



Aino Kallas

Negotiations with Modernity

Edited by
Leena Kurvet-Käosaar and Lea Rojola

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Introduction

Aino Kallas, Negotiations with Modernity

Aino Kallas (née Aino Julia Maria Krohn) was born on August 2, 1878 and, according to her own words, had an artist's "multicolored pulse in her blood" that implied the possibility of one day "flying like smoke, like wind" beyond the material borders of her daily self (1920, 39) for as long as she could remember. Envisioning herself as an artist in an early autobiographical work *Katinka Rabe* (1920) that focuses on her childhood, Kallas was at the time of completing the novel still at the beginning of her self-realization as an artist; she couldn't have foreseen the scope and impact of her work in the future. Yet this elaboration of a creative credo constitutes an important axis that informs her journey of following a vocation in an environment not always hospitable or accommodating to her ambitions. Today, the varied and rich legacy of Aino Kallas (1878–1956) that consists of novels, short stories, plays, literary and cultural criticism, memoirs, biographies, diaries, and letters places her firmly among the outstanding writers and intellectuals of the first half of the 20th century in the (modernist) literary canon of Finland and Estonia.

In October 2008, the 130th anniversary of Aino Kallas' birth was celebrated at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu with a conference that focused on her engagements with "the modern" on the Estonian and Finnish cultural scene at the beginning of the 20th century – the two cultural contexts that played a central role in her life. Aino Kallas once noted in her diary that she has no one country to call her own, "she belongs to the world"¹ (1956, 182). Here, Kallas does not so much celebrate cosmopolitan sentiment but voices a feeling of loss for not being able to fully belong to one culture – or the failure of any one culture to recognize her as one of its own. The feeling of loss is understandable, because Kallas left Finland very early, at the age of 22 when she in 1900 married an Estonian scholar and man of letters Oskar Kallas and, via St. Petersburg, the young couple moved to Estonia. This had a significant impact on the authorship of Aino Kallas. From 1903 on, she wrote only two works in which the events do not occur in Estonia. And yet, the works are written in Finnish and in that sense she dwelled in two places, two countries and, at times, felt that neither of them understood her literary art.

However, from a wider perspective of the artistic and intellectual legacy of Aino Kallas, such identification also testifies to her intellectual and aes-

thetic grasp of modernity and her varied and rich modes of engagement with it. Compared to “old Europe”, Estonia and Finland were two young cultures at the beginning of the 20th century devoted not only to the process of advancing national culture, but also tuned in to absorbing and reflecting upon wider international cultural developments. For Aino Kallas, following and participating in the cultural debates in Estonia and Finland was a priority. At the same time, however, her whole oeuvre is a constant process of negotiation between her more immediate contexts and the leading conceptual frameworks of art, aesthetics, geniality, knowledge, subjectivity, race, sexuality, nature, etc., circling in Europe at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

In the re-conceptualization of Finnish and Estonian modernism and the literary heritage of *fin de siècle*, Aino Kallas is today considered to occupy a significant position (see, e.g., Rojola 1992, 132–150; Olesk 1999, 324–326; Kurvet-Käosaar 2006; Leskelä-Kärki 2006; Melkas 2006; Leskelä-Kärki, Melkas and Hapuli 2009). However, early research on Kallas treats the question of modernism or modernity in relation to her work with considerable reservations. Kai Laitinen, who wrote the first monograph of Kallas, argues that because of the historical themes in Kallas’ work, her place is firmly outside the modernist literary canon. This is due to the fact that the concept of modernism is quite narrow in Laitinen’s study. When feminist scholars began approaching the work of Kallas with more flexible concepts of modernism and modernity, the result was quite the opposite: Kallas’ fiction, life-writings and essayistic work inscribe important aspects of the kind of engagement with modernity that has been vital to women authors all over to Europe. In particular, in the first decades of the 20th century, many modernist women authors tried to imagine a new female subject through various kinds of myths and utopias, and Kallas is one among them. Such imaginative work produced a new female subject that was also, in a pronounced manner, a bodily and hence a sexual subject, and many central themes of Kallas’ fiction as well as her other writings confirm such position (Kurvet-Käosaar 2006, Lappalainen 1995, Rojola 1994). The extensive scope of the new kind of knowledge that emerged within the process of engagement with myths and history of women authors of the period, including the work of Aino Kallas, can be viewed as a new epistemology within the Western ways of knowing (Melkas 2006). These re-evaluations place Aino Kallas firmly at the heart of the new worldview that emerged gradually at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

