every object of artistic representation loses its completedness, its hopelessly finished quality and immutability that had been so essential to it in the world of the epic ‘absolute past’” (Bakhtin, 1981 : 30). The Russian critic underscores how the novel, thanks to his special characteristic of being able to adhere to the flow of the present, to the transitory nature of contemporaneity, has become the dominant genre starting from the second half of the Nineteenth century, causing a “novelization” of the other – already rigidified – genres. Most of all, it has become the epos – like Hegel already suggested – of the rising bourgeoisie of that epoch.

In this sense, therefore, novels such as *Drakarna over Helsingfors*, retains an “epic” character. Telling a story which is entirely tied up to a specific historical moment and trying it catch the evolution of a recognizable society, it depicts the modern epos of post-war Finland. Its protagonists in fact are the middle-class, the rising bourgeoisie and the nouveau-riches, the

business-men of the Fifties, working hard to rebuilt the country after the war and to reach a better standard of living, followed by the young finance-vultures, unscrupulous and obsessed with money.

The novel takes its cue immediately after the Second World War and describes the story of the Bexar family through two generations. At the beginning of the story Henrik, the father of the narrator, is portrayed as the representative of the post-war generation which is struggling to get the country back on track again after the fearful events of the Forties. One episode results particularly illuminating to understand what the generation dreamt about and how they were ready to sacrifice a lot to achieve their goals:

Henrik står kvar på balkongen, suger i sig de sista sträva dropparna.
Han känner att han vant sig vid staden, att de tio gemensamma åren gjort just det de skulle: han känner sitt Helsingfors och staden känner honom. De förstår varandra.
Det är det kören berättar för honom: att friheten finns där han bestämmer sig för att den skall finnas.
Och han har bestämt sig. Den finns i Helsingfors.
I det lilla livet mitt i den stora staden.
I det liv som är gott.
Aldrig mer Skrottooms.

O Welche Lust O welche Lust

Han tändar en Marlboro, röker den, börjar planera. Tobaken och målsättningar hjälper honom att stävja de sista resterna av rastlösheten.
I höst skall jag köpa bil. En Ford skall det bli, det är pålitliga åkdon.
Den här lägenheten sväljer inte ett barn till. Vi behöver något större.
Och TV skall vi ha.
Henrik är en stark människa, han är bra på att fösa bort oro.
Han har en alldeles lätt huvudvärk följande morgon, inget mer.
Det är, när allt kommer omkring, ett mycket bra år.
(Westö, 1996 : 21-22)⁴

After a solitary dinner at the restaurant Leethovaara and a nightly walk under the still bright sky of summer Helsinki, Henrik Bexar is standing on the balcony of his apartment on Nystadsvägen, in the upper part of the suburb called Munksneiden. He is sipping a glass of gin and tonic while listening to the Chorus of the prisoners from the first act of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. In front of him the suburb beautifully shines in the ever-lasting sunset of the Nordic summer-nights. Henrik Bexar is born before the wars in the little town of Skrottooms, in Ostrobothnia. When Finland fought against Soviet Union during the Winter War and the

⁴ ”Henrik remains on the balcony, sips the last bitter drops. He feels he got used to the city, that the ten years passed together have done as they should: he feels his Helsinki and the city feels him. They understand each other. This is what the chorus tells him: that liberty is where he decides where it has to be. And he has decided. It's in Helsinki. In the little life in the big city. I that life which is good. Never again Skrottooms. *O welche Lust, O welche Lust* He lights a Marlboro, smokes it, starts planning. Tobacco and objectives help him to repress the last traces of restlessness. This autumn I will buy a car. A ford will it be, they are reliable vehicles. This apartment does not swallow another child. We need something bigger. And TV we have to have. Henrik is a strong man, he is good in shooting away worries. The morning after he has a barely perceptible headache, nothing more. It is, when everything comes around, a very good year.”

Continuation War, he had been sent to Sweden as one of *Finlands krigsbarn* (Finland's war children), one of those 70,000 Finnish children who left the country by ferry or by train first in 1939 and in 1944 to escape the atrocities of the wars, usually carrying with themselves nothing but some clothes and a paper tied around their necks, showing their names and origin⁵.

Henrik had come back to Finland when he was twelve. He has now been living in Helsinki for ten years now and is married with Benita. Together they have two children, Daniel and Marina, and another one is coming soon. Henrik has also found a job as a commercial lawyer in the associated company Guwenius, Rotkirch & Valentinsen, where he is doing a brilliant career. He is the first member of his family to move to the capital, as much as his wife Benita, who comes originally from Tammerfors. After the gin and tonic, Henrik lights a cigarette and, while he is smoking on the balcony, thinks about what the family will soon need: a car, a TV, a new, bigger apartment. Few minutes before, walking through the living-room, he had looked with discomfort to the furniture around himself, mostly composed of old things inherited from Benita's parents: "Orons trollspö får honom att känna avsmak inför den gammalmodiga grammofonen och de billiga, randiga gardinerna i köket och de slitna bruna fåtöljerna Benita och han fått ärva av Didde och Totti. Arv! Uttjänta saker. Andrahandssaker. Tecken för ett liv levt på nåder." (Westö, 1996 : 20)⁶.

Henrik is a man of his time. The old objects from his parents-in-law are just memories of a past that he has left behind himself when he moved away from Skrottooms, cumbersome trash that reminds him of poverty and of an old-fashioned world. A new time has come to Finland with the end of World War II. A new political situation is taking form, a new social hierarchy is developing and, above all, a new economical model is rapidly gaining space,

⁵ After the wars, most of the children were repatriated. According to official statistics, 1,500 children were adopted and remained in Sweden. Other children were also sent to Denmark and Norway, although not as numerous, due to the fact that both countries were occupied by Nazi Germany. Like Lillemor Lagnebro reports, the evacuation of the Finnish children happened in two phases, first at the end of 1939 and the in 1944: "Sveriges krigshjälp till Finland påbörjades omedelbart efter den sovjetiska krigsförklaringen. Hjälporganisationer drogs igång på bred front. Det gick väldigt snabbt och redan den 11 december 1939 började den första barnflyttningen. (...) År 1944 blev startpunkt för en ny masstransport av barn till Sverige. (...) totalt sändes drygt 70 000 barn iväg. Det som nu hände har betecknats som "världens största barnflyttning". Övervägande delen var barn under 10 år. Omkring 1500 av dess blev kvar." (Lagnebro, 1994 : 13-14). "Sweden war help to Finland started immediately after the declaration of war from Soviet Union. Help-organizations were set in motion on large front. It all went very fast and already on the 11th of December 1939 the first evacuation of children began. (...) 1944 marked the beginning for a new massive transportation of children to Sweden (...) in total, more than 70 000 children left the country. What happened has been defined as the "the world biggest evacuation of children". The largest part of the children was under 10. About 1,500 remained here." A personal witness of the experience of the Finnish war-children can be found in Pertti Kaven's book *70.000 små öden*.

⁶ "The concern's wand makes him feel disgust in front of the old-fashioned gramophone and the cheap, stripe curtains in the kitchen and the worn brown armchairs that Benita and him have inherited from Didde and Totti. Heritage! Served-out things. Second hand things. Signs of a life lived on charity".

promoting what in *Melba, Mallinen och jag* had been defined as the “amerikansk dröm”, the American dream. Henrik is aware of the new possibilities that are unfolding in front of him and his generation, and almost restlessly devotes all his energies to catch them.

The scene quoted above is taken from the first part of *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, where Kjell Westö rapidly sketches the years before the birth of the protagonist of the novel, Rikard, the youngest son of Henrik and Benita. This part, however, results particularly important, because it marks the beginning of the socio-economical process that will fully bloom in the following decade. We are in the “pre-Munksnäs”-period, when Helsinki is partly still recovering from the war scares, but already getting ready to open up to the new time. If we look at the statistics, we can see that between 1944 and 1969 the population in Helsinki nearly doubled, from 275,000 to 525,600. The capital attracted people from all over the country (both Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking), who moved there for working or studying, all ready to take up the exciting challenges of the new time. These were the years of the mass-education and the radical polarization of the national economy towards the secondary and the tertiary sectors. Henrik and Benita, whose origin from other parts of the country are emphasized at the beginning of the novel, are representatives of this mass-migration from the countryside and small-towns towards the capital⁷.

If *Melba, Mallinen och jag* mostly emphasized the linguistic tension between the two language-groups in the suburbs of Marracott Hill and Marracott Beach, in *Drakarna över Helsingfors* the investigation focuses instead on the social dynamic and the economical aspects that characterized Helsinki’s suburbs between the Sixties and the Seventies. The primacy of economy in post-war Finland is first marked by the internationalization of trade. On the new political map of Europe, drawn after the war, Finland represented the only outpost of West-Europe bordering directly with Soviet Union. As noted already in chapter three, Finland’s economy benefitted of this position, managing to keep a prosperous economical

⁷ In 1946, Helsinki incorporated some of the communes in the surroundings, with a population increase of 51,000 units. At the same time, a mass-migration from other regions and towns took place to meet the needs of the new economical situation: “Efter kriget kom livet igång igen och huvudstaden började öppna sig för världen (...). Urbaniseringsprocessen gick allt snabbare från och med 1950-talet. Industrin hade utgjort basen för befolkningstillväxten i Helsingfors, men nu började även servicenäringarna dra alltmer folk till staden. Helsingfors yttre prägel började också förändras i en mer modernistiskt riktning. Stadens tillväxt, i genomsnitt 10 000 invånare per år, resulterade i ett behov av alltmer omfattande urban bebyggelse. Efterfrågan på bostäder var stor och moderniseringen i ropet. Också en del av urhelsingforsarna ville ut till en mer naturnära miljö” (Shulman, Pulma, Aalto, 2003 : 39). “After the war, life started again and the capital began to open to the world around (...). Starting from the Fifties, urbanization went faster and faster. Industry represented the basis of the population growth in Helsinki, but now also the service sector started to attract more and more people to the city. Helsinki’s outer character changed too in a more modernistic direction. The city growth, with an average of 10,000 inhabitants per year, resulted in the necessity of more comprehensive urban building. The housing demand was big and modernization in vogue. Also a part of the old population of Helsinki wanted to move out in an environment closer to the nature”.

relationship with Soviet Union and, at the same time, to open its market to capitalism. This special geo-economical position is underscored already at the beginning of the novel, when the author described the partnership between the company where Henrik is employed and a German law firm :

En vår ingår firma Guwenius, Rotkirch & Valentisen i Helsingfors ett samarbetsavtal med advokatbyrå Streichert & Gimpel i Hamburg. Syftet med avtalet är det vanliga: ömsesidig nytta. Streichert & Gimpel vill få inblick i eventuella legala finesser rörande Finlands särartade och omfattande handelsförbindelser med Sovietunionen. Guwenius, Rotkirch & Valentinses åldrande ägartriumvirat hoppas på mer västorienterade tider, och vill få kunskap om den affärsjuridiska praxis i Förbundsrepubliken. (Westö, 1997 : 14)⁸.

For few years, thus, Henrik travels to Hamburg and devotes his summers to work, while his wife Benita travels to the coast with their children. Henrik has become a workaholic, and spending all his time buried under bunches of papers and calculations seems to be the only solution to his sometimes uncontrollable restlessness. Years pass by, Benita gets pregnant again and the family moves away from Munskhöjden and settle down in a bigger apartment on Smedsgatan, in the center of the city. However, the Bexar will not spent too many years at the new address, because, in the meanwhile, Henrik has left the company he used to work for and has become the CEO of an important import-export Swedish enterprise. His new position requires even harder work, late evenings in the office or in hotels' lobbies to negotiate with foreign partners. "Kort därefter lämnar Henrik Bexar firma Guwenius, Rotkirch & Valentinsen. Han tar säte som verkställande direktör i ett svenskspråkigt importföretag *Med Anor* och satsar hårt och har ännu svårare än förr att hinna till Pulavesi på somrarna"⁹ (Westö, 1997 : 29). Henrik is, exactly like Kenneth's father in *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, a blurred figure always busy at work, distant and stressed, with his back constantly bent on the desk deciphering some important papers.

Men far hade under den växande arbetsbördan förvandlats till en morgonpust. När badrummet luktade vitlök och whisky, visste jag att det varit en krävande affärsförhandling kvällen innan. (...) När ha om kvällarna satt böjd över sin kalkylator och dem fint rutade, orange kalkylpapperen, var han inte heller att störa. Hans böjda rygg gav då en rynkad, talande blick. "Far jobbar", sa mor, "stör honom inte"¹⁰ (Westö, 1992 : 43).

⁸ "One spring, the company Guwenius, Rotkirch & Valentinsen in Helsinki starts a cooperation with the law firm Streichert & Gimpel in Hamburg. The Purpose of the cooperation is as usual: mutual profit. Streichert & Gimpel want to have insight in any legal niceties about the peculiar and extensive trade-relationships with Soviet Union. Guwenius, Rotkirch & Valentinsen's aging triumvirate hope instead for more west-oriented times, and want to learn about the legal business practice in the Federal Republic."

⁹ "Short after leaves Henrik Bexar Guwenius, Rotkirch and Valentinsen's company. He takes sit as CEO in an import-export Swedish-speaking company *Med anor*, works hard it's even more difficult than before for him to have time to come to Pulavesi during the summer"

¹⁰ "But under the growing workload dad had transformed into a morning whisper. When the bathroom smelled garlic and whiskey, I knew that it had been an intensive business negotiation the night before. (...) In the evening, when he sat bent over his calculator and over the beautifully squared and orange spreadsheets, he was

Also Henrik becomes more and more absorbed by his work and he is progressively drifted away from the rest of the family. When they move to Smedsgatan, the last son, Riku, is already born. The chronology of the story has rapidly moved forward and has entered the second half of the Sixties. One episode from the time spent by the Bexar on Smedsgatan has remained particularly vivid in the mind of Riku, who becomes the leading character of the story. It is a hot summer-day and he watches the workers who are laying the asphalt on the streets. The accurate description of the black mass of tar emphasizes the symbolic character of the operation: the last war scares have healed and it is time now to renovate and modernize the urban space:

Det är en sommar då det luktar starkt av het, nylagd asphalt i kvarteren kring femkanten.

Riku är ensam och sysslolös. Den första stadsförmiddagen står han nere vid Skepparegatan och ser på när asfalterna tar sig an Smedsgatan.

