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# From Marracott to Munksnäs

Literary Suburbia and the Architecture of  
Finnish Modernity in Kjell Westö's *Melba*,  
*Mallinen och jag* and *Drakarna över  
Helsingfors*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the short story *Melba, Mallinen och jag* (1992) and the novel *Drakarna över Helsingfors* (1996) by Kjell Westö, with focus on the description of the suburbs of Munksnäs and Munkshöjden in the 1960s and 1970s. These two decades represent a pivotal moment in the history of Finland, as the country began to implement a fully capitalistic economy that led to radical socio-economic and cultural changes. From this perspective, the suburbs appear to be the ideal setting in which the new social hierarchy is established and the new economic dynamics unfold, with unavoidable conflicts and social tensions. Drawing on the neo-Marxist theory of Marshall Berman and recent studies on suburbs in city planning and literature, this paper aims to place the post-war Finnish suburbs in the literary tradition that started with Haussmann's renovation of Paris as portrayed by Baudelaire in *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869).

**Keywords:** Helsinki, suburbs, neo-Marxism, capitalism, urbanisation



**PRESSto.**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The debate about suburbs during the last few decades has highlighted the complexity of a phenomenon long considered of little interest, as if their peripheral position in the built environment reflected a likewise marginal meaning in the socio-political and cultural discourse about urban planning and architecture. In 1996, Larry Bourne noted that “[a]fter years of relative neglect [...] the suburbs, as befits of their importance and the scale of their emerging problems, have begun to move back onto centre stage in both urban research and planning” (Bourne 1996:163). He also emphasised the difficulty of grasping the epistemological nature of suburbs due to their “transitional” state: “It is also suggestive of the obvious but often overlooked fact that suburbs are evolutionary or transitional states: yesterday’s new suburbs are today’s mature suburbs and tomorrow’s older suburbs or inner city” (Bourne 1996:165). A similar position has been expressed by Laura Vaughan, Sam Griffiths, and Muki Haklay, who argue that “[t]he suburb should be considered as a distinctively dynamic domain that shapes and is shaped by society over time” (Vaughan et al. 2015:13), and that “to understand that suburbs are evolving entities shaped over time by external forces is another essential aspect all too frequently overlooked in traditional historical studies” (Vaughan et al. 2015:19). On the same line, Eric Prieto argues that any new settlement often originates nostalgic pleas for an idyllic past that has been lost. However, the very same place, as time passes, becomes “naturalized” (Prieto 2012:6) by history, it becomes integrated into the landscape or the built environment and acquires an aura of inviolability.

The effort to give a clear-cut definition of the intimate essence of a suburb is thus constantly frustrated by its elusive nature, and this perhaps explains the prolific taxonomy (“the festival of neologisms”, Dhanani 2015:58) around the concept of settlements on the outskirts of the city.<sup>1</sup>

If we shift the focus to the relationship between suburbs and literature, it appears evident that most of the research is relatively new and generally concerns the anglophone world. In *Suburbs. New Literary Perspectives*, the transitional, ‘fugitive’, nature of the suburb is reaffirmed: “Modern and contemporary writers recurrently picture the suburb as a shifting place on the edge, as a fluid periphery whose centre progressively becomes uncannily hazy” (Bouchet et al. 2022:16). In Scandinavia, some of the most recent scholarly contributions about suburbs can be found in the field of geocriticism and spatial studies, such as *Contemporary Nordic Literature and Spatiality*, in which Cristine Sarrimo analyses the representation of the Stockholm suburb of Hagalund in Hassan Loo Sattarvandi’s novel *Still*.