For Aino Kallas, being a modern individual was never an aim in itself; rather, her engagement with central intellectual and cultural debates of her times was a means of producing and assembling for herself a space of existence, “a room of her own” that she could inhabit creatively and with a sense of agency – as a woman (with its varied and often conflicting roles) and as an artist. Aino Kallas is not alone in her attempt to elaborate an existential stance that would enable and support female subjectivity and creativity and cater for the needs of a woman intellectual in an era when misogynistic visions of culture and society, perceptions of art, and genius abounded. Comparable strategies and manoeuvres can be detected in the

ways in which many early 20th century women of letters came to voice a “critique of modern civilization”, ultimately leading them to “remarkable new vision[s]” (Hill 1999, 1–2). (See, e.g., Benstock 1987, Gilbert and Gubar 1987, 1989, Felski 1995, Podnieks 2000).

Although the interpretations of Kallas’ fictional work in relation to the paradigm of modernism have played a crucial role in securing her a position in the literary canon of Finnish and Estonian modernism, the current collection is not limited to an analysis of aesthetic concerns and values, but places her work and life into the wider socio-cultural frameworks of her times. The traditional, dominantly male use of the paradigm of literary modernism has foregrounded, more or less exclusively, aesthetic and formal concerns. In the Anglo-American conceptualisations of modernism, influenced by the New Critics and T. S. Eliot’s “doctrines of impersonality and of the objective correlative” (Hanson 1998, 203), literary works were carefully isolated from their wider cultural contexts, making it appear “blunt, banal, even gauche to discuss modernist writing as a critique of twentieth-century culture” (Dekoven 1992, 12). Challenging the view of transcendent art, feminist critics have made visible the extent to which modernist literature was “always embedded in particular social and ideological systems in which gender was a key element” (Hanson 1998, 204). Several feminist critics of modernism have highlighted the need to look for the implications of the modernist motto of “making it new” not only in women’s texts but also in the ways they managed their lives and conceived themselves, placing emphasis on defiance of normative configurations of gender roles (see, e.g., Benstock 1986, 3; Hanscombe and Smyers 1987, 11; Podnieks 2000, 74).

Approaching the question of modernism and gender from the perspective of a cultural critic, Rita Felski calls into doubt the very usefulness of the concept of viewing it as a set of dominantly formal markers that makes it possible to view some literary texts as “embodying the truth of the modern *Zeitgeist* in a uniquely representative way” (1995, 26); she proposes, instead, to use a more flexible concept of modernity. Aiming at a wider gendered perspective of the modern period, Felski, as along with Ann Ardis, argues for the need to take into consideration not only a few “exemplary canonical [literary] texts” by women writers but also the impact of mass political movements and various aspects of popular culture such as fashion, consumer culture, journalism, as well as a radical constructions of feminine sexuality (Felski 1995, 27–28, Ardis 2003, 1). Felski also highlights the necessity to include in the analysis of women’s experience of modernity women belonging to different strata of society and a concern for the everyday and the mundane, the areas of women’s lives usually dismissed as insignificant (1995, 28).

Though opinions vary both on dating modernity as well as its implications in terms of progress and development, it undoubtedly belongs among the key concepts of Western culture and history. The current collection strives to make visible the manner of Aino Kallas’ engagement with modernity, emphasizing her significance not only to the cultural contexts and artistic and intellectual horizons of Finland and Estonia, but also on a wider scale also those of Scandinavia and Europe. There is no doubt that

Aino Kallas was throughout her life intensely tuned toward building a familiarity with the key debates over culture, aesthetics, gender, sexuality, race, and environment in Europe and in Scandinavia. Her wide horizon of knowledge was exemplary for a woman of her time, and her observations of topical intellectual and aesthetic issues of the day (that in overt format can be found in her cultural criticism and in more covert manner her fictional work) were sharp and insightful.

