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Slave of a Harsh God:
Nietzscheanism and the Nation in Joel Lehtonen's *Perm: Syysyön unelma*

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The less well-known debut work of classic Finnish author Joel Lehtonen (1881–1934) is the narrative poem *Perm: Syysyön unelma* [Perm: An Autumn Night's Dream] (1904). It begins in a melancholic tone. The narrator tells the tale of a long-gone mythical past, a medieval Fenno-Ugric land known in Old Norse as Bjarmaland or Bjarmia, or Finnicized as Perma, which was believed to have existed on the coast of the White Sea or the Arctic Ocean.¹ The poem begins:

Perma, sammunut sävele,
illan rusojen ilo mennyt,
aarrehelmien helinä!

Kansa kullassa kulisi,
paahtui arojen päivän alla,
kamppaili Ruijan rajoilla,
jäihin suisti järeän turjan.
Kulki, loisti ja katosi.

[Perma, an extinguished melody,
the joy of evening's red glows gone,
the chime of treasure-pearls!

The folk would wander clad in gold,
scorched beneath the steppes' sun,
struggled at the borders of Ruija,
drove the stout turja into the ice.
They journeyed, they shone, and vanished.]²

Perm features a third-person narrator who at the beginning positions himself temporally in the future in relation to the medieval land, perhaps in the present time of the young author Lehtonen. The verses capture the essential ingredients of the myth of Perma, which was well known among the Finnish intelligentsia of the turn of the twentieth century: the land was both materially wealthy and rich in culture, and the people showed great endurance and strength in the face of hardships. They achieved peace through victory in glorious battles. The denomination of the enemy, 'turja', probably refers to Sami people of the Kola Peninsula and carries the connotation of sorcery and

witchcraft.³ Perma was depicted in Icelandic sagas and medieval Scandinavian sources as a peaceful land of great prosperity.⁴ Similarly, Lehtonen depicts the land as ‘rauhainen, raheremuva’ [peaceful, money-laden] (p. 6).

The beginning of Lehtonen’s debut work sets the stage for the story of an *Übermensch* type of character, Perm, a tragic hero who is named after the mythical land. The influence of Eino Leino’s *Kalevala*-inspired national neo-Romanticism is strong in the poem. The verse form of *Perm* – a metrical form that I have not tried to emulate in my translations – is based on the *Kalevala* metre of the Finnish national epic, and *Perm* depicts a mythical Fenno-Ugric past. Like the characters and events depicted in the *Kalevala* (complete edition published in 1849), Perma as it appears in Lehtonen’s poem represents a dream of a glorious past. The poems of the *Kalevala* were believed to date back to the glory days of Perma.⁵ The folklorist Martti Haavio wrote in his 1965 study on the legend of Perma that for his grandfather’s and even for his father’s generation the land was not a myth but reality and its history was proof of the intellectual strength of the Finns.⁶ The classic authors Eino Leino and Juhani Aho similarly depicted Perma in some of their early works, and according to the literary scholar and Lehtonen’s biographer Pekka Tarkka, Leino’s 12-part sequence of poems ‘Perman taru’ [The Tale of Perma] in the collection *Kangastuksia* [Mirages] (1902) is an important subtext of Lehtonen’s *Perm*. Similar to *Perm*, Leino’s poems depict the affluence and glory of the medieval realm. Leino was known for his *Kalevala*-inspired works, among others his famed collection of epic poems *Helkavirsiä I* (1903) and his verse-form play *Sota valosta* [War for the Light] (1900), both of which appear to have influenced Lehtonen’s Karelianist fantasy in *Perm*.⁷ The depiction of *Übermensch* characters and the Nietzschean juxtaposition of the powerful individual and a herd mentality constitute significant elements of Leino’s thematics.

In this article, I analyse the intertwining of Nietzscheanism and nationalism in *Perm* and present an interesting case of Nietzschean nationalism, which combines an *Übermensch* fantasy, the depiction of the decadence of the people of Perma, and an allegory of national struggle, set in a mythical ‘neo-Romanticist’ story world like many other works of Finnish Symbolism of the time.

Nationalism is a defining characteristic of what has traditionally been called the neo-Romanticist or ‘national neo-Romanticist’ current of the Finnish fin de siècle,⁸ until Pirjo Lyytikäinen’s studies in the 1990s interpreted literature of the time in relation to the international currents of Symbolism and decadence.⁹ Whether the dominant literary current of the period is characterized as neo-Romanticist or Symbolist and decadent, Nietzscheanism has always been identified as a central philosophical and literary-aesthetic current in literature of the time.¹⁰ Among Lehtonen’s works, his debut work *Perm* is arguably the most Nietzschean. The depiction of the Übermensch character and the whole story of the poem can be criticized for a lack of complexity and depth, and *Perm* is generally not considered one of Lehtonen’s best works.¹¹ However, its appeal as an object of scholarly interest lies in its peculiar blend of Nietzscheanism and nationalism and in the interpretation of its allegorical setting, particularly the depiction of the decadence of the people of Perma.