The focus of the novel is geocentric, that is, it solely depicts a limited part of the suburb of Hagalund. The rest of Hagalund and the area outside the suburb are described as a distant noise. Sweden and the world outside Sweden are never an integrated part of the diegesis. [...] “Sweden” as a nation is only present in *Still* by billboards with election slogans. (Sarrimo 2020:59)<sup>2</sup>

However, as an example of the Swedish *Miljonprogrammet* turned into a ghetto, Hagalund can be traced back to the idea of the suburb as a dystopian place completely disconnected from the rest of the country, not so different from its North American counterparts.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the representation of the two suburbs of Munksnäs and Munkshöjden in Helsinki in two works by Kjell Westö – the short story *Melba, Mallinen och jag* (*Melba, Mallinen and I*) and the novel *Drakarna över Helsingfors* (*Kites over Helsinki*) – and to show how these suburbs do not develop any antagonism towards the city nor are they in conflict

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<sup>1</sup> The idea that the suburb is a part of a process rather than a fixed category has been considered also by Nicholas A. Phelps (2018:40): “Perhaps a lowest common denominator that might integrate discourse on the suburb is that it is, in one or more senses, less than urban. If we accept this, we might also – although this is more controversial in some regards – accept the suggestion that, by the actions of their people and institutions, these settlements are in a process of becoming more urban. This is a question that has rarely been touched on in the literature (Bourne 1996) and remains a largely vacant research agenda (see also McManus and Ethington 2007). That is, rather than the suburb as a category, it is the process of (post)suburbanization that needs to be considered (Ekers, Hamel and Keil 2012)”.

<sup>2</sup> For a further analysis of the concept of suburb in the novel *Still*, see also Gendolavigna (2021:183–205).

with the rest of the country. They do not bear “the seeds of a profound disturbance of the political and economic hegemony” (Bouchet et al. 2022:20). On the contrary, they synecdochically represent the political, social, and cultural transformations of a whole nation.

Given the intangible nature of suburbs, whose borders cannot possibly be drawn once and for all, a specific timeframe is needed. Indeed, Westö describes Munksnäs and Munkshöjden within a specific timeframe, namely the Sixties and Seventies, when these places were new suburbs of the Finnish capital. Finally, through the analysis of a selection of excerpts, I argue that it is possible to detect two spatial dimensions of the suburb, both connected to its architecture and its interaction with the residents. One dimension is public, and turns the suburb into a sort of modern agora; the other is private, and reproduced through the suburbs’ different types of dwellings and their interiors. The representation of the suburb thus becomes an example of “storied spaces” (Malmio & Kurikka 2020:2), because it does not simply serve as backdrop for the storytelling but, thanks to its interaction with the characters living there, it generates meaning and enables cognitive associations. As Prieto observes, “[a] site does not become a place until a person comes along and enters into a meaning-generating relationship with it” (Prieto 2012:13).

## 2. FROM SAARINEN TO SUBURBIA: A SHORT HISTORY OF MUNKSNÄS AND MUNKSHÖJDEN

The first project to turn the areas of Munksnäs and Munkshöjden into suburbs of Helsinki was developed in 1915 by Eliel Saarinen in the pamphlet *Munksnäs-Haga och Stor-Helsingfors* (*Munksnäs-Haga and Greater Helsinki*). According to Saarinen’s plans, a large area (860 hectares) located northwest of the city centre was set to become Helsinki’s fastest-growing neighbourhood, with the capacity to accommodate up to 50,000 new residents. Saarinen, who firmly believed that industrialisation would lead to a demographic surge in Helsinki, partly took inspiration from Haussmann’s renovation of Paris, which he defined “[d]en betydelsefullaste företeelsen på stadsplanskonstens område på kontinenten under hela 1800-talet” (Saarinen 1915:18).<sup>3</sup> His drawings foresaw the creation of two large squares, which would act as focal points, and a radial, star-shaped development of wide streets in the style of the French boulevards. However, the outbreak of World War I and the Finnish Civil War curtailed the project. Only one building (Munksnäs pensionat) was completed in 1918, and some houses were built between the late Twenties and the late Thirties. In 1945, the population of Munksnäs was about 7,300 people (Nyström 1945:88), far less than what the architect had forecast. The situation changed after the great annexation of 1946, when the municipality of Helsinki radically expanded its borders, incorporating large areas (Munksnäs included) that became officially part of the city and cementing their status of suburbs.

Like in many other European countries, the rapid and solid growth of Helsinki after World War II, both in terms of size and population, was fuelled by the implementation of a fully industrial and capitalist model.<sup>4</sup> People from all over the country moved to the capital to participate in its development towards modernity.