Han följer med allt som händer, tittar på de rödbrända männen som arbetar med sina spadar medan svetten ångar om dem, tittar på pickupbilen med förrådet av varningsskyltar och runda blå pilskyltar på flaket och en blinkande lampa där framme på taket, tittar på lastbilarna och ångvärtarna och asfaltkokaren. Fascinerad ser han den ångande, lakritsliknande massan bredas ut och plattas till och stelnar, han ser hur den tar sig framåt, hur den ibland gör ett avbrott i framryckningen för att breda ut sig lite mer – som en orm blir plattare och bredare när den svält sitt byte helt och lägger sig för att smälta det, tänker Riku – men hur den ändå obehagligt tar sig framåt, lägger under sig mer och mer av hemgatan, lik en svart mamba som målmedveten ringlar sig fram mot sitt byte.¹¹ (Westö, 1996: 52).

What seems important to notice in the passage quoted above is how the post-war reconstruction – epitomized here with the streets' asphaltting – interests in different ways the entire urban space. Also the city-centre (which was severely bombed during the last phase of World War Two) is now invaded by the asphalt, that winds around the buildings like a black snake, probably covering the more ancient cobblestones, less fit to bear the new, massive car-traffic¹².

not supposed to be disturbed. His bent back seemed to give a wrinkled, significant look. "Dad is working", mom said. "Do not disturb him".

¹¹ "It's summer and it smells strong of hot, newly-laid asphalt in the blocks around Femkanten. Riku is alone and idle. The first morning in the city center he stands on Skepparegatan and look when the asphalt-workers take care of Smedsgatan. The first He follows everything that happens, looks to the sun-burned men who work with their shovels while sweat steams around them, he looks at the pick-up with the store of warning signs and blue, round signs with an arrow on the platform and a twinkling lamp on the top of the cabin; he look at the trucks, at the steamrollers and at the asphalt kettle. Fascinated, he sees the steaming, licorice-like mass that gets spread and flattened and rigidify, he sees how it goes forward, how it sometimes makes a halt in its advance in order to widen itself a little more – like a snake gets flatter and wider when it has swollen its prey and gets down to digest it, Riku thinks– but how it inexorably advances, putting under itself more and more of his home-street, like a black mamba that purposefully winds its way towards its prey."

¹² During the post-war years, motorization broke through on the Finnish market: "1952 överskred bilbeståndet i Finland 100 000 bilarsträcke och bara sex år senare hade det redan fördubblat. Vid övergången från 1950-talet till 1960-talet fanns det nästan 90 000 bilar i Helsingfors och siffran fördubblades på knappt tio år" (Schulman,

The same summer day, moreover, Benita proposes to Henrik to make a short outing to Sweaborg, taking advantage of the lovely weather. Henrik refuses firmly, asserting that he has important papers to read: ”Ja, jag är ledsen’, säger Henrik litet irriterat, ’men jag måste jobba. Jag har viktiga papper att gå igenom. Och de bryr sig inte om vädret.” (Westö, 1996 : 54). Thus, Benita leaves him alone and goes to the old Swedish fortress together with her mother and her little son Riku. When they come back home, they find Henrik asleep on the couch, exhausted after hours of work. “Det är nästan midnatt när de kommer hem (...). Henrik ligger på soffan i vardagsrummet, fullt påklädd. I hans arbetsrum är luften tjock, på skrivbordet tornar papperen upp sig i oformliga högar. ”Såhär hårt ska man inte arbeta, det kommer bara surt av det”, säger Diddo och skakar huvudet”¹³. (Westö, 1996 : 57-58).

Nevertheless, Henrik’s hard work bears fruit. Shortly after the summer, the Bexar family is ready to move back to the same suburb where they used to live before. This time, though, they do not return to a modest flat in Munkshöjden, they move instead in an elegant townhouse on two floors and garage on the opposite side, in Munksnäs, the more refined and expensive part (that part which had been re-baptized Marracott Beach in *Melba, Mallinen och jag*). The Bexar’s *rentré* in the suburb marks the enfranchisement of the family from the law-middle-class and the advance to the upper-middle-class. The suburb of Munksnejden, with its different social segments and invisible borders, reflects thus the mobility of the Finnish society of the time, whose dynamic is tied to the economical success of its inhabitants, which, in turn, refers to the economical transformation that was going on in the whole country¹⁴. Those who were willing to work hard and able to make business could earn well and take advantage of the positive economical climate, which allowed them to live the “American dream” of a two-floor-house, a car and a TV. At the same time, Finland was climbing up the international statistics over the most dynamic economical countries, attracting investors, new thoughts and ideas (Henrik’s company has a joint-venture with Japan, for example).

Pulma, Aalto : 69). “In 1952 the car stock exceeded the limit of 100,000 cars, and only six years later it had already doubled. At the moment of transition from the Fifties to the Sixties, there were 90,000 cars in Helsinki and the digit doubled in only ten years”.

¹³ “When they get home is already midnight (...). Henrik lies asleep on the couch in the living-room, completely dressed. In his office the air is thick and on the desk papers are piled up in shapeless bunches. “So hard should no one works, only bad things come out of it”.

¹⁴ To move around the city was a very common phenomenon during those years. Statistics show that 15% of the population of Helsinki changed address only in 1962. “På basis av en specialutredning i början av 1960-talet, registrerades år 1962 35 490 interna flyttningar – egentligen flyttningheter – I vilka 71 210 personer ingick. Omkring 15% av helsingforsare bytte bostad. I den stadsdelarna där många nya bostäder blev färdiga var det interna migrationen störst.” (Turpeinen, Herranen, Hoffman : 58-59). “On the basis of a special enquiry at the beginning of the Sixties, in the year 1962 35,490 internal moves (actually moving units) were registered, in which entered 71,210 people. Around 15% of the population in Helsinki changed accommodation. In those parts of the city where many new houses were ready, the internal migration was the biggest”.

At this point, Riku becomes one of the leading characters of the story. The narration, which has been conducted so far according to an heterodiegetic scheme, shows now autodiegetic posts, where the adult Riku takes the roll of the narrator and recalls some episodes of his childhood. It is his voice that describes the apartment on Ritobergsvägen:

Hösten då jag började i tredje klass flyttade vi tillbaka till Munksnejden.
Vi bodde på Ritobergsvägen i något som redan avlägset liknade en patricierlägenhet.
Vår bostad låg i kanten av Munksnäs: bredvid oss låg Alvar Aaltos ateljé, och därefter följde skog och berg och hav.
Vårt hus var ett femtiotal radhus av den ljust optimistiska sorten.
Till varje lägenhet hörde ett eget garage: de låg i gatunivå. (...)
Men vi fick egna rum nu, Dani, Marina och jag. Och jag antar att vi faktiskt hade kommit på grön kvist redan då: vi behövde inte sälja Smedsgatan utan hyrde ut den till ett äldre par, avlägsna släktingar till Danis före detta klasskamrat Rufus Palm.
Vi hade en stålgrå Renault 19 det året. (Westö, 1996 : 58)¹⁵

The description of the apartment's exterior and its location in the fine part of the suburb reveals the success achieved by Henrik with his endless working days. During the same years, moreover, he has also managed to pass from a Ford Taunus to a more expensive Renault 19. Like in *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, cars represent a fundamental economic marker: the richer the family, the more expensive is the car. In another passage, just a few pages before, we also find a description of the interior of the apartment: "Benita sitter på fönsterplatsen, tätt invid det nya lingonbladsgröna draperiet. Han tycker det är för tungt för familjen Bexars moderna kök. Det är Henrik som velat köpa det, och det är han som velat köpa det matchande vardagsrumsdraperiet och den ockragula soffgruppen"¹⁶ (Westö, 1996 : 42). It is significant that Henrik is more eager than Benita (who comes already from a wealthy family) to furnish the house with the most modern equipment and the finest decorations. If we compare this passage with the second quotation from the novel, when Henrik was sipping gin and tonic on the balcony, we can notice how, in a few years, he has managed to achieve his goals: the "second-hand", "served-out" curtains and brown armchairs of the apartment of Munkshöjden have finally been thrown away and replaced by a new sofa and fashionable furnishings. The Bexar can also afford to have a TV (that was also on the to-buy-list of Henrik). This household appliance represents another interesting detail worth mentioning: "Han har ensam

¹⁵ "The autumn when I started the third class, we moved back to Munksnejden. We lived on Ritobergsvägen, in what already from distant looked like a patrician apartment. Our house was in the outskirts of Munksnäs, next to Alvar Aalto's atelier. After it there was forest, mountains and the sea. Our place was a townhouse from the Fifties, those of the bright, optimistic kind. To every apartment belonged a garage, laying on the ground floor. (...) But we got each of us a room now, Dani, Marina and I. And I assume that we actually were well off, because we did not need to sell Smedsgatan, but we rent it to an older couple, distant relatives of Dani's former class-mate Rufus Palm. We have a metallic grey Renault that year".

¹⁶ "Benita sits by the window seat, close by the new cranberry-leaves-green. Benita thinks it is too heavy for the modern Bexar's kitchen. It's Henrik who insisted in buying it, and it is him who wanted to buy the matching curtain of the living-room and the ochre yellow sofa".

och utan lov (...) tittat på ishockeyskamper i den svartvita Tv-n som är på väg att bli omodern: färgsändningarna har börjat samma höst, i tidningarnas programtablåer finns feta, ännu glest utspridda F.”¹⁷ (Westö, 1996 : 43). Television was one of the modern comforts that Henrik wanted for his family. What is interesting to notice is how this electronic equipment rapidly becomes obsolete: already after some time a new model, which makes automatically the previous one outdated, is available. This is probably one of the first and most relevant signs that marks the rise of consumerism in Finland. If we go back to the theory elaborated by Marshall Berman, we can consider this passage as a clear example of what he defined “the innovative self-destruction” of capitalism. In post-war western European countries, it is especially household appliances, furniture, clothes and vehicles that mostly represent the process of mass-production and consumption which stands at the bases of the new mode of capitalism. Most of the products coming out of the industries are inserted into a market-circuit that constantly aims at stimulating a new demand on a larger scale. Therefore, the objects’ durability is not longer measured according to their resistance to usage, but to the an artificial and induced obsolescence that makes the consumers believe that time has come to throw-away a certain thing and buy another – probably the same, but just more modern. Such dynamic – which is at the heart of the capitalistic industrial production – is perfectly embodied by Henrik, the Finnish self-made man, who considers his possibility to afford a more expensive car, newer household appliances and designed furniture as the most evident proof of his economical success. Henrik is, in this sense, a complete *nouveau-riche*, because he is constantly moved by the desire to show off the welfare he has achieved.

This reference to television is also interesting in another regard. It implicitly indicates the year when the narration takes place, that is to say in 1969, when color-broadcasting first appeared on Finnish TV-screens. This is a technique that Westö already used in *Melba*, *Mallinen och jag* and that becomes an hallmark of *Drakarna över Helsingfors*. Seldom in the novel we are given the exact date when a certain event happens; instead, a long chain of socio-cultural markers tacitly inform the reader about the year or the period at issue. This does not make the chronotope approximate or imprecise (maybe sometimes only slightly difficult to understand for the not-Finnish readers); on the contrary, such stylistic device makes it more realistic, because it enables the narration to recreate in a more effective way the socio-economical atmosphere of the time. As we are told at the beginning, most of the novel is a

¹⁷ “Lonely and without permission, he has watched hockey fights on the black and white TV, which is on the verge of becoming outdated: the same autumn color broadcasts have started, on the newspapers’ TV-schedule there are thick, still sparsely scattered F”.

long, labyrinthine flash-back about a family's history that proceeds in the aftermath of the country's history, and all these details create a frame of references that works as a compass for the readers¹⁸.

After the Bexar move back to Munksnejden, the narration is frequently taken up by Riku, which recalls his childhood in the Swedish yard of the suburb. Some things openly reminds of *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, for example the character of Roland, named Råttis (Rat), an adolescent who scares the other kids of the suburb and humiliates them by forcing them to get down on their knees and beg for mercy. Roland is another Melba or another Killeri (the two bullies of the previous short novel), as much as Sammy Ceder, one of the best-friends of Riku, resembles Mallinen. However, if the tale from Marracott Hill and Marracott Beach was mostly centered on the problem of the national-linguistic identity and only partly on the analysis of the social environment, in *Drakarna över Helsingfors* we find a reverse situation. The language-problem is dimmed, whereas the social belonging and the question of class is highlighted. Also Riku's and his sister Marina's friends grow up in middle-class families that work hard to reach a better social position. Kati, a class-mate of Marina, is the daughter of a famous lawyer who works almost every day until late, while her mother (like Benita) takes care of the big apartment they live in: "Katis far, stjärnjuristen Kari Wiherkaisla-Asp, jobbade långa dagar och reste mycket. Mamman Barbro fanns gömd någonstans i den väldiga lägenhetens två övre våningar"¹⁹ (Westö, 1996 : 140). Also the Åström family follows the same pattern, so that the father's career advancement coincides with the purchase of a new house and, of course, of a new car: "Först följer familjen Åströms Bexarnas exempel. Robbis pappa har blivit avdelningschef. De har en ny bil, en vit Saab 99:a, och flyttar över Tarvobron och nere till Rievägen"²⁰ (Westö, 1996 : 149).

Henrik's race to the economical success is not over yet. The Holzinger company he works for makes excellent business with Japan and the United States and time is ripe for a new move. The Bexar finally complete their wandering through the city's suburbs and buy a

¹⁸ Like Korström suggests in her review, the perception of time in Westö's novel mostly depends on this group of details referring to the past, which works like Proust's *madeleines*. "The infinite number of memory markers in Westö's book serve as Proustian *madeleines* both for its characters and for the reader" (Korström, 1997 : 83). The evocative power of small, everyday-life objects and situations in the novel is unquestionable. However, it is also important to emphasize that Westö's concern is to recreate a solid bases to make the past perceptible, and not to nullify the perception of time.

¹⁹ "Kati's father, the famous lawyer Kari Wiherkaisla-Asp, had very long working-days and traveled a lot. Her mother, Barbro, was hidden somewhere in the huge apartment two floors above".

²⁰ "First, the Åström family follows the Bexar's example. Robbi's dad had become the head of the department. They have a new car, a Saab 99:a, and they move over the Tarvo bridge down to Rievägen".

new house with sea view on Strandstigen, equipped with design kitchen and private sauna. The house is only few hundred meters from the previous address, but much farther in terms of social prestige:

Holzingerföretagets japanska hemelektronik säljer allt bättre.
Den har sina konsekvenser: hösten då Marc Bolan kör ihjäl sig flyttar Bexars från
Ritobergsvägen till Strandstigen.
Det handlar om en halv kilometer.
Men det är en längre väg än så.
(Westö, 1996 : 146)²¹

Henrik has fulfilled his bourgeois “American” dream, although the price to pay has been very high. Henrik has managed to purchase a big house for himself and his family, but he is seldom able to enjoy it, because he is always busy at work or travelling somewhere to meet new costumers and business-planners. And it is also between the walls of the house in Munknäs that his marriage with Benita falls apart and his relationship with his first son Daniel is irreparably compromised. Already when they lived on Smedsgatan, Benita was often worried about Henrik’s exhaustive working rhythm. When the family moves to Munksnäs, she also begins to show signs of depression. She spends entire afternoons sitting in the well-equipped kitchen without doing anything, until Riku, coming back home from school, reminds her that it was almost time to have dinner.