Nietzscheanism and Nietzsche’s influence in Lehtonen’s early works

Lehtonen began his literary career with four Symbolist-decadent works: *Perm* was followed by the novels *Pabolaisen viulu* [The Devil’s Violin] (1904), *Villi* [Wild] (1905), and *Mataleena* [Magdalena] (1905).¹² The novels are strikingly different from *Perm* in terms of their content. They represent a special brand of fin de siècle decadence, which Pirjo Lyytikäinen has characterized as Dionysian decadence.¹³ In the context of the fin de siècle, the concept refers above all to Nietzsche’s analysis of the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of Greek culture presented in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).¹⁴ The Dionysian represents excess and transgression, the untamed ‘nightside’ of man, as the opposite of Apollonian order and reason. Expressing a Nietzschean-Dionysian tendency to break boundaries, the most distinguishing thematic feature of Lehtonen’s early novels is an attitude of transgression and provocation against the Christian and patriarchal order of society. Moreover, Lehtonen’s early novels represent a form of rural decadence, in which the typically urban motifs and themes of literary decadence are transported into the Finnish countryside. In Finnish literature,

the countryside has often been presented as morally purer than city life. The main characters of the novels are in some ways very different from the paradigmatic core decadence of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884): they are half-primitive, and yet they also show signs of life-weary decadent sensibility and aestheticism just like Des Esseintes.¹⁵ In their decadence, they are a far cry from the Nietzschean nationalism and the Übermensch fantasy of *Perm*.

Nietzsche is critical of nationalism in many of his texts, for instance in his magnum opus *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885) and in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), and in the posthumously published autobiographical *Ecce Homo* (1908) he speaks very negatively of German nationalism in particular.¹⁶ In Finnish literature of the fin de siècle and in Lehtonen's early novels, Nietzscheanism appears above all as a philosophy of individualism and even rebellion, as in Lehtonen's first novel *Pabolaisen viulu* [The Fiddle of the Devil] which features a Zarathustra-like preaching character called Viuluniekka [The violin player] who is known for his anti-Christian aphorisms, reminiscent of Zarathustra's, and for his decadent way of life. The Nietzschean decadence of Lehtonen's early novels can be seen as antithetical to the nationalist concern with the health of the body of the nation – to use a metaphor that is very common in the literature of the time. Literary decadence as well as Naturalism, two artistic currents that depict decay, have traditionally been downplayed in the literary history of the young nation, which has been concerned with the health and purity of the so-called 'Maiden of Finland'. Among Lehtonen's four early works, *Perm* seems to represent a dose of anti-decadent and nationalist sensibility – albeit in the estranging form of myth, fantasy, and allegory – only to be followed by three novels in which nationalist themes are nearly absent and the protagonists defy everything that is decent and wholesome.

Finnish literature of the turn of the twentieth century shows vibrant connections to Western artistic and intellectual currents, while at the same time themes concerning the nation and its battle for survival in the face of Russification efforts were central during the *Ensimmäinen sortokausi* (1899–1905), the so-called First Period of Oppression. I conceive of the literary

Nietzscheanism of the time as selectively adopting Nietzsche's ideas and receiving inspiration from them, and/or as influenced by Nietzscheanism as a discourse circulating in the culture of the fin de siècle. In young Lehtonen's case, his debut work combines Nietzscheanism with a nationalist theme: the medieval land of Perma, a symbol of past Fenno-Ugric greatness, is threatened by foreign invaders, and the fate of the people hangs on the actions of the character Perm, a Nietzschean personification of masculine will and vitality.

As Esko Ervasti shows in his 1960 study on Nietzscheanism in Finnish literature of the fin de siècle, Nietzsche's influence in Finland began during the last decade of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Eino Leino's brother Kasimir Leino, for instance, contemplates Nietzsche's conception of the Übermensch in his 1892 essay on new trends in French literature, published in the influential cultural journal *Vaivoja* [The Overseer].¹⁸ Perhaps surprisingly, Leino ponders whether the overrefined decadent individual of French decadence might be a prerequisite for Nietzsche's Übermensch. Nietzscheanism became fashionable among Finnish literary circles particularly in 1903 and 1904, which coincides with the beginning of Lehtonen's literary career, and Ervasti considers the popular Nietzscheanism of the time as a central influence for young Lehtonen's worldview.¹⁹ Crucial for Lehtonen's interest in Nietzsche was becoming acquainted with the authors Volter Kilpi, Eino Leino, and Aarni Kouta.²⁰ As Tarkka states, becoming friends with Aarni Kouta has been considered a central source of Lehtonen's 'Nietzsche contagion', particularly the time Lehtonen spent with Kouta in Porvoo in 1903.²¹ Kouta later translated into Finnish *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in 1907, *The Antichrist* in 1908, and *Dionysian Dithyrambs* in 1909.²² He wrote dithyrambic poems himself. Kouta can be considered the most thoroughly Nietzschean author of the Finnish fin de siècle, even to the point of not appearing as very original.²³