Aino Kallas' negotiations with modernity can be tentatively divided into various clusters of thought. Questions of the new aesthetics emerged in relation to the Young Estonia movement, in Kallas' search for her own poetics of writing, and in the interrelationship and tensions between aesthetic and experiential concerns. The role of Aino Kallas as a 'cultural ambassador', mediating and introducing Estonian culture in Finland and vice versa, as well as her attempts to place Estonian and Finnish culture into wider European frameworks, relate to aesthetic concerns but also reflect on the problem of (cultural) belonging in Aino Kallas' own life. Aesthetic matters in turn are intertwined with wider socio-cultural concerns and intellectual developments that find reflection in Aino Kallas' fiction, in her life-writings, and in her work as a cultural critic. Demonstrating a familiarity with the thought of many leading European intellectuals of the period, the work of Aino Kallas engages, for example, with the perceptions of culture and humanity of more general nature (Friedrich Nietzsche, Otto Weininger, Georg Simmel), sexuality (Sigmund Freud, Cesare Lombroso, Richard von Krafft-Ebbing), race (Arthur de Gobineau, Hippolyte Taine, Auguste Morel), the interrelationship between nature and civilization (Elin Wägner, Rosa Mayreder), and women's emancipation, in particular Scandinavian feminist thought (Ellen Key, Minna Canth, Laura Marholm).

Although Aino Kallas is most well known in Finland and in Estonia, her work has also been translated into English, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch, Italian, German, Hungarian and Russian. In 1922 Aino Kallas moved to London to accompany her husband who assumed the post of the Estonian Ambassador to the United Kingdom. The Kallas family stayed in London for 12 years, and it was during this period that Aino Kallas wrote her most influential work, the novels *Barbara von Tisenhusen* (1923), *Reigin Pappi* [The Rector of Reigi] (1926), and *Sudenmorsian* [The Wolf's Bride] (1928). She also gradually developed an international reputation, and translations of her work started appearing in different languages. Only two years after moving to London, two volumes of her work were translated into English by Alex Matson: the short story collection *The White Ship* (1924) and a collection of two novels, *Barbara von Tisenhusen* and *Reigin Pappi* published under the title *Eros the Slayer* (1924), followed by *The Wolf's Bride* that was published in 1930.

This current collection, the first in English on the work of Aino Kallas, reflects on the processes of Aino Kallas' engagement with modernity from various viewpoints and thematic angles, focusing on her novels and short stories, the previously unknown play "Bathseba", diaries, letters, cultural criticism, and visual images of her. Although the objective of the collection is not only to present Aino Kallas' work and life from the perspective

of feminist criticism, most contributions make visible the genderedness of different discourses of modernity, and Aino Kallas' awareness of such bias as well as the importance for her to relate to aesthetic and socio-cultural matters and reflect upon her own life as a woman. Such perspective, however, rarely comes to dominate the work of Aino Kallas but rather forms an ever-present level of engagement and reflection among a range of issues concerning modernity.

The articles in the first section of the volume, titled "Along the Trajectories of the New Woman", concentrate on Aino Kallas' work as part of a process of envisioning new female and feminist aesthetics modes of knowledge. Tiina Kirss offers a comparative contrapuntal reading of the fiction of Aino Kallas in relation to that of an internationally renowned Danish woman author Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), focusing on dialectical, uneasy, and unconventional relations with "modernisms" in the literary cultures of the primary audiences of the two authors. As Kirss argues, Dinesen in her "stylised Gothic" stories and Kallas in her historical fictions take stances on an exoticized past: despite many of the labels each have warranted in literary histories, neither is a "modern" writer only. Lea Rojola focuses on issues of the female voice within the Western literary tradition through an analysis of Aino Kallas' short story "Lasnamäen valkea laiva" [The White Ship] (1913). Concentrating on the theme of the female voice and a woman's right to speak on three levels, Rojola interprets the short story in relation to the process of Aino Kallas seeking a voice of her own as an author, the implications of the cultural figure of the speaking woman for her own community, and within the wider context of the Western literary tradition, where the female voice is usually interpreted as a symbol of disastrous power. Kukku Melkas presents Aino Kallas' prose work in connection with the early (feminist) ecological thought that emerged in Scandinavia between the two World Wars, examining Kallas' exploration of the gendered culture/nature dualism and her search for a new kind of relationship between woman, man, and nature that can be seen as a novel way of thinking about nature and environment – which can today be seen as part of ecological thought.