Kjell Westö briefly described the story of his family at the beginning of the essay *Har aldrig hittat hem* (2009), emphasizing his socially split background, “tudelad bakgrund” (Westö, 2009 : 234). Like Benita, his mother came from a conservative, well-off family from Tammerfors, whereas his father was raised in a more proletarian environment near Jakobstad. The difference between the two families, however, changed during the post-war years. Westö’s father made a rapid and brilliant career as a business-man (something that drifted him away from his social origin), while Benita’s family “upper-class” status started to wither: “Dels hade min far gjort en snabb klassresa och var mån om stil och elegans, något som ibland gjorde hans och hans äldre släktingars umgänge lite förläget. Dels hade Tammerforsläkten övremedelklass-lackering tydliga repor”²² (Westö, 2009 : 234). Nevertheless, it is not in the family tree that Westö became aware of the concept of class. That the society we live in is still characterized by a class fragmentation appeared to him with clarity when his family (exactly like in the novel) left Munkshöjden and moved to Munksnäs.

²¹ “The Japanese home electronics of the Holzinger’s company sell more and more. This has its consequences: the autumn when Marc Bolan run himself to death, the Bexar move from Ritobergsvägen to Strandstigen. It is only a matter of half kilometer. But it is a longer way than that.”

²² “Partly my father had done a quick class advancement and care about style and elegance, something that sometimes made the intercourse with his older relatives a bit embarrassed. Partly, my the over-class painting of my Tammerfors’ relatives showed evident scratches”.

To live on a certain street meant to belong to a certain class. Even if borders were not evident, an address could tell more about a person's income, job and education than anything else. Again, like in *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, we can see how Westö is able to depict the subtly normative nature of another construction, namely the social classes. If, in the previous novel, he tried to deconstruct the national/linguistic discourse, showing how its normative structure forced the subject to adhere to a certain group (unless he or she wanted to pay the price of exclusion), now Westö copes with another social dynamic, which stems however from the same concept of norm. To live in a certain part of the city, on a certain street in the suburb, to drive a certain car, to live in a certain house means to belong to a certain class. This correspondence opens invisible gaps in the urban net that, if not necessarily leads to conflict, nevertheless creates a breeding ground for self-isolation. It is therefore not surprising that, except at the beginning, most of the events in *Drakarna över Helsingfors* are set within the small circle of the middle- and upper-middle-class of Munksnäs. Once the family of Rickard moves in the posh part of the suburb, its contact with the former past is almost completely broken down. Like Westö wrote in a another passage of *Har aldrig hittat hem*, during the Seventies there was an intimate correspondence between an address and what kind of social position the people who lived there was supposed to have.

Det var en väldig skillnad mellan att bo på Strandstigen eller Tegelbacken och att bo på en sidogata bakom Hoplaksvägen. För att inte tala om skillnaden mellan att bo på Strandstigen och att bo i ett höghus på Ulfsvägen uppe i höjden. Jag utgick därför, på barns rättframma sätt, från att jag fick stryk av Risto och de andra svenskhatarna för min familj hade kommit upp sig, blivit rikare, blivit *bättre folk*. (Westö, 2009 : 237).

Thus, the question of the class belonging basically re-proposes the same normative structure of the language-problem. To belong to the upper-middle class brings along a set of denotations that pretend to define a singular individual and to place him/her in a certain category. And, like in the case of a minority language which is given an "official" character, also those who achieved a better social position seem not aware that they tacitly accept to play with the same rules that used to exclude them before. This is evident in the case of Henrik, who has a poor background. One day, when he already lives in the big house of Strandstigen, he receives the visit of an old friend from Skrottoms, Jarl Danielsson. "Jalle" lives in Sweden, he is a "missförstådd målare" (misunderstood painter, Westö, 1996 : 167) who has not gone so up in the social scale like Henrik. Jarl walks around the house, looks at the designed kitchen and at the expensive paintings on the walls and cannot help but whistle at the old friend's welfare. It seems evident that the guys from Skrottoms have followed different roads:

they both had taken part to the general strike in 1956, side by side. Jarl has somehow remained the same, he is still “Jalle bilvältare” (Jalle the “car-turner”) whereas Henrik has become a petit bourgeois. The conversation between them is kind but stunted and, when the old friend finally leaves, Riku notices that his father is restless and uneasy: “Det blir inte mycket mera sedan; uppbrottet blir ganska brådstörtat. När gästen gått, känner sig Henrik rastlös och olustig. Han vankar omkring i lägenheten, sätter på skivan igen, sätter sig på balkongen, tittar ut över the spegelblanka Bredviken”²³ (Westö, 1996 : 168).

The American dream of Strandstigen, though, is short-lived. Dani, the first son, leaves from home very soon, after an adolescence marked by an irresolvable conflict with his father. His rebellious temper, his impatience with the rules and his ever more frequent escaping in artificial paradises, makes him a good symbol for the entire decade. Also in Finland, the Seventies were the hippie-years, the epoch of free love, of communalism, of the refuse of the bourgeois values and traditions (the reference to Marc Bolan, the father of the Glam Rock who died in a car accident in 1977, results particularly coherent in this regard). Dani and Henrik will meet each other only once again, many years after. Marina, the daughter, begins to study at the university, whereas Riku, as soon as he finished the high-school, starts working in a record-shop.

The same summer after the kids have left home, Henrik and Benita decide to divorce. One day Henrik invites Marina and Rickard (the older son has disappeared breaking all contacts with the family) for lunch and explains them what has happened:

“Henrik hade ledsna ögon och var mycket alvarlig, och när vi kommit fram till tränärsparfaiten harklade han sig och sa: “Det är nu tyvärr så att Bitta och jag ...”
”Sen när ...” frågade jag och tänkte att jag borde ha förstått det. (...)
”Sedan förra vecka”, sa Henrik. ”Jag hoppas att ni ... att i sinom tid ska förstå”.
Lite senare satt vi i hans mörkblå BMW, det var en vacker sensommareftermiddag”²⁴ (Westö, 1996 : 188).

Short after, both the house on Strandstigen and the property on Smedsgatan are sold. Benita leaves Helsinki and moves back to Tammerfors, whereas Henrik buys a four-room-apartment on Kaptensgatan. The long-desired, comfortable life in the exclusive part of the suburb have disappeared within a short time (if it ever been there, considering the depressive problems of Benita and the violent conflict between father and son). This episode marks the

²³ ”There is not so much more to say; the breakup is rather hastily. When the guest has left, Henrik feels restless and uneasy. He wanders around the apartment, put on the record again, sits on the balcony and looks over the glassy Bredviken”.

²⁴ “Henrik has sad eyes and was very serious, and when we came to the cranberries parfait he cleared his throat and said: “It’s that unfortunately Bitta and I ...” “Since when ...”, I asked and I thought that I should have understood it. (...). “Since last week”, Henrik said. “I hope that you ... that you in due course will understand it”.

end of the first part of the novel, which coincides with the end of the bourgeoisie dream of Henrik. Riku, who is the narrator of the final scene, completes his tale with a quotation that he has found on the magazine *Rolling Stones*, unaware of its origin: “All that is solid melts into air” (Westö, 1996 : 190).

Of course this reference to Marx brings us back again to the theory of the innovative self-destruction developed by Marshall Berman in his book about modernity. In his analysis of *Faust*, Berman suggested that it was possible to detect three different stages in the evolution of Goethe’s character: the lover, the dreamer and the developer (Berman, 1983 : 37-86). In his final transformation, “(Faust) connects his personal drives with the economic, political and social forces that drive the world; he learns to build and destroy. He expands the horizon of his being from private to public life, from intimacy to activism, from communication to organization” (Berman, 1983 : 61). When Faust creates his new, laborious community, he finds an obstacle in an old couple, Philomen and Bauchis, who tries to resist to the modern evolution. Faust gets rid of them, although he regrets almost immediately what he has done, and suddenly understands that, now that his work has been accomplished, he is himself an obstacle destined to be removed. According to Berman, this episode exemplifies the ironic tragedy of capitalism, which initially liberate a spring of positive energy and important progresses, but then gives way to a relentless mechanism that does not admit exceptions and that is based on a constant replacement of what has been created with something newer, in a process of more and more rapid fragmentation and tearing down, which ultimate involve the capitalist dynamic itself. It seems clear that the first part of *Drakarna över Helsingfors* describes the affirmation of capitalism in Finland during the second half of the Twentieth century. Fuelled by the post-war reconstruction, capitalism and industrial production (which had shyly started at the beginning of the century) fully bloom, with an incredible liberation of social energies as much as material improvements. Henrik undergoes somehow the same transformation of Faust. His dynamism is initially motivated by the desire of a better life, to be a part of the optimistic spirit that animates his nation after the war and that aims at achieving a collective progress and a better standard of living. Gradually, though, he gets more and more sucked up in his race to make business and more money. This process, epitomized by the purchase of new, bigger houses and more expensive cars, reflects a general situation in the entire country. Finland has rapidly moved from the post-war reconstruction to a golden age of creation and welfare, which however contained already in itself a nucleus of

self-destruction, because what had been achieved had to be replaced again, as soon as possible and possibly with a higher economical profit.

It is important to notice that the dissolution of the idyll of the suburb, Henrik's wake-up from the bourgeois dream, do not yet represent the final step that sweeps away the form of economical growth that he stands for. Henrik is still active (he had just bought a new, expensive BMW and gets together with another woman, Sari), but soon his place will be taken by the new generation that will ultimately accomplish the work.

In the second part of the novel the narration is entirely conducted by his daughter Marina, which addresses herself directly to her younger brother Riku, as if she was writing a long letter to him. Through her tale, then, we also learn more about the young Riku's story after leaving Munksnäs and starting to work in a shop. Already in the previous part Riku had been presented as a boy often afflicted by a sense of confusion and bewilderment. During his childhood and early youth, at the time of Munksnejden, he used to spend the time in the Swedish yard with Robbi Åström and Sammy Ceder, with whom he formed a sort of triumvirate. However, already when Riku's family had moved to Munksnäs, he had started to notice how he lacked the boldness and self-confidence of the first and the cunning of the other. Now that he has grown up, Riku also feels uncomfortable with the hippie behavior of his older brother Dani as much as with his father's ostentatious bourgeois life-style, and takes shelter from the chaos and loneliness of his late-teenage anxiety in music and alcohol. His personal crisis is thus rooted in a social and cultural situation and bears clear autobiographical traces. Westö himself, in *Har aldrig hittat hem*, commented his relationship with the suburb of Munksnäs as follows:

Jag blev aldrig riktigt du med livet i Munksnäs. I något skede, jag vet inte när, fastnade ett tag, letade sig djup in i köttet och belv kvar. Men kan skönja taggen i en av mina romaner, *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, som delvis utspelar sig i Munksnäs. Ibland får jag kritik för detta av Munksnäsbor, både tidigare och närvarande. (...) Taggen har förstås med klass att göra. Så mycket vet jag, och jag visst det redan när jag skrev *Drakarna över Helsingfors* som 34-årig. Men som tonårig visste jag det inte. Då kände jag mig bara förvirrad och olycklig, var utsatt för krafterna jag inte hade resurser att inringa och förstå²⁵. (Westö, 2009 : 239).

Riku, exactly like Westö when he was younger, feels "nowhere at home", as the title of the essay suggests. This feeling of "exclusion" was also recurrent in Westö's previous works,

²⁵ "I never got used to the life in Munksnäs. At some point, I don't know when, a thorn got trapped, found its way deeply in my flesh and stayed there. You can discern the thorn in one of my novels, *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, which is partly set in Munksnejden. Sometimes I get criticized for that by the people living in Munksnäs. (...) Of course the thorn has to do with class. So much I know, and I knew it already when I wrote *Drakarna över Helsingfors* as a 34-year-old. But as a teen-ager, I didn't know that. Then I just felt confused and unhappy, I was exposed to strengths I had no resources to encircle and understand."

both as a poet and as a journalist. Riku's contrasted personality strongly resembles that of the characters that the writer described in his poems from the Eighties. In the same way, his uneasiness about the dominant cultural and sub-cultural ways of thinking reminds of the author's equidistant and equally critic position both towards the radical left and the fashionable "alternative" movements as much as towards conservatism, like he had expressed in his contribution to *Rockad* and in some of his articles for *KLO*. If the young Riku represents the confused and bewildered side of the author, it is also true that Westö infuses some of his rationality and critical thinking into another character, Larsko Casell. One episode results particularly interesting in this regard: Larsko, Riku and Marina are sitting at a table in an underground club in Helsinki. Marina has followed her friend Niki, but feels uncomfortable in the gloomy atmosphere of the gothic club, where most of the people are dressed in leather, have make-up and take drugs. It is the beginning of 1982 because, shortly before, we got to know that John Lennon has been dead for more than one year and that the first subway-line has opened its gates in Helsinki. Larsko explains to them what he thinks about the supposed alternativeness of the place where they are:

"Vill ni höra min teori om nödvändigheten av att protestera mot protesten?", sa Larsko Casell sedan plötsligt och överraskande ivrigt.

"Förlåt?" sa du och jag med en mun.

"Det är ju så", sa Larsko och gjorde en svepande gest ovanför sitt huvudet, "att de där däroppe inbillar sig att dem håller på med någonting viktigt. Dem tror att de protesterar mot nånting som är förkljudet och fel."

"Precis", sa du, "Och vad är det för fel med det? Man ska ge fingret åt konventionerna när man är ung och ... ja, när man är äldre också förresten, hela livet. Det är viktigt!"

Lasko Casell skakade på huvudet åt ditt inpass.

"Det är så att det är slut ser du. Det är slut alltihop. Dom följer bara en mall dem där, en gammal modell för hur man ska bete sig. Och att dom ser så groteska ut och att deras musik låter så jävligt beror på att det runnit mycket vattnet under broarna sen Jimmy Deans och Zimmermanns dagar, det krävs hårdare bud hela tiden. Men poängen är att ingen längre vet varför den gör saker. (...) Jag menar, det här med att protestera mot stagnerade livsformer är inget annat än en schablon. För om du tänker efter, vad är mer stagnerat efter dem senaste tjugo åren än att supa, trycka i sig knark och ligga med människor man inte känner?"²⁶ (Westö, 1996 : 231).