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<sup>3</sup> “The most significant phenomenon in the field of city-planning on the continent during the entire nineteenth century”. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Schulman et al. (2003:39): “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 modernistisk riktning. Stadens tillväxt, i genomsnitt 10 000 invånare per år, resulterade i ett behov av alltmer omfattande urban bebyggelse” (“After the war, life started again, and the capital began to open up to the world around [...]. Starting from the Fifties, the process of urbanisation went faster and faster. Industry represented the basis of the population growth in Helsinki, but now also the service sector started to attract more people to the city. Helsinki’s outer character changed in a more modernistic direction, too. The city growth, with an average of 10,000 inhabitants per year, created a need for more comprehensive urban building”).

Marshall Berman claims that both modernity and modernism stem from the urbanisation propelled by the industrial revolution. From the radical transformation of European cities, a new type of literature was born, aiming to describe the ‘maelstrom’ of modern life. Places like the Parisian boulevard described in Baudelaire’s *petit poème en prose* “The Eye of the Poor” from 1864 and the Nevskij Prospekt described by Dostoevskij in *Notes from the Underground* epitomise modernity’s unavoidable clashes and social struggles. The street becomes the *locus deputatus* where different social classes meet and confront each other. On the newly laid cobblestones of the boulevards, the Parisian bourgeoisie could come across the poor people who lived there before Haussmann’s demolition plan because the boulevard is also a link that connects the centre to the outskirts of the city.<sup>5</sup> In the same way, on the Nevskij Prospekt:

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)

As we shall see in the next subchapter, a similar representation of the *maelstrom of modernity* appears also in the Finnish suburbs of Munksnäs and Munkshöjden during the Sixties and Seventies.

### 3. MELBA, MALLINEN OCH JAG: MAPPING THE IDEOLOGICAL TERRAIN OF SUBURBIA

Since his debut, Westö has been considered a keen observer of the transformations of Helsinki and a careful investigator of its history.<sup>6</sup> With the short story *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, published in the collection *Fallet Bruus* (*The Bruus Case*) in 1992, he started his literary exploration of the suburb of Munksnäs. As the author himself has claimed, this short story has an autobiographical matrix, which is intimately related to his Finland-Swedish background: “När jag läser *Melba, Mallinen och jag* (1992), ser jag tydligare än förr hur svårt jag ännu i trettioårsåldern hade att acceptera den för många av oss finlandssvenskar så typiska balansgången mellan svenskt och finskt” (Westö 2009:7).<sup>7</sup>

*Melba, Mallinen och jag* consists of a long analepsis depicting the late childhood and the early adolescence in the life of Kenneth Backman. The story takes place in an imaginary suburb called Marracott, built on the outskirts of Helsinki after World War II when the country’s economy rapidly bounced back to pre-war standards.<sup>8</sup> The nation’s wealth kept growing relentlessly over the following two decades, which led to a massive urbanisation.<sup>9</sup> Kenneth comes from a Swedish-speaking middle-class family that has moved to the capital from Österbotten in search of a better future.

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<sup>5</sup> Commenting on Baudelaire’s “The Eye of the Poor”, where a rich couple sitting in a café on the boulevard sees a poor family standing outside the window, Berman (1983:159) observes: “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”.

<sup>6</sup> Andersson (1997:67f.) reviewed Westö’s debut as follows: “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” (“The enchantment for the city, the Urbs, is indeed evident in early modernist poetry; one celebrates the asphalt and the engines and the neon lights and the cinemas [...]. It is evident that the modernist experience has never died out in Finland-Swedish poetry, and an example is the debut poet Kjell Westö”).

<sup>7</sup> “When I read *Melba, Mallinen och jag* (1992), I see more clearly than before how difficult it was for me, even in my thirties, to accept the tightrope between Swedish and Finnish, so peculiar to many of us Finland-Swedes”.

<sup>8</sup> “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 et al. 1999:237).

<sup>9</sup> “In the 1960s the population of Finnish towns increased by over 600,000, more than ever before within a corresponding period” (Jussila et al. 1999:300).