Five articles in the section "Crossing Modernity's Master Discourses" trace Kallas' engagement with cultural debates of central importance in late 19th and early 20th century Europe concerning decadent modernism, theories of race and heredity, and the relationship between Finnish literary symbolism and Kallas' unpublished play *Bathseba*. The section also extends the application possibilities of the concept of modernity beyond the more common temporal frame of late 19th and early 20th century, focusing on Kallas' reading of Goethe and offering a conceptualisation of the fiction of Kallas within the framework of existentialism. The article by Mirjam Hinrikus highlights the role of Aino Kallas as a cultural critic via her collection of essays *Nuori Viro. Muotokuvia ja suuntaviivoja* [Young Estonia. Portraits and Trajectories] (1918), offering an in-depth analysis of the imprint of Hippolyte Taine on Kallas' explanations of Young Estonia's place in cultural history, particularly his insistence on contextualising literary texts in the cultural "moment" of their genesis. She also points out that an outstanding feature of the collection is the problem of (the excess of) modernity – of European

culture having reached its peak and from there taking a plunge toward the over ripened impulses of decadence and degeneration. Leena Kurvet-Käosaar explores Aino Kallas' engagement with race and heredity debates of late 19th century and early 20th century Europe, focusing in particular on her representation, both in fiction and in life-writings, of the potential and limits of the Estonian race – highlighting in particular “the vitality of native peasant blood” as the foundation of high-quality Estonian culture and as a guarantee of the advancement of Estonians as a nation. Her fine reflection of the subject follows the main foci of the debate both in Europe at large (works of Darwin, Taine, Lombroso, Morel, etc.) as well as the Estonian highlights of that debate (Johannes Aavik's theory of ‘reverse selection’, Juhan Luiga's ideas on the Northern spirit, etc.).

Silja Vuorikuru's article focuses on Aino Kallas' unpublished verse drama *Bathseba* (1909) set in a biblical milieu, an exception in Kallas' oeuvre. The manuscript of the play, believed to be lost, was discovered by Vuorikuru in the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu, Estonia, in February 2008. A comparison of *Bathseba* to Kallas' published works reveals that Bathseba as the main character notably resembles the ambivalent female figures of Kallas' later works, especially the heroines of the *Eros the Slayer* trilogy. Also, the conscious use of biblical pastiches, allusions, and quotations in *Bathseba* are distinctive in Kallas' published works. Liina Lukas looks at Goethe's impact on Aino Kallas' personality and literary development, in particular the process of objectification of subjective passions into a work of art. Kallas' strongest interest in Goethe coincides with a period of crisis in her personal life, as well as issues of artistic development. Lukas focuses on Goethe's role in these processes in the life of Aino Kallas, approaching the topic in a wider context of Goethe's reception in the early 20th century European and Finnish culture, then proceeding with an analysis of Goethe's possible role in the artistic and personal development of Aino Kallas. Rein Undusk argues that tragic love can be considered a theme that fascinated Aino Kallas throughout her artistic career. Analysing Kallas' conception of love in the context of 19th and 20th century existential thought, Undusk gives special attention to its religious undertones, which testify to the existence of certain Romantic ideals in Kallas' work. The tragedy of love in Kallas' masterpiece *Eros the Slayer*, always accompanied by a kind of religiously elevating experience, can be interpreted also as the writer's artistic quest for the existential feeling of life so characteristic of Romantic philosophy and, for example, of the first existentialist thinker Søren Kierkegaard.