²⁶ "Do you wanna hear my theory about the necessity to protest against protest?" Larsko Casell said suddenly and surprisingly enthusiastic. "Excuse me?" me and you said with the same voice. "That's how it is", Larsko said, making a sweeping movement over his head, "it's that those up there convince themselves that they are doing something important. They think they protest against something that is insincere and wrong". "Exactly", you said, "And what's wrong with it? You should show the finger when you are young and ... well, also when you are old, by the way, the whole life. It is important!" Larsko Casell shacked his head at your commentary. "The thing is that is it over, don't you see? It's over, everything. They just follow a model those people, an old model about how you should behave. And the fact that they look so grotesque and that their music sounds so fucking bad depends on that much water has flown under the bridges since Jimmy Dean's and Zimmermann's days, stronger bids are required. But the point is that no one knows *why* they do things. (...) I mean, this of protesting against stagnating life-styles is nothing but clichés. Because, if you think about it, what is most stagnating than binging, filling yourself with drugs and getting laid with someone you don't know after the last twenty years?"

Larsko Casell's words expressed the same feeling of dissatisfaction that Westö has described in his articles just a few years before. Many "alternative" movements of the second half of the Seventies and the early Eighties were only later followers of the original hippie-movement, which arose in the Sixties and tried to oppose, among other things, the rising materialism of the time. Quickly, though, these movements lost their challenging power and turned themselves into a new "norm", with its consequent conformism, clichés and stereotypes. Like Jyrki Kiiskinen notices in her review of *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, one of major qualities of the book is its ability to illuminate the social and economical dynamics that have characterized the Finnish society in the decades after the war (although the discourse could be easily extended to all the post-war European western countries): "The story is familiar: the hippie movement arose in reaction to the materialism of the 1960s followed by, in the 1970s, leftism. Later a strong market spirit arose from the roots of youth communism, and partially from within it, and society was divided into winner and losers." (Kiiskinen, 1996 : 218). As we tried to explain about the language-identity discourse in *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, the acknowledgment of minorities and of the "official character" is a double-edge weapon that turns into a system for the central power to make the challengers visible and recognizable and to neutralize as much as possible their destabilizing messages. It would be wrong, of course, to accuse the challenging instances of weakness or naiveté, as if they were not able to scratch the norm if not superficially or let themselves be domesticated. On the other hand, for these instances to be really effective, it is required a constant effort (significantly Larsko Casell speaks about "starkare bud", stronger messages) that goes further than conquering a little space, inside of which to replicate the same dynamics, and masochistically inflicting a self-ghettization. As in the case of nationalism, also the social hierarchy and other social constructions follow the same pattern. It is not sufficient to create a counter-norm; what is really important is to challenge the essentially imposing nature of the existing norm and try to change it from within, bringing inside it new thoughts and ideas, and not to search for the acknowledgment of a perpetual diversity, which means nothing, from the side of the existing norm, but a ill-concealed toleration. Alternativeness at any cost brings to a dead end.

In *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, this is evident in the relationship between Henrik and the first son Dani, the latter epitomizing the hippie-movement that initially contrasts the petit bourgeois mentality spreading over the country. Dani reads *Howl* and the American beat generation, listens to Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, plays *Abbey Road* and *Strange days* for Riku. He disparages his father's fixation with money and moves away from his family before

turning eighteen. His protest against the "Munksnäs's lifestyle", however, fades rapidly away, overshadowed by his drug-abuses, following to the bitter end the degeneration of the "alternative" movements described by Larsko Casell. If Dani's tragic destiny symbolizes that of a generation that was not able to translate its uneasiness towards the bourgeois society into a real change of the status quo, so the *finansvalpar*, the finance's whiz-kids, stand as the radicalization of the greediest capitalistic mentality. This role is played by the ex- kids of Munksnäs, Robert Åström, Benno and Sammy Ceder, and Marina's boyfriend and future husband Rufus. Also Rickard, though with a more marginal position, takes part in their economic adventure. Thanks to a property inherited from a rich uncle, Sammy Ceder goes to the United States to study economy, and there he rapidly absorbs the ideas of the American New-liberalism: "Sammy hade realiserat sin del av arvet och sedan ansökt om, och fått studieplats vid ett universitet i Illinois, han skulle studera ekonomi och marknadsföring där"²⁷ (Westö, 1996 : 247). When he comes back to Finland, in the early Eighties, he opens a company with his brother, and first invests in the media sector. The epos of the finance's whiz-kids represents the final part of Marina's tale. The narrator's voice, thus, belongs to her:

Sammy och Ufa var inte närmare bekanta, men genom sin vänskap med Benno kom Ufa att dras med I brödernas project från första början. Holdinbolagen – eller ett av dem, Cederco – grundades redan då, och Ufa gick med I den lilla styrelsen. Den bestod av Sammy, Benno, Katis Wiherkaisla, Robert Åström och Ufa. Senare var ju också du med på ett horn, även om jag aldrig fick klart för mig om du var ordinarie eller bara suppleant.²⁸ (Westö, 1996 : 283).

The real bulk of the company is composed by the brothers Ceder and Robert Åström, who is re-baptized by the press "finansgeni", financial genius (he also works in the powerful Holzinger Group, where he takes care of the company portfolio). Soon, the Cederco expands and becomes the CePaMedia Transnational. The young economy-experts buy magazines, open the radio-channel Bright Light Radio, and build a futuristic headquarter in the district of Vanda. Ufa, who is an art expert and so far has worked in a museum, is bewitched by the ability to do business of the young brothers, who also sponsor the art gallery that he has always dreamt about²⁹. Through him, Marina tries to understand how it has been possible, for

²⁷ "Sammy had settled his part of the heritage and then applied and obtained a place at one university in Illinois, he would study economy and marketing there".

²⁸ "Sammy and Ufa were not close friends, but through his friendship with Benno, Ufa got involved in the brother's project right from the beginning. The holding company – or rather one of them, the Cederco – was funded already at that time, and Ufa became a member of the little board. It was constituted by Sammy, Benno, Katis Wiherkaisla, Robert Åstöm and Ufa. Later you also got in, by the side, even though I never really understood if you were a permanent member or only a substitute".

²⁹ Interestingly, Marina emphasizes how Ufa changes under the influence of the Ceder brothers. Before meeting them, Ufa was a staunch supporter of Pierre Bourdieu's theory about art in modern times, that he had introduced in the Finnish intelligentsia. As soon as he makes money with his gallery, he rejects the neo-marxist theorist and embrace the *comme-il-faut* attitude of postmodernism.

two young men without capital, to build a media-empire in such a short time. Thus, she understands that Benno and Sammy Ceder take advantage of the current deregulation of the financial market, and drive a politics of speculation which is based on an endlessly expanding market and constantly rising consumer growth. Sammy Ceder creates a net of diversified investment companies, each of them speculating on a different sector: “När du började på Radio Bright Lights var Sammy Ceders affären redan så invecklade och mångskiftande att ingen annan, inte ens Benno, begrep sig på dem”³⁰.

Differently from her boyfriend and her brother, Marina seems to be one of the few who is able to notice the deception, the blunder of the Casino economy’s golden reflection. Unfortunately, though, the whole country seems to be charmed by the possibilities that the new market opens up. Suddenly Helsinki becomes the glittering and tawdry interior of the Hotell Intet described by Westö in *Tango Orange*. “Alla talade om den nya friheten, och om sig själva. Varorna var dyrbara, farten var hög. En ny och ljus era stod för dörren. Men ljuset var för vasst. Jag kände mig ihåligt, livet hade blivit tunt. Jag började söka mig bort”³¹ (Westö, 1996 : 297). It is very significant, considering the discourse developed by Marshall Berman about Faust, to notice that another character who understands almost immediately the Achilles’ heel of the brothers’ economical system, is Henrik. When he realizes how the CePaMedia works, he expresses a deep skepticism about the possibility for it to last:

Han är både begåvad och skicklig, den där Åström. Det erkänner jag. Men han bygger på lösan sand. Han har för bråttom. Det har ni förstås allihop. För det här uppsvinget har ingen sund bas. Det bygger mera på psykologiska förväntningar än på ekonomiska realiteter. Ett enda felsteg, och hela slottet rasar ihop. Och det hemska är att det inte ens behövs några felsteg. Ni kan göra allt rätt men ändå förlora. Det enda som behövs är att de allra försiktigaste blir skrämde och slutar köpa, börjar sälja ut³². (Westö, 1996 : 305)

Henrik, raised in the old school of post-war capitalism, understands that a new economic model is rapidly replacing the one he has been following during his life. It is his turn, now, to be out-of-date. Shortly after, the board of the Holzinger Group invites him to resign from his post, which is to be taken by one of the young financial whiz-kids. Henrik perfectly embodies the self-innovative destruction of capitalism, which finally has to

³⁰ “When you started at Radio Bright Lights, Sammy Ceder’s business was already so intricate and diverse that not even Benno was able to grasp on them”.

³¹ “Everybody talked about the new freedom, and about themselves. Goods were expensive, speed was high. A new and bright era was at the door. But the light was too sharp. I felt empty, life had become thin. I started to look away”.

³² “He is both talented and smart, that Ceder, that I can admit. But he builds on sand. He is too much in a hurry. Like all of you, by the way. Because this upsurge is based on no solid base. It is built more on psychological expectations than economic realities. One single mistake, and the whole castle tumbles down. And the terrible thing is that you do not even need to make any mistake. You can do everything correctly and still lose. The only thing which is needed is that all the most cautious get scared and stop buying, and start sell again”.

eliminate itself to give way to something else. Nevertheless, like Henrik predicted, the house of cards erected by the financial whiz-kids was entirely based on a bet, on the premises that the market would never stop growing, that the consumers' trust (still today one of the most important indexes of the financial sector) would never decrease, that the cash-flow would never run dry. As soon as investors become more cautious and stop buying, a contraction of the market opens an immense crater under the shining façade of the CePaMedia.

Robbi Åström is the first victim of the Casino Economy debacle. After a desperate attempt to hide away the huge debts accumulated during the years and shrewdly hidden in the Chinese box in the galaxy of companies, Robbi tries to leave the country with a briefcase full of money.

Några månader senare är Robbi Åströms lopp kört.
Bakgrunden är nästan genant enkel.
Hans eget bolag har hamnat i kris flera år tidigare, efter en serie katastrofala aktieköp. (...)
Därefter har han försökt täcka förlusterna med valutaspekulationer, men haft otur även där.
Och sedan har han gjort ett katastrofala misstag, ett som vännen och förebilden Sammy aldrig skulle ha gjort: Robbi har underlåtit eller helt enkelt glömt bort att terminera sina valutalån, trots ryktena redan tidigt vetat berätta om den förestående devalveringen.³³ (Westö, 1996 : 347-348).

At the security control of the airport, Robbi is stopped by the police and arrested. The brothers Ceder manage to flee the country: Benno settles down probably in Switzerland, whereas Sammy moves with his family to Malaga, in southern Spain. Riku and Ufa, instead, have been careful enough to draw back before the collapse. For them, like for the rest of the country, very little remains of the short golden age of the Casino Economy. In the final part of the novel, Riku wanders with his little son Raymond through the area of Råberga, where the brothers Ceder had built their headquarter:

Där i Råberga syntes spåren av det som hänt så skrämmande tydligt. Cederbyggnaden stod tom och öde. Jag såg inga rullgardiner, Jag skymtade inga krukväxter på fönsterbräda eller tavlor på väggen. Fönstern gapade svarta och tomma, inget tydde på att byggnaden var i bruk.
Bottenvåningen hade tillhört bolaget som skött golfbanan och det spanska hotellprojektet. Nu var Cederco Leisures fönster prydda med slarvigt upptejpade pappskivor. På skivorna hade någon med grov tusch och spretig handstil textat VUOKRATAAN – UTHYRES. KUNTA – KOMMUNEN. (Westö, 1996 : 358)

³³ “Few months later is Robbi Åström’s race is over. The background is almost embarrassingly easy. His own company has been in crisis for some years, after a series of catastrophic share purchases. (...) Then he has tried to cover the losses with currency speculation, but was not lucky even there. And then he has done a catastrophic mistake, one that his friend and model Sammy would never have done: Robbi has failed or simply forgotten to terminate foreign currency loans, despite rumors already before have told about the imminent devaluation”.

The new capitalistic mode, based on refined financial operation and stock-exchange speculation, rapidly sweeps away what had been created during the post-war decades, but it fades away as fast, leaving behind itself nothing but a pile of rubble, a scar on the urban tissue that would require years to heal completely. The epos of the Bexar family, of the financial whiz-kids, of the stubborn, eternal hippies has a sad ending, which does not seem surprising, considering that the novel covers fifty years of social and economic changes of Finnish history, from the enthusiasm of the post-war reconstruction until the sad and poor atmosphere of the lame years of the Nineties.

PARAGRAPH TWO

GOODBYE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: *VÅDAN AV ATT VARA SKRAKE*.

In autumn 2000 Kjell Westö published his second novel, *Vådan av att vara Skrake* (The danger of being a Skrake). This date does not seem to be simply a coincidence: the writer composes another epic tale, that brings him for the first time in the past, until the years of the Finnish civil war, expanding his investigation in the invisible palimpsest of Helsinki over the century which has just come to an end. Compared to *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, which began straight after the Second World War, *Vådan av att vara Skrake* thus presents a wider historical perspective. The narrative line, as in the previous work, does not follow a precise chronological order, but intersects loosely with the temporal axis through the use of flashbacks. On the other hand, whereas in *Drakarna över Helsingfors* the narration was fragmented in a chorus of different voices, here the entire plot is developed within an intradiegetic frame, where the narrator of the story is also one of the characters. The novel has the typical Chinese-box structure of the tale within the tale. In the opening chapter, in fact, we meet Wiktor Skrake, a free-lance journalist and copywriter around forty, who comes back to the house where he has grown up in, in the suburb of Råberga. Here, sitting at a desk in front of the panoramic window of the living-room, he begins to write the story of his family, and especially of his father Werner and his grandfather Bruno. *Vådan av att vara Skrake* is thus another Finnish-Swedish urban epos that unfolds on the streets of Helsinki, mapping out the intimate correspondence between a place and its social, historical and cultural meanings. Like Ola Larsmo noticed in his review of the novel on *Dagens Nyheter*:

Finns här en huvudperson är det staden Helsingfors. Det är på det planet ”Vådan ...” är en verklig djärv roman, som vågar inkorporera allt. Liklukten från döda röda fångar på Sveaborg sommaren 1918. Tjugotalets punschkapitalism. Funkisarkitekturens ankomst. Rockmusiken. Den moderna pedagogiken. Det blir en kannibalistiskt trerättsmiddag, serverad med underskruvad, melankoliskt ironisk stil³⁴.
(Larsmo, 2001 : 26).