Scholars have previously analysed *Melba, Mallinen och jag* either from the point of view of the linguistic conflict that characterises Kenneth's upbringing – an enduring socio-political issue in Finland (Ekman 1995) – or as a coming-of-age story where the protagonist is unable to fulfil the masculine ideal projected onto him by society (Stenwall 1996). However, it is possible to detect another dimension, related to the historical, political and economic changes that Finland experienced in the post-war years, epitomised by the architecture of the suburb.

Westö imagines that the modern development of Munksnäs and Munkshöjden is the result of an official tender, to which two diametrically opposed projects are submitted:

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; Marracotts 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.<sup>10</sup> (Westö 1992:15)

Although the toponyms Marracott Hill and Marracott Beach are the product of the writer's imagination, it seems quite clear that they overlap with the real suburbs of Munksnäs and Munkshöjden.<sup>11</sup> A similar 'invented cartography' of this suburb appears also in the novel *Lang* (2002), where Westö coined the toponym Kallhamra for the neighbourhood where the main characters, Christian Lang and Konrad Wendel, grew up. As Terhi Ainiala and Lieven Ameel (Ainiala & Ameel 2018:203) suggest, the rivalry between the characters is rooted in the "geography of their childhood": Lang lived in the richer part of the suburb located near the beach whereas Wendel grew up in the rental apartment buildings up the hill. The scholars also note how this internal division of the suburb gives birth to a "dynamic that tells one particular compelling story of the Finnish post-war suburbanization" (2018:204).

In *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, this dynamic acquires a broader, collective perspective. The upper part of the suburb, Marracott Hill, is described as a place that hosts people with different backgrounds (some are city-born, other migrants from the rest of the country), different social backgrounds (workers and members of the lower middle class), different regional accents and mother tongues (both Finnish and Swedish).

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*, *snadi*, *lafka* och *sofka*. Där fanns folk från Raumo-trakten som sa roliga saker som "*lunta tuli aivan kränsmäntinäns*". Där fanns människor från norra och östra Finland som sa *mie*, *sie*, *myö*, *työ* och *hyö* i stället för *minä*, *sinä*, *me*, *te* och *he*. Där fanns också endel svenskar, men inte i huset där jag bodde i.<sup>12</sup> (Westö 1992:16f.)

On the other side of the suburb, lying gracefully by the sea, is the more refined Marracott Beach, where the architecture is characterised by larger and more comfortable apartments and villas. This is where the upper middle class finds its built environment. Taken as a whole, then, Marracott is anything but a homogeneous suburb occupying a marginal position in contrast with

<sup>10</sup> "A commission was appointed. 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 profile of the 'housing project' in Manhattan and Saint Louis. Marracott's competitors were Pavel Jefimovitj Pavlinskij and Irina Maximovna Pavlinskaja, the Russian constructivist couple who shortly before had created two suburbs, each of them for 50,000 inhabitants in that city that everybody thought would be called for all the foreseeable future Leningrad".

<sup>11</sup> The similarity was first noticed by Michel Ekman (1992:248): "(Marracott Hill) har anmärkningsvärt mycket gemensamt med Munkshöjden – t.o.m. fotbollsplanen tycks vara den där jag själv spelade för 25 år sedan" ("[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").

<sup>12</sup> "In Marracott Hill lived workers, the lower middle-class, and the Middle Class that Truly Wants to Climb the Social Ladder Fast. There were natives from Helsinki, who used old Russian words such as *buli*, *snadi*, *lafka* and *sofka*. There were people from the Raumo region who said funny things like *lunta tuli aivan kränsmäntinäns*. There were people from the north and the east of Finland who said *mie*, *sie*, *myö*, *työ* and *hyö* instead of *minä*, *sinä*, *me*, *te* and *he*. There were also quite a lot of Finland-Swedes, but not in the house where I lived".

an allegedly dominant city centre. Quite the opposite: it is a microcosm that replicates on a smaller scale the social stratification, cultural evolution, political tension, economic development, and multilingualism of the entire country.