The last section of this volume, titled “Life on the Borders”, approaches the implications of modernity via a focus on Aino Kallas' management of her life and the reflections of her life experience in her life writing. In various ways, articles in this section evoke the concept of the border that may imply a demarcation line between two cultures – Finnish and Estonian. It concentrates on the effect of cultural encounters and border crossings upon travelling, the complex and shifting nature of the borders of “fictional” texts and autobiographical accounts, and addresses the framing processes of the authorial image constructed through visual means during Kallas' lifetime. Basing her argument on Juri Lotman's claim about the creative potential of

the periphery, Sirje Olesk analyses the position of Aino Kallas on the borderlines of two national literatures as an interesting example of the enriching and inspiring influence on “the other” to a writer’s work. The life and work of Aino can be looked at as a constant movement between various borders, most importantly the cultural and linguistic border between Finland and Estonia, the generational gap between the intellectuals affiliated with the newspaper “Postimees” and the literary grouping Young Estonia, and artistic quests between realism and modernism during the 1910s. Ritva Hapuli’s article represents Aino Kallas as a traveller and travel writer, testifying to Kallas’ identification as a world-citizen. Arguing that Kallas’ interests and skills as a novelist are to be seen also in her travel narratives – a doubly marginalized type of narrative because of the marginal relevance of the genre and due to the fact that travelling and travel narratives have been dominated by men – Hapuli offers an analysis of Kallas’ *Marokon lumoissa* [Under the Spell of Morocco] (1931) as a Finnish representative of the controversial women’s Orientalism.

Maarit Leskelä-Kärki’s contribution focuses on the autobiographical connections in the texts of ageing Aino Kallas, investigating the letters, diaries and poems that Aino Kallas wrote during the 1940s. Leskelä-Kärki analyses the ways in which Kallas used poetry as a place to remember, mourn and cope with the losses in her life in the 1940s, drawn from Kallas’ last remaining diary documents, entitled after her death *Vaeltava vieraskirja* [The Wandering Quest Book] (1957) and forming a touching document of an ageing woman writer that solidifies the connection between writing and mourning. In Leskelä-Kärki’s view, ageing Aino Kallas and her late production offers a different perspective of the canonised picture of Kallas as a writer and her connections to modernity. Tutta Palin and Kai Stahl outline the Aino Kallas iconography, suggesting new attributions and complements to her image by presenting some less known material, especially from Estonian archives, including some line drawings that present Kallas from a fresh angle. Yet they also correspond with the two main iconographic variants, that of the mystical dark woman in ‘Art Nouveau’ or Symbolist terms, and that of the more somberly elegant ‘New Woman’ of the inter- and postwar era. Elaborating on the interactive processes through which her portraits were produced and selected for publicity, Stahl and Palin show that visual self-presentation, articulated in carefully weighed experimentations with both ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ female types and feminine styles, was an integral part of Kallas’ authorial strategies.

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NOTES

1. [Mina kuulun maailmalle.]

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The collection, first one ever on Aino Kallas in English, highlights her significance to the artistic and intellectual horizons of modernity of Finland and Estonia as well as those of Scandinavia and Europe. In the 1920s and 30s, Aino Kallas became an internationally renowned author and a selection of her work was translated into English. For her, participating in the immediate cultural debates in Estonia and Finland was a priority, yet her whole oeuvre is a negotiation between her more immediate contexts and the leading conceptual frameworks of aesthetics, geniality, knowledge, subjectivity, race, sexuality, nature, etc., circling in Europe at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

Containing articles focusing on the question of female voice and echoes of feminist ecological thought in her fiction, a contrapuntal reading of her fiction and that of Isak Dinesen, her unknown manuscript “Bathseba”, the implications of existentialist thought for her work, Kallas’ engagement in her cultural criticism and life writings with decadent modernism, issues of race and heredity, subjectivity and borders, travel, ageing, her interpretation of Goethe, and the iconography of Kallas, the collection features the work of today’s leading Aino Kallas scholars in Finland and in Estonia.



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