Again Westö enters the invisible palimpsest of his home city, but goes much further in his investigation, crossing the line of his personal memories (which basically had represented so far his time-limit, although some smaller episodes of *Drakarna över Helsingfors* already took

³⁴ “If there is a protagonist, then this is the city of Helsinki. It is on this level that “Vådan...” is a really audacious novel, that dares to incorporate everything. The smell of corpses of the dead reds imprisoned in Sveaborg during the summer of 1918, the Twenty’s punch capitalism, the arrival of functionalistic architecture, rock music, the modern pedagogy. It becomes a cannibalistic three-course dinner, served with a mild, melancholically ironic style”.

place a few years before his birth) and thus moving from an autobiographical into an historical dimension. Nevertheless, the most consistent part of the novel is set between the Fifties and the end of the century, with a special emphasis on the years between 1952 and 1970. Coherently with the purpose of my research, I will focus especially on these parts of the novel, emphasizing at the same time how the historical flashbacks represent an interesting anticipation of the following novel *Där vi en gång gått*, which is entirely set in the first half of the century.

Wiktor's narration begins – faithful to the ancient epic tradition – in *medias res*, in 1952, almost a decade before his birth. Wiktor's father, Werner, was at that time a young university student, belonging to a well-off bourgeois family in Helsingfors. The Skrake, though, came originally from Tobakstaden, the “tobacco city”, that is to say Tammerfors. The founder of the dynasty, Bruno Waldemar Skrake, had been sent to the capital at the beginning of the century to work in an uncle's workshop. Already before the Twenties, however, he had started to study economy and, in 1929, the year of Wall Street crack, he had already managed to become an established and respected self-made business-man: “Hans affärsbegåvning hade visat sig tidigt. Han gjorde lönande tomt- och valutaaffärer genast efter inbörderkriget, då han ännu var en spoling som läste vid Svenska Handelsinstitutet. Under tjugotalet sysslade han med textilimport och hade en affär för damkonfektion på Mikaelsgatan tillsammans med sin vän och studentkamrat Eric Widing”³⁵ (Westö, 2000 : 34). By marrying Maggie Enerot, daughter of a famous architect and professor at the polytechnic, Bruno had accomplished his mission to become a member of the high bourgeoisie of the newly independent Finland. After the Second World War Werner, the scion of the family, is sent to Cleveland to study law. With deep regret of Bruno, though, Werner deserts his courses at the university and spends more and more time listening to black music. Once he is informed about his son's *follies*, Bruno calls him back again to Helsinki. In the late spring of 1952, then, Werner leaves the United States and returns home. By coincidence, he lands at Malm's airport together with Geoffry Mulchay, a manager of the Coca-Cola company, who has been sent to Finland to organize the launch of the famous soft-drink in the country on the occasion of the Olympic Games. Werner, who works for the Finnish company in charge to cooperate with Mulchay, is present with a delegation at the airport and signals to his son to go home and not to disturb him.

³⁵ “His talent for business had emerged soon. He did rewarding land- and financial business immediately after the civil war, when he was still a whippersnapper who studied at the Swedish Institute of economy. During the Twenties, he worked with textile-import and had a shop for women's wear on Mikaelsgatan together with his friend and student-companion Eric Widing.”

As mentioned in chapter II, 1952 was a glorious year in modern Finnish history. Not only Helsinki hosted the XV Olympiad, but also the last war-debts were finally paid-off: trains and ferries loaded with goods destined to Soviet Union crossed the eastern borders for the last time, sanctioning the end of the foreign yoke on the country's economy. Moreover, the election of Armi Kuusela to Miss Universe added a touch of splendor to the new and optimistic epoch. Wiktor describes with precision the chronotope where his narration starts: Helsinki in June 1952.

Ifall ni som laser det här är finländare vet ni också vilket år vi befinner oss i. Det är det härliga Femtiotvå, ett magiskt år, ett år som snart skall förvandlas till en myt. De sista tågen med krigsskadeståndsleveranser till Sovjetunionen lämnar järnvägstationerna och tuffar iväg mot östgränsen anförda av stolt bolmande lok. De sista fartygen fullastade med tunga maskiner och trävaror lämnar hamnarna i Åbo, Helsingfors och Kotka och tar sikte på Leningrad, och samtidigt lämnar resterna av Sjdanov kontrollkommissionen Tornio och Socis och Kämp och de andra centrumhotellen och deras barer. Olympiastadions utsida och Stadionsornamentet är nybestrukna i vitt, i Kottby och Osnäs står Olympiabyarnas moderna en- och tvårummare och väntar med sina balkonger av korrugerad plåt och sina diskbänkar i gråaktig zink. De nya Olympiakajen har invigts, likaså hamnhotellet Palace, gator har asfalterats och nya broar har byggts. Fröken Armi Kuusela återvänder från Miss Universumtävlingen och zigenartenoren Virtas svarta hår är oljat och bakåtstruket som aldrig förr.³⁶ (Westö, 2000 : 41)

During a dinner at Bruno's house, Geoffry Mulchay notices Werner and, impressed by his good English and his fresh and "boy-next-door"- look, asks him to drive one of the cars, colored with red and white, which are supposed to cross the centre of the city few days later. Mulchay is organizing the parade to launch the new product on the local market just before the inauguration of the Olympic Games, but finds it difficult to deal with the rigid formalism and the almost soldier-like composure of the Finns. The event, which is meant to mark the beginning of a new capitalistic phase in the country's economy, is struggling to get going. The American manager is deeply unsatisfied with the result of the preparations and, a few days before, when he had browsed the cars of the parade, his frustration had suddenly burst out:

Det var svenska bilar och de var inte eleganta, de gjorde ett nästan förkrigstida intryck, de utstrålade ingen dynamisk free enterprise, de såg nästan ... nästan *sovjetiska* ut, tyckte Jeff. Och chaufförerna sedan: de stod uppställda framför honom, skuldra mot skuldra, idel råbarkade män med fårade ansikten och tröttna

³⁶ "In case you are Finnish, you too should know in which year we find ourselves. It is the wonderful Fifty-two, a magic year, a year that soon will be transformed into a myth. The last trains with the war reparations' delivery to Soviet Union leave the Railway Stations and chug towards the eastern border carried by proudly billowing locomotives. The last ferries, loaded with heavy machineries and timber leave the harbors in Åbo, Helsinki and Kotka and point at Leningrad, and at the same time the rest of the Sjdanov control commission leaves Tornio and Socis and Kämp and the other hotels of the centre and their bars. The outside of the Olympic stadium is newly coated in white, in Kottby and Osnäs the Olympic villages' modern single and double rooms are waiting with their balconies of corrugated plate and their sinks in grayish zinc. The new Olympic quay has been inaugurated, and so the harbor Hotel Palace, streets have been asphalted and new bridges built. Miss Armi Kuusela returns in triumph from the Miss Universe competition in Manila and the gipsy tenor Virta's black hair is oiled and brushed-back like never before".

ögon, säkert krigsveteraner allihop eftersom de förde sig så stelt och försiktigt, som om de hade granatsplitter i kroppen och med täta mellanrum måste känna efter var splittret just då befann sig. (...)

”Can’t you people see we’re trying to sell a fucking lifestyle here! For Christ’s sake!” (...) “GET ME SOM FRESH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A PURE, INNOCENT LOOK! AND GET ME A FUCKING REINDEER WHO CAN WRITE DECENT COPY!”³⁷ (Westö, 2000 : 46, 47-48).

Mulchay’s references to ”free enterprise”, ”new lifestyle” and his disregard for the “soviet” look of the Swedish cars, illuminates a central aspect of Finland’s contingent social and historical situation and shows how the organization of the Olympic games was not only meant to be an important world sport-event, but also to represent the climax of the country’s final adhesion to international capitalism. The Coca-cola landing in Finland, which also brings to the country new concepts of merchandizing, private sponsoring and advertising, is a clear sign in this direction. As Mulchay’s words explicitly indicate, the soft-drink they are promoting is not only a beverage, but a symbol that embodies a lifestyle, that is to say, the post-war “American dream” of economic prosperity based on business-making and free enterprise, of individual freedom and leisure.

The fact that the country’s economical shift is epitomized by the hosting of the Olympic Games largely depends on the various meanings that this event has gained during the Twentieth century. The Canadian sociologist Rickard Gruneau, a pioneer of neo-marxism in the field of sport-studies, in his paper *Commercialism and modern Olympics* claims that the Olympic games, since their first appearance in 1896, always had other purposes than the purely ideal message of brotherhood of the ancient sport-events. “The 1900 Games were held in conjunction with the Paris Universal Exhibition; the 1904 Games were held alongside the St Louis World Fair. (...) The London games of 1908 were linked to the Anglo-French exhibition” (Gruneau, 1984 : 5). Not surprisingly it is with the Olympiads of Los Angeles, in 1932, that all the advantages of hosting this event begin to be systematically spoilt: “By the Los Angeles Olympics of 1932, it had become widely recognized by state and civic officials in Western nations that the Games had considerable utility for the promotion of national prestige, civic pride, tourism, urban development and commercial growth” (Gruneau, 1984 : 6). Basically, thus, there has never been an “age of innocence” for the modern games. Moreover, with the Berlin “Nazi” Games of 1936 and the post-war Olympiads, the political

³⁷ “It was Swedish cars, and they were not elegant, they made an almost pre-war impression, they radiated no dynamic free enterprise, they look almost ... almost *soviet*, Jeff thought. And the drivers then: they stood lined up in front of him, shoulder against shoulder, pure grove men with furrowed faces and tired eyes, surely war-veterans all together, because they moved so stiffly and cautiously, as if they hade shrapnel in their bodies and they had to check with frequent intervals where the shrapnel sat. (...) ‘Can’t you people see we’re trying to sell a fucking lifestyle here! For Christ’s sake!’ (...) ‘GET ME SOME FRESH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A PURE, INNOCENT LOOK! AND GET ME A FUCKING REINDEER WHO CAN WRITE DECENT COPY!’”.

significance of the manifestation became more and more relevant. Countries' participation, but especially the opportunity to host the event turned into a strong political instrument to affirm a certain geo-political and economic belonging.

The 1948 Games in London and the 1952 Games in Helsinki were held at the height of the Cold War and were dominated by political tension. However, it was the struggle over the markets, and not simply ideological differences, that lay at the heart of this political unrest. The United States and Soviet Union emerged from the Second World War as the world's two great imperial powers, and each was caught up in a drive to expand its markets in order to speed up post-war recovery at home" (Gruneau, 1984 : 7).

Gruneau emphasizes thus how the Olympiads follow the pattern of the economic evolution of capitalism during the second half of the century and the repositioning of the countries of the Atlantic alliance. A rapid look at the list of the post-war editions of the Games, in fact, show that, until 1980, the venues were all located in countries that were either capitalistic or had opened up to capitalism. Furthermore, the organization of the Games was gradually privatized because of the huge costs required by the necessary infrastructures and services. Private companies, then, entered strongly into the complex machine of the organization as *official sponsors*, encouraged by the extraordinary visibility granted by TV-broadcasting world-wide. Already at the Olympic Games in Rome in 1960, forty-six private sponsors were involved. Also Moscow, in 1980, "showed its proclivity to capitalism by endorsing 200 products"³⁸ (Gruneau, 1984 : 9). The final act of the commodification process of the Games took place with the Los Angeles edition of 1984, whose organization was completely run – consistent with the neo-liberism promoted during the first Reagan presidency – by private actors³⁹.

The analysis of Gruneau (which seems valid also if applied to the Olympics that followed Los Angeles in 1984)⁴⁰, results particularly interesting because is inserted in a wider marxist perspective. He considers sport in general as a social experience which has been

³⁸ It is important to remind that this edition was boycotted by the United States and seventy-five other countries, officially because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

³⁹ Interestingly, Gruneau notes that the four major sponsors of the Olympic Games in Los Angeles were Coca-Cola corporate, the fast-food chain MacDonalD's, the chocolate industry Mars and the beer-producer Budweiser. It can be argued that soft-drinks, hamburgers, chocolate and alcoholic drinks represent the basic diet for a good athletic performance; nevertheless, corporations are only interested in reaching the audience of possible consumers (even better, the association with sport and healthy bodies could also help to clear up their different nature). Like Gruneau claims: "Whether or not US athletes actually thrive upon chocolate bars, Coke, Big Macs, or Budweiser beer is unimportant to the sponsoring companies whose primary concern is that their products become associated in the public mind with the Olympics. (...) Effective advertising is predicated upon establishing a set of deeply rooted symbolic connections with a target audience." (Gruneau, 1984 : 1).

⁴⁰ The Olympics games of the last two decades took place in South Korea, Spain, Australia and United States. The latest edition, Peking 2008, well epitomizes the process illustrated by Gruneau. The People's Republic of China was assigned the Olympic Games after becoming a member of the the World Trade Organization, which sanctioned its definitive shift to the capitalistic model.

gradually dragged into the capitalistic totalizing market. The process of commercialization, in fact, tries to penetrate into every aspect of the human life and to turn it into a business. Even leisure-time, then, although it is outside the dynamic between the employer and the employee, also becomes a section of the market, because it is shaped by the possibilities offered by specialized industrial sectors: “For example, sport facilities were provided by entrepreneurs for a fee, admission was charged for watching sporting events, and new markets developed for sporting equipment” (Gruneau, 1984 : 4-5). According to the Canadian sociologist, sport becomes thus subjected to the laws of the capitalistic market, it turns *itself* into a commodity. This is part of a process which has, if not destroyed, at least notably reduced the old forms of entertainment of the pre-industrial age, which were mostly based on amateurism. “Traditional home and community-centered forms of entertainment, along with many new forms of recreational expression, were transformed into commodities for purchase. Political economists refer to this process as the creation of capitalism’s universal market, to the transformation of all areas of human experience into relationships governed by economic exchange.” (Gruneau, 1984 :4). The final result is that sport-events are subjugated to sponsor-policies, they are gradually emptied of their true message and finally turned into a segment of the market.

If we return to *Vådan av att vara Skrake*, we can better understand the historical significance of the Olympic Games of 1952. Finland, which came out defeated from Second World War and had to cope with a controversial position (the Continuation War against Soviet Union had dangerously brought the country on the verge of co-belligerence with Nazi Germany), was eager to show its new geo-political membership to the group of nations which had fallen on this side of the iron curtain. Deciphered in economical terms, this meant to open the local economy to American capitalism, and no better occasion could be given than the Olympic Games. Of course the US market-economy did not decline the invitation and promptly landed on the rocky coasts of the Nordic country with one of its most distinctive symbols, Coca-Cola. It is inside the frame of this historically true event (Coca-Cola did arrive in Finland in 1952 as an official sponsor of the Games) that Westö places the first manifestation of the *vådan* (danger, misfortune) of being a Skrake. Contrary to what Mulchay expected, in fact, Werner not only was not able to give to the parade that energetic touch that the manager thought he had seen in his look, but almost spoilt the entire event. During the parade, after a few hundred meters, on Backasgatan, the young man loses control of his car, almost has a frontal accident with a tram driving in the opposite direction and ends his run against a tree, while thousands of bottles crashes with a fearful noise.