Westö's narrative strategy of inventing the architecture of the suburb from scratch allows him to invest it with symbolic historical meaning and political resonance. The choice of Henry S. Marracott III over the Russian architects Pavlinskij becomes a symbol of Finland's definitive shift towards capitalism and a Western-oriented lifestyle. This process is also epitomised by the different aspirations of the suburb's new residents. Kenneth's father belongs to those who have a boundless enthusiasm and an unwavering faith in the new capitalistic economy and look with fervent optimism toward the bright future ahead.

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 annan. [...] 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 Riktningen.<sup>13</sup> (Westö 1992:24)

Kenu's and Mallinen's fathers are hard-working self-made men, the former has just obtained an MBA and the latter is an engineer who takes part in the project for the country's first highway from Helsinki to Turku. Iso-Hiisi is instead a dissident and represents the radical left, which tries to resist the new economic system in favour of a socialist-inspired model.

Marracott Hill and Marracott Beach appear to be a chronotope (Bakhtin 1981) encapsulating the distinctive features of the Finnish society at a specific moment in history. This suburb is a place where residents have different backgrounds, jobs, and expectations, where political opinions differ radically, where even the language can change from household to household. However, the members of this crowd have something in common; they all find themselves on the threshold of a new era, and thus need to deal with new social dynamics, a new economic system, and a new lifestyle. In Marracott, the rising middle class shares their space with the lower class, the newly capitalistic-oriented bourgeoisie lives next door to proletarians and political dissidents. The collective perspective of this narrative is spatially conveyed through a public architectural dimension – that of the yard.

It is on Marracott's *gård* that the differences among the residents become visible: the richest, like Kenu's and Mallinen's fathers already have a car, whereas the poorest, like Mrs Sunila and Iso-Hiisi still use public transport. It is here that the young Kenneth is afraid to run into Melba, the neighbourhood bully, who wants to beat him up simply because he is a *hurri*, a highly derogative term for the Finland-Swedes. It is here that the residents express their diverging opinions about a sculpture donated by the Soviet Union, meant to symbolise the peaceful relationship between the two countries. While Kenneth's and Mallinen's fathers frown upon the ambiguous meaning of this donation, others – like Iso-Hiisi – praise it as more aesthetically significant than the conservative sculpture of Marshal Mannerheim riding a horse (Westö 1992:41). However, the suburb is the urban space that makes it possible for the members of this mixed crowd to confront one other, because the new social hierarchy has not yet completely solidified, and the modernisation of the country is still a work in progress.

According to Berman's theory, Modernism is the movement *par excellence* of the urban streets, because it is here that the social and cultural clashes occur and the economic force of capitalism takes form. In this regard, the post-war Finnish suburbs of Munksnäs and Munkshöjden

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<sup>13</sup> "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 heading towards one completely different. [...] But regardless the difference between their elastic futures, they all came home late. The struggles of their days were long and regarded, as I understood much later, Economy, Growth and Direction".

– disguised by Westö as Marracott Hill and Marracott Beach – can rightfully be included among the places where modernity unfolds, like the Nevskij Prospect in Saint Petersburg and the boulevards of Paris during the second half of the nineteenth century.

#### 4. *DRAKARNA ÖVER HELSINGFORS: INTERIORS, COMMODIFICATION, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM*

Westö has claimed that *Melba, Mallinen och jag* holds a special place in his authorship as it contains *in nuce* some of the defining features of his later works.<sup>14</sup> After its publication, however, he experienced several episodes of writer's block. On a cold January evening in 1996, he managed to squeeze out one page and, after six months, this fragment had grown to a five-hundred-page novel titled *Drakarna över Helsingfors*. Published in the autumn of the same year, it was immediately acclaimed as a modern classic of Finland-Swedish literature.<sup>15</sup> In her review in *Nordisk Tidskrift*, Korsström notices the connection with *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, but emphasises how in *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, Westö expands the time axis up until the late Eighties, giving it a multi-generational character that the author will continue to develop in his later works.<sup>16</sup>

More recent scholarly contributions have focused on the multilinguistic dimension of the novel. Words and phrases in Finnish – and even entire lines of dialogues – appear rather frequently in the text as if to highlight the complex and, at times, tormented relationship between the Swedish-speaking and the Finnish-speaking communities, an aspect of the text that affects the local readers and challenges translators (Tidigs 2016; Haapamäki & Eriksson 2017; Tallberg-Nygård 2017).