Det är alltså vid ett övergångsställe i Backasgatans esplanad som Werner kör ut, han undgår med några centimeter att köra in i en kraftig lind, han kanade ut på skenorna, han märker fortfarande ingenting, då kommer spårvagnen farande från Tavastvägen, frontalkrock hotar, spårvagnsföraren praktiskt tagande står på hornet, ljudet är genomträngande och Werner vaknar till, han gör en häftig högergir och undviker spårvagnen, men när den passerat vrider han lika häftigt till vänster och råkar antagligen samtidigt trycka på gasen; den rödvita skåpbilen kanar ånyo över spåren och touchar först en trafikskylt, kör sedan i ett trä, efter smällen hör man under några sekunder det skärande ljudet av tusentals flaskor som krossas⁴¹. (Westö, 2000 : 51).

The day after the accident, Werner's face appears on every newspaper and, by the time, his name becomes synonymous of clumsiness and fatal day-dreaming. A few days after the episode, in fact, Werner releases an interview for the national newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet* and explains that he lost control of the vehicle because he had started to think about some photos of the Dutch athlete Fanny Blankens-Koen. This statement makes him the laughing stock of Helsinki for years to come. As Wiktor notices: "Han hade drömt sig bort helt enkelt"⁴² (Westö, 2000 : 53).

Two weeks later, on a rainy day, the opening ceremony of the Games takes place in the new stadium of Helsinki. Bruno sits on the tiers together with his brother Leonard and tells him that, due to the accident, he has resigned from his post in the company's board: "Jag är ändå ansvarig, jag ser inte hur jag skulle kunna fortsätta efter en sånär nesa"⁴³ (Westö, 2000 : 55). Leo invites him to be less harsh with himself and to desist from his intentions, but Bruno is determined not to change his mind. He is especially worried about his son, because he seems to be different from him, "riktingslös", unable to follow a direction. Leonard replies that Werner simply has another type of force inside himself, which pops up unexpected and that will probably create more problems in the future: "'Han har styrkan i sig han också. Men det tar sig andra uttryck i honom, hos honom är den ofrivillig, den kommer fram ur hans inre fast han *inte* vill den, det är därför den ...' Här tystnade Leo och tittade skyggt på brodern, tillade sedan: 'Jag är rädd att han i sinom tid kommer att orsaka fler olyckor, det blir lätt så när man kämpar mot krafter i sitt inre.'"⁴⁴ (Westö, 2000 : 55).

⁴¹ "It is at the pedestrian crossing on Backasgatan's esplanade that Werner drives out, he avoids just for a few centimeters to crash into a strong lime-tree, he slides out on the rails, he still notices nothing, then a tram comes from Tavastvägen, he risks a frontal accident, the tram-driver is basically on the corner, the sound is penetrating and Werner wakes up, he does a sudden turning to the right and avoids the tram but, when that has passed by, he does an as much sudden turning to the left and happens probably to press the accelerator; the red and white van slides again over the trails and touches a road sign, then crashed against a tree. After the bang, during some seconds, the crashing of thousands of bottle was heard."

⁴² "He had simply lost himself in his dreams."

⁴³ "By the way, I am responsible, I don't see how I could continue after such a shame."

⁴⁴ "'He has got also a force. But in him, it takes other shapes, it is involuntary, it comes from inside of him though he does not want it, that's way ...' Here Leo got silent and looked timidly to his brother, and the added: 'I am afraid that in due course he will cause other accidents, this happens easily when you fight against forces inside yourself'".

Leonard's bad omen turns out to be correct. After the accident with the Coca-Cola van, Werner does different kinds of odd jobs, stubbornly refusing to accept money from Bruno and Maggie. On a cold winter evening, he ends up talking in a pub together with another American, Duncan Reinertsen. Duncan, a professional basket-ball coach, currently works as a "consultant" at the American Embassy in Helsinki, but wants to set up his own company. His business-plan is to import a new food-product from the United States, which – in his opinion – can be very successful in Finland. Cheap and easy to prepare, it consists of a little plastic bag full of corn grains. The instruction could not be easier: you only need to pour a handful of grains into a pot with some oil and wait. Duncan asks Werner if he is interested in becoming a partner in his business, because he needs someone who knows the country and can help him to promote the product. Werner agrees and organizes a demonstration in the school where his uncle Leonard works. Duncan had recommended him not to pour too many grains and not to forget to cover the pot with a lock "*Ha locket på, otherwise it'll be quite a show*"⁴⁵ (Westö, 2000 : 67). Once Werner finds himself in front of the school-kids who have gathered to assist to his presentation, he gets unsecure, spreads too many grains in the pot and obviously forgets to put the lock on. The result is an explosive rain of white pop-corns that are thrown all around the class, with great amusement of the students and evident disapproval of the school director. Werner calls immediately Duncan and withdraw his participation in the business; upset with another catastrophic result that might cast even more shame on his name, Werner briskly cuts off his contact with the American with the following words: "Dessutom smakar dom ju ingenting. Jag tror inte popcorn har nån framtid i Finland"⁴⁶ (Westö, 2000 : 68).

The less spectacular, but as much hilarious, episode of the pop-corn shows Werner's scarce intuition for business. Exactly like Coca-Cola, pop-corns is another symbol of the new economical relationship which is establishing between Finland and the United States during the Fifties and the Sixties, something that Westö already had depicted in *Drakarna över Helsingfors*. In the previous novel, however, the representative for the spirit of the times was Henrik, a proud self-made man, completely absorbed into the new capitalistic model based on international trade, stock options and financial market operations. In *Vådan av att vara Skrake* we find instead the reverse situation: unlikely Henrik (the two characters were born approximately in the same period), Werner is inadequate to the new economic market which is rapidly occupying the entire system, he is unable to pick up the possibilities offered by his

⁴⁵ "Put the lock on, otherwise it'll be quite a show".

⁴⁶ "Furthermore, they taste nothing. I don't think that pop-corn will have any future in Finland".

time, he is reluctant to hold off his day-dreaming and melt into the new mentality and lifestyle; shortly, he does not “fit in”. It is therefore not surprising that, after the accident of the Coca-cola van, Werner retreats in the old family house in the suburb of Råberga. Here he devotes his time to three passions: writing, fishing and hammer-throwing. In 1957, when rumors about him finally start to fade away, Werner publishes his first collection of short-stories *Den avundsjuka aborren och andra berättelser* (The Envious Perch and other stories), followed, shortly after, by another one, *Hösthimmel över Hästkobben* (Autumn sky over the horse-islet), both inspired to fishery. The two books sell quite well and are positively reviewed. In the same period, Werner also meets Vera, a young woman who uses to travel as a guide between Finland and Sweden, where she had been a *krigsbarn*. Vera settles down again in Helsinki, marries Werner and moves into the big house of Råberga. Things seem thus to be on track again for the ex- guy who “had crashed the Coca-cola van into a lime-tree”. On the 6th of August 1960, their first son Wiktor Ansgar Skrake is born. Later, he is re-baptized Wiktor Jouri, as an homage to Jury Gagarin, the first human in space⁴⁷.

A few months later, Bruno, only aged sixty, dies of a heart infarct. Contrary to what the rest of the family had thought, he does not leave behind himself a huge patrimony: “Bruno hade just fyllt sextio, och efter hans död visade det sig att han inte alls varit så rik som alla tagit för givet. De sista femton åren av sitt liv var han en ganska surmulen och olycklig man, och det var då han gjorde dåliga affärer, sålde när han borde ha behållit, köpte när han borde ha avvaktat”⁴⁸ (Westö, 2000 : 70). Werner inherits the villa in Råberga and some money that he saves up for the future.

The suburb of Råberga and the old house of his grandfather becomes the place where Wiktor spends his childhood. Like Marracott in *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, also Råberga is a fictive suburb that turns into a symbol of the transformations that are taking place in the city and in the whole country. As for the relation between Henrik and Werner, it is possible to establish a parallel by contrast between Marracott/Munksnejden and Råberga. If the first one is the place that best represents the enthusiasm of the new middle-class, the aftershocks of a radical social change which had not yet been finished and also the conflict between two different language-communities, the second represents the opposite pole: a peaceful garden-suburb with elegant liberty and functionalist villas that used to host the *fin-de-siècle*

⁴⁷ It is rather significant to notice that Wiktor’s birth date is the same of Kjell Westö, except for the fact that Wiktor was born in 1960, whereas the writer was one year later.

⁴⁸ “Bruno had just turn sixty, and after his death it turned out that he was not at all so rich like everybody had taken for granted. During the last fifteen years of his life, he was a rather sullen and unhappy man, and it was when he made wrong business, he sold when he should have kept, he bought when he should have waited”.

bourgeoisie of the Finnish capital – most probably entirely Swedish-Speaking – so well-represented by Bruno and even more by his wife Maggie, descendant of a prominent family (her father was a famous *jugend* architect and her mother came from an aristocratic family of Saint Petersburg). *That* high bourgeoisie is slowly disappearing, as much as the splendor of the house seems to fade away winter after winter. Werner, who has changed different jobs without finding anything stable and finally starts to write, does not live up to the Skrake's glorious past. Also in *Vådan av att vara Skrake*, thus, Westö describes the problem of the social hierarchy, although from a different perspective compared to the previous works. The focus is not anymore on the rising post-war middle-class that strives to obtain a better social status, but on the withering upper-class which is losing its prominence. Werner, whose temper is incompatible with the new economic mode, is a typical *downshifter*, the exponent of a class which is irremediably going down on the social scale. Like Pia Bergström-Edwards noticed in her review of the novel:

Faderns tendens at misslyckas, eller kanske hans vägran att bli "lyckad" enligt de gängse framgångsnormerna i den krets han fostrats, är nog romanens levande åder. Werner inkarnerar problemet social deklassering. Hans far Bruno har genom driftighet och hårdhet, inte minst i krig, blivit en av Helsingfors mäktiga och förmögna. Men sonen är inte road av det ekonomiska⁴⁹. (Bergström-Edwards, 2001 : 13)

Bergström-Edwards's review touches a central point of our analysis, namely "de gängse framgångsnormerna", the current norms of success. As we already mentioned apropos the question of the national identity and the social membership, a determinate norm arises to establish what is to be considered "normal" and what, falling beyond its limits, becomes "un-normal". Whereas in *Drakarna över Helsingfors* the writer described the rise of the new middle-class and what it was supposed to do in order to get up on the social scale, in *Vådan av att vara Skrake*, the question is how the upper-class has to do to avoid the downfall. Already at the beginning of the novel, we had been informed that Werner – faithful to the family tradition – had been sent to the United States to study economy and law. His destiny was to follow in the aftermath of his father, to become the CEO of a major company, drive expensive cars, wear fashionable clothes, buy another house and fill it with the most refined furniture. He was supposed to become like Henrik Bexar, and that would have been easier for him, because he already had favorable conditions to start with. Werner, instead, with his

⁴⁹ "The father's tendency to fail, or maybe his refuse to "manage" according to the current norms of success inside the circle he has raised, is surely the novels pulsing vein. Werner embodies the social problem of downshifting. His father Bruno, through enterprise and harshness, not least during the war, has become one of the powerful and wealthy of Helsinki. But his son dislikes economy".

stubborn curiosity for what is “different”, places his personal disposition before the supposed obligations stated by the norm.

The contrast between him and the rest of the society becomes even more evident when Birger and Annette Muhrman, together with their son Björn and their daughter Janina, move into the new villa next to that of the Skrake. Muhrmans’ new residence is a modern labyrinthine house designed by Birger himself, which makes the old villa of the Skrake to look even older and more decadent than it already is. Significantly, Birger is an architect, and the associated firm he works for is in charge of the projects for the new suburbs that are being constructed in the western outskirts of Helsinki:

Birre var arkitekt. När familjen Muhrman flyttade till Råberga arbetade han ännu i byrån Saalismaa&Rautee som var ansvarig för en stor del av de packlådeliknande hus som vid den här tiden växte upp i Botbyhöjden, Kvarnbäcken och Gårdsbacka i östra Helsingfors. Birre var förtrogen med Le Corbusiers tankar om hur framtidens människa skulle bo, och han deltog ivrigt i de unga arkitekternas debatter om hur de arbetande massorna bäst skulle beredas luft och ljus. Med adelsmannen Le Corbusier delade han också tendensen att omedvetet och oreflekterat betrakta lejonparten av människorna som arbetsmyror och fotsoldater. Vem som helst med blick för sociala hierarkier och dito maner kunde se att Birre Muhrman var inpyrd av högborgerlighet, men själv såg han det inte. (...) när han rattade sin röda Volvo genom de nybyggda förorter där han på inga villkor ville bo, tyckte han att de bengrå åttavåningshusen med de nästan fönsterlösa gavlarna var bebådelse, var rymdskepp som svävade genom den elupplysta stadsnatten, var härolder som sjöng en rätlinjig framtidskantat i betong⁵⁰. (Westö, 2000 : 145).

As much as Werner and Vera seem to be at odds with the time they live in and not so much concerned about their social position, Birre and Annette well represent the new, rampant bourgeoisie which has rapidly climbed up on the top of the social hierarchy and are particularly zealous to show how *modern* they are. Birre, a faithful devotee of functionalism architectural credo, considers the suburbs that he has designed like the best expression of modernity, although he would never live there. He is in fact *too rich* to settle down in a place which is destined to regular, low-income workers, and not professionals like him. Because of his social higher status (which he pretends not to see), he builds his house where the rich should be, that is to say, in the suburb of Råberga. This process clearly show how the entire

⁵⁰ ”Birre was an architect. When the family Muhrman moved to Råberga, he still worked for the firm Saalismaa&Rautee that was responsible for a great part of the box-like houses which, by that time, were growing in Botbyhöjden, Kvarnbäcken and Gårdsbacka, in Western Helsinki. Birre was familiar with Le Corbusier’s opinions on how the people of the future should live, and he zealously participated in the young architects’ debate on how the working masses should best be given air and light. With the aristocrat Le Corbusier he also shared the tendency to unconsciously and unreflectively consider the lion part of humanity as a working ants and foot soldiers. Anyone with an eye for social hierarchy and ditto mannerism, could see that Birre Muhrman was imbued with high-bourgeoisie, although he did not see it himself (...) when he drove his Volvo though the newly-built suburbs where he under no circumstances would have lived, he thought that that the grayish eight-floor houses with sides almost without windows were a new credo, were spaceships floating through the city-night illuminated with electricity, were heralds who sang a rectilinear future of concrete”.

urban space, starting from the suburbs, is re-written according to new social rules stated by the capitalistic economical model.