As much as the novel has a broader urban dimension and a longer time span, the suburbs of Munksnäs and Munkshöjden still occupy a prominent position in the first part. Compared to *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, the spatial dimension here is not so much directed outwards, it rather turns inwards – into the different types of dwellings and their interiors – which acquire a socio-economic significance, as they reflect the escalating process of commodification brought about by the post-war economic boom.

Westö describes the history of the middle-class family Bexar, which resembles that of Kenneth's family in *Melba* and the author's own background.<sup>17</sup> In the first part of the novel, we follow the Bexars as they move to different areas of Munkshöjden and Munksnäs, each change

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<sup>14</sup> 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 off the mark. Only after finishing the novel, I realized there were certain themes 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” (Westö 2000:107). Bold characters in the original.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Korsström (1996:8): “Är det nu möjligt att Kjell Westö gått och gjort det som Runar Schildt och så många finlandssvenska prosaister aldrig gjorde – nämligen skrivit den Stora finlandssvenska romanen, undrar jag efter att ha slagit igen Westö's debutroman” (“Is it really possible that Kjell Westö has managed to do what Runar Schildt and so many other Finland-Swedish prose writers never did – that is to say, to write the Great Finland-Swedish novel? I'm left with this question after having read Westö's debut novel”).

<sup>16</sup> Korsström (1997:82f.): “*Dragons over Helsinki* [sic] 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's article has been published in both Swedish and English. Funny enough, the title *Drakarna över Helsingfors* is translated as *Dragons over Helsinki*, although the correct translation is *Kites over Helsinki*.

<sup>17</sup> As Westö himself explains (Westö 2009:232f.) in the autobiographical text *Har aldrig hittat hem* (*Never Found My Way Home*): “Det geografiska navet för min mammas familj var Tammerfors. Min mormors far Hugo Sandbacka hade lämnat hemorten Nederveitil, och kort efter inbördeskriget hade han landat i ‘Finlands Manchester’ och grundat läderfabriken ute i Epilä. När jag var barn var fabriken redan nedlagd, och min mormor hade tillfälligt flyttat från Tammerfors”. (“The geographical hub of my mother's family was Tampere. My grandmother's father, Hugo Sandbacka, had left his home in Nederveitil 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 had temporarily left Tampere”).

of address marking a step upward on the social ladder. The father of the protagonist, Henrik Bexar, moves with his family to the suburb of Munkshöjden in the early 1950s: “Men snart skall vi anlända till denna värld där ingenting har mer än några år på nacken, där trapporna luktar bonvax och allt är nyrappat, där natthimlen är stor och märklig och svag orangefärgad av det samlade ljus staden omkring oss utstrålar” (Westö 1996:13).<sup>18</sup>

The narrator’s voice in this part of the novel belongs to Henrik’s son, Riku. The suburb is first evoked through the smell of the staircase in a newly built condominium, where the Bexar family has just moved in. Shortly after, Henrik is described as he returns home at night:

Henrik kommer hem till stenhuset på Nystadsvägen.

Han är rastlös och trerumslägenheten känns med ens låg och trång. 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 ting.

Andrahandssaker.

Tecknen för ett liv levt på nåder.

[...]

Han hör vattenledningar brusa. Någon svalkar sig. Duschar. Vi hade aldrig någon dusch i Skrottoms, mamma och jag.

[...] Han tändar en Marlboro, röker den, börjar planera. Tobaken och målsättningarna hjälper honom att stävja de sista resterna av rastlöshet.

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.<sup>19</sup> (Westö 1996:20f.)

Henrik is a man of his time. He has left the countryside to start a new life in the big city. He has a good job in a law firm, a lovely wife, two kids and another one on the way. Life in this suburb is already better compared to the countryside: running water, shower, a radio. However, this is not enough: the interior of his apartment smells of poverty, because most of the furniture is inherited from his in-laws – old, second-hand items that must be thrown out and replaced. A larger apartment and a new car – American, like the dream he is chasing – are now needed. Hard work and determination will pay off. As noted by Jussi Ojajärvi (2006:158), “[a]t this point, the consumer desires are directed at acquisitions with a relatively long-term use value [...]. In brief, Henrik lives in a society where consumption has not yet turned into ‘consumerism’”.