The antique characteristic of Werner and Vera emerges not only in their humble occupations – Vera, who used to work as a guide, after the marriage has found a job in the administration office of the local school, while Werner, who cannot maintain the family only with his activity as a writer, works as a gardener and factotum in the same school – but also in their clothes, the furniture of the house and the old, rusty Anglia that makes a sharp contrast with the luxury Mercedes parked in front of the Murhman's house. Annette, who is a successful writer of children literature, cannot help but repeating on several occasions how much she likes Råberga but how *anti-deluviansk* she also finds the old functionalist villas and generally the obsolete atmosphere of the suburb. When Annette, called Nette, pays a visit to the Skrakes for the first time, she expresses her judgment on their house using her favorite word: “Nette tackade ja, gick husesyn och utropade att utsikten från vårt vardagsrum var underbar och att hon älskade funkisvillor fast de var så anti-deluvianska”⁵¹ (Westö, 2000 : 177). Many are the things that Annette considers out-of-dated, passé, not enough modern, and she seems to find all of them in Werner and his personality. Like Wiktor recalls from the Murhmans' visits to his parent's house, Annette plenty used the word “anti-deluviansk” about his father:

Under den korta tiden de umgicks fann Nette Muhrman ständigt nya anti-deluvianismer hos min far. (...) Hon brukade börja med orden ‘Inte för att jag vill vara spydisk men ...’ och så satte hon igång och var sedan monoton som en tickande klocka. Att hon ansåg Werners nylonskjortor som anti-deluvianska nämnde jag redan. Anti-deluviansk var också Werners fransiga och blankslitna landslagsoverall och anti-deluvianskt var det likaledes att någon gitte syssla med något så löjligt som att kasta slägga. Och lika anti-deluvianskt var det att döda fiskar för sitt eget nöjes skull, för att inte tala om ofoget att sedan skriva om detta dödande när man hade tillgång till Det Offentliga Rummet och i stället kunde ha använt Orden på ett uppbyggligt sätt.⁵² (Westö, 2000 : 180-181).

For some time Werner keeps quite and does not reply to Annette's insistent rhetoric about his being so *antedeluvian*. One evening in March, though, miss Murhman makes the fatal mistake to deplore the miserable condition in which Elvis Presley has ended up. With his cheap b-movies, the flirty songs and the more and more extravagant look, the American singer has

⁵¹ ”Nette accepted, went around the house and exclaimed that the view from our living-room was wonderful and that she loved functionalistic villas, although they were so antedeluvian”.

⁵² ”During the short period when they used to meet, Nette Muhrman constantly found new antedeluvianisms in my father. (...) She used to start by saying ‘Not that I mean to be sarcaistical, but ...’ and then she got going and she was monotone like a ticking watch. That she found my father's nylon shirts antedeluvian I have already meant. Antedeluvian was also Werner's frayed and consumed National team Overalls, and antedeluvian was also that someone felt like to occupied himself with something so ridiculous as hammer-throwing. And as much antedeluvian was to kill fishes for one's own pleasure, not to talk about the prank to write about that killing, when you had access to the Public Room and could have instead used the Words in a constructive way”.

turned into a puppet of the music-industry. Werner, who used to like Elvis's early music, initially cannot but admit that his debacle as a musician is evident, but gets suddenly tired of the neighbor's maniacally critic countenance and reproaches her for her ridiculous haughty behavior, adding that she – a writer! – is not even able to spell correctly the word “spydig” (sarcastic) – before she had said “spydisk” (sarcastical) – and also that her favorite expression is “ante-diluviansk” (antediluvian) and not “ante-deluviansk” (antedeluvian). Werner's long and angry tirade shocks the Murhmans' and – although they later try to get on good terms again – their friendship is soon over.

The confrontation between Werner and Vera on one side and Annette and Birger on the other brings us back again to the capitalistic discourse as exposed by Marshall Berman. In his Marxist analysis of Faust, he devotes particular attention to the episode of Philomen and Bauchis, an old couple who has always lived in a remote corner of the region where Faust is realizing his project. In order to accomplish the construction of a tower, he needs to have the last piece of land where the house of the Philomen and Baucis stands:

As Faust surveys his work, the whole region around him has been renewed, and a whole new society created in his image. Only one small piece of ground along the coast remains as it was before. This is occupied by Philomen and Baucis, a sweet old couple who have been there form time out of mind. They have a little cottage on the dunes, a chapel with a little bell, a garden full of linden trees. (...) Faust becomes obsessed with this old couple and their little piece of land. (...) They must go, to make room for what Faust comes to see as the culmination of his work: an observation tower from which he and his public can “gaze out into the infinite” at the new world they have made. (Berman, 1983 : 66-67).

Since Philomen and Bauchis refuse to move away (they are not interested in money and they are sentimentally attached to that place where they have lived all their lives), Faust calls Mephisto and asks him to get the old couple out of the way. “At this point” Berman notes, “Faust commits his first self-consciously evil act” (Berman, 1983 : 67).

Werner and Vera, with their ineptitude towards the new capitalistic economy, reminds of Philomen and Bauchis, as much as the old villa of Råberga has the same significance of the small cottage on the coast where the old couple of Goethe's work lives. The Skrakes, in fact, do not actively oppose to the forces of capitalism, they are simply not interested in becoming part of it. Annette Muhrman, in her shameless critic about Werner's antediluvianism, is actually right. Werner (and Vera too) is not – and does not want to be – at pace with his time. Also Wiktor is able to notice how his parents are different from the rest of the society, especially when compared to their neighbors:

Länge trodde jag att allt blev som det blev för att Birre och Nette var så moderna, *så comme-il-faut*, medan Werner och Vera var så otidsenliga. (...) Jag var nog

påverkad av Nette Murhman och allt hennes prat om anti-deluvianismer när jag tyckte så; numera tycker jag att resonemanget smakar förenkling.

För trots att Werner hatade den alltmer hektiska och våldsamma Sam-Tiden och ville undvika den så gott det gick, och trots att en fiskande Werner eller en Vera böjd över sitt piano kunde te sig som klippt ur en förgången tid, så representerade varken min far eller min mor den attitydkonserverism som dåförtiden förde en styvnackad uppehållande strid mot de unga eller – som i Nettes och Birres fall – ungdomliga radikaler⁵³. (Westö, 2000 : 180).

Annette and Birger are not the only representatives of the new capitalistic epoch: all around the Skrake's house the once peaceful and slightly posh suburb of Råberga is undergoing a complete transformation. White blocks of houses replace the old wooden dwellings, chain stores and malls take over the family food-shops, asphalt is laid on the dirt roads. In 1972, when Wiktor turns eleven and his father falls victim for a deep depression, Råberga seems like a huge construction yard:

Det är i norr förändringen syns. Vändplatsen mitt i byn är asfalterad sedan två år tillbaka, och gatlyktorna är fler än förr. (...) Också byns sista rödmylletorp med vita knutar har rivits, och bakom kyrkan och gravgården finns inte längre någon orörd äng med tistlar och blåklockor, där finns nu en asfalterad väg och ett nybyggt bostadsområde, prydliga, identiska radhus med platta tak. Och ute vid landsvägen, vänster om Essostationen, finns några jättelika gropar och i groparna finns betongfundament och grova pålar och märkliga trädkonstruktionen, och där finns en skylt där den mäktiga gründer Rauno Virstanpylväs meddelar att här byggs det högghus, fem hus med inalles 250 lägenheter skall det bli. (Westö, 2000 : 236)

The modernization of the suburb, which epitomizes the process of modernization of the entire country, rapidly invades every corner in Råberga, destroying the existing edifices and the old dirt roads in order to give way to new houses, new shops, new infrastructures, that is to say: the new capitalistic modernity. As much as this economical model changes the face of the city and gives a new meaning to each part of it, so it also penetrates in every aspect of the society with the same invasive obstinacy. If we go back to what Annette Murhman said about Elvis Presley's music, specifically that "kapitalisterna dödat Elvis själ och gjort honom till en zombie"⁵⁴ (Westö, 2000 : 184), we can see that Werner cannot help but agreeing with her. The spectacular and tragic parable of Elvis Presley has remained one of the most significant examples of the greediness and mercilessness of the American star-system. Werner, as Wiktor explains, used to be a great admirer of the first Elvis, the young talent from Memphis with his strange movements and the particularly deep voice. Already during the Sixties, however,

⁵³ "For a long time, I thought that it was like that because Birre and Nette were so modern, so *comme-il-faut*, whereas Werner and Vera were so anachronistic. (...) I was surely influenced by Nette Murhman and all her talking about antediluvianism when I thought like that. Now I think that her way of thinking tastes simplification. Because, although Werner hated the more and more hectic and violent Contemporary and wanted to avoid it as much as possible, and although a fishing Werner or a Vera bent over her piano looked like cut from a by-gone time, my father and my mother represented neither the conservative attitude that at that time was carrying on a stubborn fight against young people nor - like in the case of Nette and Birre - young radicals."

⁵⁴ "The capitalists had killed Elvis' soul and turned him into a zombie".

Elvis began to present himself as a brand and to merchandize his image with bad movies, whereas his music became more and more commercial and predictable. People like Werner, who had loved his songs produced for the Sun Records, can only helplessly observe his rapid downfall:

Min far hade stränga åsikter när det gällde Elvis inspelningar. Han dyrkade de tidiga Sunlåtarna, de som var gjorda för Sam Philips i Memphis. Däremot ställde han sig kritisk till de tidiga RCA-skivorna, han tyckte det vilade något beräkande över till exempel en låt som *Jailhouse Rock*. (...) Men sextiotalet fortsatt, och de färggranna och tomma Elvislångfilmer blev bara fler. De formligen strömmade ut på marknaden, de bildade en sömngångaraktig flod av kvävande dålighet, och Werner led⁵⁵. (Westö, 2000 : 117).

Werner has always been an admirer of genuinely alternative and disruptive music expressions. As mentioned before, already when he lived in Cleveland, he had become interested in black music and also participated to a concert when he was the only white person in the entire arena. The tragic downfall of Elvis shows the result of the relentless law of the capitalistic market, that turns a talent into a money-machine. The exaggerated proliferation of bad movies and soulless records also represents an interesting example of the innovative self-destruction that we often quoted as the most distinctive feature of capitalism. Elvis movies and records, in fact, respond to the logic of the rising throw-away society, are nothing more than commodities that are supposed to be consumed and rapidly replaced with other ones. Records (like movie-tickets) have to make as much profit as possible in a calculated spun of time, before a new collection of songs, merchandized with another movie and an even more eccentric look of the singer, replaces the previous one (a mechanism with which we have become very familiar during the last decades).

As for the music, also sport – as we have already seen with the Olympic Games – is slowly incorporated in the universal market. When he was a teen-ager, Werner was a promising hammer-thrower. He had started to cast when he was thirteen, and, by the age of twenty-nine, he had become one of the medal hopes in his club, *Kamraterna* (the Comrades). At that point, though, Werner had refused to participate to the Finnish national games and decided to start training on his own. He had solemnly promised never to go to an official competition again and to devote his efforts to cross his personal record of 60 meters. The reason for this sudden shift, Wiktor explains, was Werner amateurism.

⁵⁵ “My father had strict preference when it mattered Elvis’ records. He worshipped the first Sun-songs, those that were made for Sam Phillips, in Memphis. On the other hand, he had a critical approach to the early RCA-records, he thought that there was something calculated, for example, in a song like *Jailhouse Rock*. (...) But the Sixties just went on, and the colorful and empty movie with Elvis became more and more. They literally flooded on the market, creating a sleepwalking river of bad quality, and Werner suffered.”

För att förstå skillnaden mellan min far och män som Klim och Zsivotsky bör man veta att Werners livsinställning var den passionerade dilettantismens. Man bör också veta något om dilettantismens historia. Det fanns tider, långliga tider, då dilettantismen genomsyrade hela Europa. (...) 1800-talets andra hälft var de mer eller mindre fnoskiga uppfinnarnas guldålder. (...) Men det nya seklet, 1900-talet, krävde effektivitet och prestanda. Specialisering blev ett måste (...) Inom idrotten levde dilettantismen dock kvar ännu en tid. Men i det kalla krigets kyla fnös slutligen idrottsdilettantismen ihjäl. Män som Klim och Zsivotzky och deras hisnande resultat annonserade att Specialisternas Tidevarv börjat också inom idrotten⁵⁶. (Westö, 2000 : 111)

Interestingly, amateurism brings us back again to the theory elaborated by Gruneau about the capitalistic evolution within the field of sport. The Canadian sociologist observed how amateurism used to be diffuse in the pre-capitalistic society as the most common form of entertainment. With capitalism, amateurism is replaced by the professionalization of the sport activity, and an entire industry began to develop around it. Werner is not interested in becoming a professional hammer-thrower not because he has lost his passion for the discipline, but because he intimately refuses to follow the rules that want to force him into this new paradigm. For him sport is, like any other human activity (significantly, Wiktor notices that amateurism was his father's attitude to life) a way to experiment, to try to understand how something works and how it could be done in a, if not better, at least different way.

Unfortunately, his bad omen hits him again. When finally, after years of casts that stubbornly end a little before the magical 60-meter limit, experimentation with different kinds of rotations and movements with the hands, he manages to cross his personal record of 60 meters, the hammer lands on the right foot of the Archbishop Achrén, who had come to visit the school where Werner used to work and exercise. Once the injured Archbishop has been sent to the hospital and Werner carried away by the police to explain the dynamics of events, the physical education teacher Gustafsson measures the length of his cast and finds out that it had passed not only the sixty-meter limit, but also the almost Olympic record of seventy meters. His "jättekast" measured in fact seventy-two meters and eighty-four centimeters. Like Wiktor notices: "Med ett sådant resultat skulle min far ha tagit olympiskt brons föregående

⁵⁶ "In order to understand the difference between my father and men like Klim and Zsivotsky, you should know that Werner's attitude to life was that of the passionate amateur. You should also know something about amateurism's history. There were times, long back in the past, when amateurism permeated the entire Europe. The second half of the Nineteenth century was, more or less, the crazy inventors' golden age. (...) But the new century, the Twentieth, required efficiency and ability and good performance. Specialization became a must. (...) Inside sport, however, amateurism survived still a bit. (...) But in the coldness of the Cold War, finally sport-amateurism froze to death. Men like Klim and Zsivotzky and their breathtaking results announced that the Age of the Specialized had started also inside sport". The Russian Romual Klim and the Hungarian Gyula Zsivotzky were two hammer-throwers who had won the golden and the silver medal in this discipline at the Olympic Games of Tokyo in 1964. They both are named in the passage before this quotation.

natt, knappt distanserad av Zsivotzky och Klim men klart före Zsivotzkys landsman Lovász”⁵⁷ (West, 2000 : 229). It is the summer of 1968, and the Olympic games are going on in Mexico City.