Soon, however, Henrik becomes a workaholic, spending every evening at home buried under a pile of papers. After a few years, the Bexars move away from Munkshöjden to Smedsgatan, in the city centre – but only temporarily. Once Henrik becomes the CEO of a major Swedish import-export company, they return to the suburb, but this time to Munksnäs, the more affluent part of the neighbourhood.

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.

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<sup>18</sup> “Soon we will be landing in this world where nothing is more than a few years old, where the staircases smell of cleaning products and everything is freshly plastered, where the night sky is big and strange and has a tinge of orange because of all the lights radiating from the city around us”.

<sup>19</sup> “Henrik comes home to the stone house in Nystadsvägen. He is restless, and the three-room apartment suddenly feels low-ceilinged and cramped. The magic wand of restlessness makes him sick of the old-fashioned grammophone and the cheap striped curtains in the kitchen, and the worn-out brown armchairs that he and Benita have inherited from Didde and Totti. Heritage! Served-out things. Second-hand things. Signs of a life lived on charity. [...] He hears the water pipes fizzing. Someone cools off. Takes a shower. We never had a shower in Skrottoms, mum and I. [...] He lights a Marlboro, smokes it, starts planning. The cigarette and the idea of setting goals help him keep the last bit of restlessness at bay. This autumn I will buy a car. It will be a Ford, they are reliable vehicles. This apartment cannot swallow one more child. We need something bigger. And we shall have a TV”.



Vårt hus var ett femtiotalradhus 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.<sup>20</sup> (Westö 1996:58)

The interior of the apartment has also changed: “Benita sitter på fönsterplatsen, tätt invid det nya lingonbladsgröna draperiet. Hon 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” (Westö 1996:42).<sup>21</sup>

The new, fashionable furniture has replaced the second-hand “worn-out” pieces once inherited from the in-laws. The radio has been replaced by a television, and the Ford Taunus has given way to a more luxurious Renault 19. The Bexars’ social advancement is not yet completed. A few years later, they move to a house equipped with a designer kitchen, a private sauna, and a sea view. The house is only a few hundred metres away from the previous address, but much further away in terms of social prestige:

Holzingerföretagets japanska hemelektronik säljer allt bättre. Det 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.<sup>22</sup> (Westö 1996:146)

Henrik has fulfilled his ‘American Dream’ although the price to pay – and not just in economic terms – has been very high. The tremendous workload and frequent travels abroad distance him from his family. His wife Benita falls into depression and ultimately decides to file for divorce, while his eldest son Daniel cuts all family bounds. The American Dream of Strandstigen is short-lived. Henrik’s marriage falls apart and his relationship with his son is irreparably damaged.

Compared to *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, the suburbs of Munksnäs and Munkshöjden are represented through a different spatial relationship between places and characters. Focusing on the status symbol of the dwellings and their interiors, this relationship becomes more private. If the *gård* was the public arena where confrontation between different social groups was possible, the dwellings and their interiors represent the individual dimension, where each object, piece of furniture, or appliance reflects the newly acquired social status.

Berman believes that the defining feature of capitalism is its “innovative self-destruction”.<sup>23</sup> In his analysis of *Faust*, Berman suggests that it is possible to detect three different stages

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<sup>20</sup> “In the autumn when I started third grade we moved back to Munksnejden. We lived in Ritobergsvägen, in what already from a distance looked like a patrician apartment. Our house was on the outskirts of Munksnäs, next to Alvar Aalto’s studio. Behind it there were forests, mountains, and sea. Our place was a row house from the Fifties, of the brightly optimistic kind. To every apartment belonged a garage on the ground floor. [...] But each of us had their own room now, Dani, Marina and I. And I assume that we actually were well off, because we did not need to sell Smedsgatan, but rented it to an older couple, distant relatives of Dani’s former classmate Rufus Palm. We had a metallic grey Renault 19 that year”.