After the accident, which re-proposed the *våd* that had persecuted him when he was younger, Werner has a long period of depression and for some time he goes in and out from a clinic. The legal costs of the process and the expenses for his periods of treatment also affects the economy of the family and, despite the help of Maggie, the money inherited from Bruno runs out and the house maintenance is totally dependent on Vera’s salary. The Skrake ultimately fall down from grace, because, despite the expensive cures, something remains irremediably broken inside of Werner. Also his literal inspiration seems to have vanished. For many years Werner had worked with the project of writing a new book inspired to the big salmon trout that he has been fishing in the bay of Råberga and in its surroundings. Wiktor, who used to follow his father during his boat trips, had re-baptized the big fishes “silverfiskar”, (silver fishes), because of the translucent color of their scales. Werner is determinate to write a big opus about this curious fish with strange behavior, but uncountable sheets of paper remain blank in the typing-machine on the desk in front of the panoramic window of the living-room or end up in the trash-bin shortly after being written on.

Rapidly, during the Seventies, the situation degenerates. Werner often disappears in the city and comes back after a few days with clear signs of drunkenness. Vera cannot handle the situation anymore and finally moves out. Wiktor, who is an adolescent, remains with his father in the big house of Råberga for some more years but, when he turns seventeen, he also moves to the centre of Helsinki and starts to live a bohemian life, as was the costume among young people during the beginning of the Eighties. Werner thus remains alone in the house of Råberga, with the only consolation of fishery. During this period, the suburb has changed even more radically:

Detta var året då de första fyravåningshus ute vid landsvägen stod inflyttningsklara, och man grävde redan groparna för åttavåningshusen som skulle byggas under åren som följde.

Jerkka Haglund och hans föräldrar flyttade från byn till en ljus trerummare i översta våningen i ett av höghusen, deras trähus där vid Torget revs omedelbart och fru Haglund lade ner sin verksamhet och var således ingen Skalperartant längre⁵⁸. (Westö, 2000 : 259)

⁵⁷ ”With such a result, my father should have taken the Olympic bronze the night before, hardly distanced by Zsivotzky and Klim, but clearly ahead of Zsivotzky’s compatriot Lovász”.

⁵⁸ “This was the year of the first four-floor houses along the highway were ready to be inhabited, and holes were already being dug for eight-floor houses that would be built in the following years. Jerkka Haglund and his parents moved from the suburb in one luminous three-room-apartment in the upper floor of one of the houses, their wooden house close to the Torget was immediately tore down and Miss Haglund close down her business and was thus not anymore the scalping-lady”.

While Råberga is voraciously transformed into a modern suburb, where the old wooden houses are torn down to give way to the new four-floor houses (which soon will be placed side by side with even higher houses of eight floors), Werner turns into an hermit, with the only consolation of his boat-trip in search for silver fishes. Also this last passion, however, which already has consumed his literary vein without producing any result, is marked by his *vådän*. In the late spring 1986, short after the catastrophe of Chernobyl, Werner goes to throw his fishing lines from the rocky cliffs of Tistelskär. A big fish – probably the biggest one he ever fished in his life – takes the bait and starts to pull vigorously. Werner stumbles over a rock, falls backwards and fatally hits his head. Werner has remained throughout his life an outsider, he has not surrendered to the intruding forces of his time, he has accepted his inadequacy towards the new capitalist model. His death, though tragic, confirms thus his stubborn nature of maverick.

After his death, the narration continues with the story of Wiktor himself. And it is at this point that the novel has a sudden expansion both forward and backward on the temporal axis. Wiktor, in fact, draws a parallel between his years in the capital and the arrival of the first Skrake, the brother of grand-grandfather, Oskar Johannes Skrake, to Helsinki. Like his ancestor, also Wiki has to “conquer” again a city which is not the same anymore like that of the previous generations. He lives first a dissipated life, he has a relationship with Janina Muhrman, the daughter of his old neighbors in Råberga, and then finds a job in a media company. Although with the years he has settled down in the city, he never feels at home, exactly like Oskar Johannes Skrake, who arrived to Helsinki one hundred year before him, on July 1890, always had a controversial relationship with the city.

This is probably the reason why Wiktor, after some years of hesitation, decides to go back to Råberga and to move back into the old house of his family. He has understood, maybe urged by the new millennium’s approach, that the story of his family (and especially of his father), the story of their house and their suburb somehow reflects the history of the city and of the whole country throughout the century which is coming to an end. From the national independence, passing through the violent experience of the civil war and the Second World War, until the years of the reconstruction and the final opening of the country to a capitalist economy, the Skrake have constantly coped with the brisk twists of the Twentieth century, sometimes following in the aftermath of that modernity that shook their world to the roots, sometimes trying to place themselves in a diametrically opposed position and to resist it.

Wiktor feels the urge to turn backwards and look as far as he can, to fumble with his memories and the stories he heard from his uncle Leonard and his grandmother Maggie, in a desperate attempt to rescue from oblivion a glimpse of history which is rapidly melting into air.

Jag vill betona att jag är något så passerat som en 1900-talsmänniska, en som inte tagit steget över den med möda konstruerade och sorgfälligt utsirade och maniskt marknadsförda millennietröskeln. Jag är en som stannar kvar, jag sitter obevekligen fast i den gångna seklets bortglömda fadäser och olösta gåtor och uppklarade grymheter⁵⁹. (Westö, 2000 : 70).

⁵⁹ "I want to emphasize that I am something so passé like a man from the Twentieth century, one who has not taken a step over the laboriously constructed, minutely ornate and maniacally merchandized threshold of the new millennium. I am one who has got inexorably stuck in forgotten silly things, in the unresolved enigmas and the unexplained cruelties of the by-gone century".

CONCLUSION

In the preface to the Penguin edition of *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman explains the chronological and geographical limits of his investigation into modernity by claiming that he did not want to write an encyclopedic work about this topic. He hoped that he had been able to create an “open book”, where readers could be inspired by the thoughts and ideas contained in it and thus encouraged to add new chapters about other places and other times.

Many readers have wondered why I didn't write about all sorts of people, places, idea and movements that would seem to fit my over-all project at least as well as the subjects I chose. Why not Proust or Freud, Berlin or Shanghai, Mishima or Sembene, New York's Abstract Expressionists or the Plastic People of Prague? (...) I never intended to write an encyclopedia of modernity. I hoped, rather, to develop a series of visions and paradigms that could enable people to explore their own experience and history in greater detail and depth. I wanted to write a book that would be open and stay open, a book in which readers would be able to write a chapter of their own. (Berman, 1983 : 9).

My intention, when I first started to work on this project, was to humbly confront myself with this task, namely to write a new chapter about the arrival of modernity in Helsinki through the analysis of a selection of works by Kjell Westö. To tell the story of an entire city, although not as big as Paris or London and still relatively “young”, would have outstripped the time-limit imposed by this project. Modernity – intended as the *maelstrom* of technical progress, cultural mutations and social transformations propelled by the industrial capitalism – arrived to Finland later, compared with other European countries. As some critics (Ciaravolo, Toftegaard) already pointed out, this process started at the beginning of the Twentieth century, paving the way for the first urbanization that brought people from the countryside to the newly-born capital. While the society went through rapid and radical changes with the national independence and the parliamentary reforms, the bloody events of the following years (the civil war, the Continuation war and the Lapland war) inevitably slowed down the process of modernization.

During the second half of the Twentieth century, however, like many other countries in Europe, Finland became a fully “modern” country, opening up to the international market-economy. The Fifties, the Sixties and the Seventies represented a period of unprecedented economical growth and of political re-assessment towards the western block. The huge supply of work opportunities provided by the post-war reconstruction determined a new process of urbanization and Helsinki almost doubled the number of its inhabitants within the ten years following the end of the Second World War. The city grew bigger and expanded

outside its borders, both through the inclusion of existing suburbs (the so-called “annexation”) and the construction of new ones. The suburb thus became the most visible sign of the radical transformation that Helsinki was going through. The architecture and the planning of these places, with the neo-functionalist buildings, the efficient infrastructures, the presence of the first malls and shopping-centers, emphasized the *modern* character of this new urban space. The suburbs hosted a “fluid” social environment, not yet inserted in the traditional hierarchy, where people with sometimes extremely different background, origin, education and language found themselves to live next door with each other. This fundamental social peculiarity made the suburb the laboratory of the new society, where everybody, no matter what kind of job, which type of education, if Swedish-speaking or Finnish-speaking, was trying to find his/her place in the *maelstrom* (I borrow this term from Berman) of modernity.

When I first read *Vådan av att vara Skrake*, more than eight years ago, I was struck by the melancholic description of the suburb of Råberga, which is depicted like a decadent, fin-de-siècle, elegant suburb destined to be cancelled by the construction of modern buildings, as much as his last caretaker, Werner Skrake, is pushed at the margin of a society where he has never been able to fit in. When I read *Drakarna över Helsingfors* I noticed how Westö somehow did the opposite operation: the moves of the Bexar family from the upper part of Munkhöjden to the centre of the city and then back again to the suburb (this time to the posh part, called Munksnäs) followed the increasing economical welfare and the rise of the family father, Henrik. I noticed thus a convergence in Westö’s novels between the development of the characters’ social membership and the urban places that they inhabited. This pattern was further confirmed by the short novel *Melba, Mallinen och jag*. Although from different perspectives, the suburb was always presented as the place where something *new* was happening, where the forces liberated by the post-war capitalism were trying to sweep away the old world, or where the internal, sometimes conflicting instances were clashing against each other.

The often quoted book by Marshal Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, provided me both with the critical instruments to carry on this study and the literary tradition to refer to. Keeping in mind his brilliant analysis of the Nevsky Prospekt in Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, where the boulevard of Saint Petersburg appears as the place *par excellence* of the turmoil of that time, I tried to show how the suburb of the Finnish capital is the place where the social and economical transformations taking place during the post-war years in Helsinki become mostly visible, and this is why I decided to entitle my research *Notes from the suburb*. My references to the works by Berman, Benjamin, Gruneau,

and Bourdieu clearly place my research in the field of the neo-marxist school. Ultimately, in fact, what Westö describes in the novels, poems, and short-stories that I have selected is the process of gradual but relentless opening of the country to the capitalistic market, which has re-shaped not only the national economy (from the enthusiasm of the years of the post-war reconstruction to the craziness of the Casino Economy of the Eighties), but also the social hierarchy and the urban environment itself, where the suburb becomes its symbol and its irradiating point. It is here that the new middle-class is born and raised, it is here that the old bourgeoisie sees the old world falling apart.

One peculiar character of Helsinki, namely the presence of two language-groups, was a topic of major interest. Since the country's independence from the Tsarist empire, fuelled by the Swedish-speaking *intelligentia* and largely supported by the Swedish-speaking part of the population, the relationship between the two communities has always been controversial, especially what matters the status of Swedish as official language. Inspired by the analysis of Derrida and Bourdieu (but also of Terry Eagleton) about the connection between the national identity and the ability to master the language of the State, and how it could be deconstructed and analyzed according to new premises, I started to wonder if the acknowledgment of the official status to the Swedish language could not be seen as something that on one hand gave to a community a specific connotation and guaranteed some rights, but on the other paved the way for a disjunction between the two groups, which eventually led to conflict. What interested me most was to analyze how the minority, as soon as it is acknowledged by the central power, gradually drift away from it and replicate the same internal structure and way of thinking, creating a counter-norm. This process poses an *aut-aut* that leaves no other choice but being inside one group or the other, which more and more slide away from each other and become less able to dialogue together. Since Westö belongs to the Swedish-speaking community but has an excellent command of Finnish and considers himself fully "Finnish", he represents in this regard an exception and, at the same time, an example of how this relationship can be re-thought. How this process can be applied to other constructions, such as the social membership, I tried to explain in the chapter about *Drakarna över Helsingfors*.

In 2005, Westö republished most of his short-stories in the collection *Lugna Favoriter*. He also added two new stories, *Lugna favoriter* and *1968*. Significantly, 1968 was a crucial year in *Vådan av att vara Skrake*, the year of the "jättekast" of Werner. In this short and very intensive tale, Westö returns to the suburb. No geographical indication is given, no

name (real or invented) appears to indicate where the action takes place, but it seems quite clear that the tall, white buildings near the forest resemble the architecture of Munkshöjden. The protagonist and the narrator of the story is a child, most probably (like Wiktor in *Skrake*, Kenneth in *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, Rickard in *Drakarna* and Westö himself at that time) seven-year-old. On a Sunday morning, the child goes with his father and his little-brother to visit the mother, who is in a clinic to cure her depression. In the evening, after coming back home, he takes a walk in the yard between the buildings and jumps on the mushrooms that still grow beside the layers of asphalt and concrete. He ignores the shouts coming from the other kids, because he does not understand their language, and lifts his head to look at the buildings, displaced around him like space-ships ready to take off.

På garden leker barn som talar ett språk som är omöjligt att förstå och de ropar efter mig. Jag bryr mig inte, jag tar trapporna, jag lämnar klippan och de vita rymdskeppen, jag går omkring bland röttegelhusen öster om köpcentret, jag går fram och tillbaka över gräsmattorna och sparkar på bläcksvamparna som faller sönder svarta och blöta, och jag stiger på röksvamparna och det säger *foff* och ut flyger mikroskopiskt små astronauter insvepta i ett kosmiskt moln¹. (Westö, 2005 : 381).

As Westö told me, *1968* has a special place in his literary production. He wrote it in a day and it represents, according to his own opinion, the end of a narrative line, a line that probably started a long time ago, with the description of the Noveros in the beginning of *Tango Orange*. It is with this nocturnal vision of the suburb that I wish to conclude my research, quoting the words of Westö, when he told me that Munkshöjden, despite its apparently anonymous and modest architecture and all the mixture of sad and melancholic memories it awakened in his mind, embodied the dream of a generation, of a whole country, a dream that had something “storslaget”, magnificent.

¹ “Some kids, who speak a language which is impossible to understand, are playing in the yard. I do not care about them, I take the stairs, I leave the cliff and the white space-ships, I turn around amidst the houses of red brick east of the shopping-center, I walk back and forth on the grass and I kick the shaggy manes, which fall apart black and wet, and I tramp on the puffballs, which say *foff* and small astronauts wrapped up in a cosmic cloud fly out of them.”

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