<sup>21</sup> “Benita sits by the window, close to the new lingonberry-leaf green curtain. She thinks it is too heavy for the Bexar family’s new modern kitchen. Henrik insisted they would buy it, and he also wanted to buy the matching living-room curtain and the ochre yellow sofa”.

<sup>22</sup> “The Holzinger’s company’s Japanese home electronics are increasing their sales. This has its consequences: the autumn when Marc Bolan dies in a car crash, the Bexars move from Ritobergsvägen to Strandstigen. It is only a matter of half a kilometer. But the distance is so much longer”.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Berman (1983:99): “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 neighbourhoods 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

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 encounters an obstacle in an old couple, Philomen and Bauchis, who try to resist modern evolution. Faust gets rid of them, although he regrets it almost immediately, and suddenly realises that, now that his work is complete, he himself has become an obstacle destined to be removed.

This episode exemplifies the inner nature of capitalism, which initially releases a surge of positive energy and leads to great achievements, but then gives way to a relentless mechanism that does not admit exceptions and is based on a constant replacement of what has been created with something newer, in a process of more and more rapid consumption, in order to sustain production.

Like Faust, Henrik Bexar's dynamism is initially driven by the desire for a better life and the will to be part of the optimistic spirit animating his nation after two wars and a long period of poverty. In this regard, he resembles Kenu's father in *Melba, Mallinen och jag*. Gradually, though, Henrik is drawn into a vortex of money-making and overspending, exhausting work and consumerism. This process, epitomised by the purchase of increasingly larger houses filled with new appliances and expensive cars, reflects a broader reality in the country. Finland, like many other Western European nations, experienced three decades of unprecedented economic growth, which, however, already contained the seeds of the crisis that would come later, culminating in the financial crisis of the early 1990s. Henrik himself will eventually be replaced by a new, unscrupulous generation of financial whizz kids. Quite significantly, the first part of the novel ends with a quote that Riku finds in a *Rolling Stone* magazine:

Men nu hade jag läst en lång Rolling Stone-artikel med rubriken 'Facing Life's Uncertainties', och i den hade jag hittat några ord som jag tyckte var vackra.

Och det ironiska var att jag, som inte hade en aning om deras ursprung, hade velat rista in dem i Jimbos sten:

*All that is solid melts into air, Jimbo baby.*<sup>24</sup> (Westö 1996:190).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Suburbs are often subject to a simplistic dichotomy, typically associated either with marginality, poverty, and social exclusion or with the affluence and seclusion of gated communities. While scholars have increasingly emphasised the complexity of suburban spaces, mainstream perceptions continue to frame them in predominantly negative terms (D'Amato 2024). In this context, Munksnäs and Munkshöjden in post-war Helsinki represent a notable exception and go beyond the usual dichotomies often associated with suburbs. Neither places of socio-economic relegation nor exclusive retreats for the wealthy; neither utopian visions turned dystopian, nor idyllic enclaves disconnected from the rest of the city, these suburbs embody a more nuanced reality. They reflect, in microcosm, the dynamics of social mobility, political contrasts, and linguistic conflicts that characterised Finnish society during the decades following World War II.

Westö does more than depict the urban development of these areas – he examines their intricate relationship with the people who inhabit them. In *Melba, Mallinen och jag*, this relationship is spatially articulated through the yard, which functions as a modern agora where social tensions,

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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".

<sup>24</sup> "But now I had read a long *Rolling Stone* article titled *Facing Life's Uncertainties*, and in it I had found some words that I thought were beautiful. And the ironic thing was that I, who had no idea of their origin, had wanted to carve them into Jimbo's stone: *All that is solid melts into air, Jimbo baby*". Italics and bold type in the original.

cultural transformations, and personal conflicts are laid bare. In *Drakarna över Helsingfors*, attention shifts inwards, into domestic interiors, to explore how the post-war reconstruction era evolves into a period of intense commodification and consumerism – an evolution marked by the erosion of family ties and profound psychological dismay. Through these representations, Westö's suburbs emerge not as peripheral voids, but as storied spaces at the heart of Finland's opening towards modernity.

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