According to Tarkka, an important idea Lehtonen learned from Nietzsche is that an individual must break free of conventional morality in order to create something positive.²⁴ The opposition between the individual and society, essentially the quest for authenticity and the levelling tendencies of societal life, is the core of Nietzscheanism in Lehtonen's three early novels,

which depict rebellious young men. The morally strong 'lion' is forced to confront a society of selfish 'dogs', as Tarkka describes the situation.²⁵ *Perm*, on the other hand, is as much concerned with the collective being of the people as the protagonist's individual authenticity. The tragic main character Perm is torn between humane feelings, his compassion and affection for others, and the demands of his 'jylhä jumala' [majestic God] (e.g., p. 16), a personified voice that tells him to obey his masculine will to power and subject everything to it. The unity of will is the driving force of Perm's life. It is the core of his authentic being and constitutes his wholeness, which together with unity, are goals for his people to achieve.

I argue that some of the central characteristics of Nietzscheanism in all of Lehtonen's early works, and even in Finnish literature of the fin de siècle in general, are an 'aristocratic' attitude – a pathos of distance between the strong individual and the common man – and on the other hand immoralism or amorality, being 'beyond good and evil'. *Perm* can be characterized as anti-decadent in the sense that it describes a national struggle led by a strong and, in his own twisted way, heroic character. Perm's actions defy common conceptions of morality, particularly his inhumane and even absurd-seeming decision to kill his wife who is pregnant with his child. The main characters of Lehtonen's early novels are of a different breed, a strange blend of exceptional mental and physical abilities – Übermensch-like characteristics – and immoral decadence, which is in a way beyond good and evil. The stories are set in the contemporary reality of the Finnish countryside at the turn of the twentieth century, although there are many fantastical elements in the story worlds, most notably in *Mataleena*, which is paradoxically also the most auto-fictional work in Lehtonen's lengthy oeuvre.²⁶ In *Mataleena*, Lehtonen's fictional alter ego tells a story, which is based on the young author's experience of recently meeting his biological mother, from whom he had been separated since the age of six months. The novel is named after the narrator's mother. However, the narrator is more interested in talking about the formation of his own nonconformist identity. He is in search of his authentic self, which paradoxically is presented as a figment of his imagination, 'valheellinen satu' [an untruthful tale].²⁷ Lehtonen's early prose style is pathos-filled

and lyrical, which he shares with Volter Kilpi, one of his major sources of influence. An attitude of rebellion and moral transgression dominates in the novels, the most extreme instance of which is the ending of *Mataleena*. The novel ends with a dreamlike episode titled ‘Hullujen laulu’ [The song of the mad], in which the narrator sees his ancestors as ghosts gathered in a kind of Dionysian symposium, around a table surrounded by wine groves. Satan himself is among them, a figure with black wings arcing out of his shoulders. The ‘hullujen suku’ [family of the mad], as they call themselves, deliver a sort of manifesto in which they oppose everything decent and normal. They bombastically proclaim, among other provocative things, that they ‘ja dekadentteja me tahdomme olla, jos muut terveydellään pöyhkeilevät’ [wish to be decadent, if others flaunt their health] and ‘[m]e emme ole lainkuuliaisia lapsia, me hullut. Me nousemme vanhempiamme vastaan, meissä on kapinoitsijain rikollinen henki’ [we, the mad, are not law-abiding children. We rise against our parents, in us is the criminal spirit of rebellion].²⁸

At the early stage of his literary career, Lehtonen is not thoroughly, unequivocally Nietzschean, but Nietzscheanism is an important aspect of all of his early works. *Perm* represents a rather straightforward Nietzschean Übermensch fantasy, while Lehtonen’s early novels with their more complex narratives express no coherent worldview or philosophy of life. Rather, they are permeated by contradictions and the search for a satisfactory way of life, above all freedom and authenticity. The Nietzschean quest for authenticity represents an anti-decadent ideal in the novels, and at the same time it is paradoxically a central ingredient of Lehtonen’s morally rebellious literary decadence.²⁹

Nietzsche does not use the word *Authentizität* [authenticity], but he is very much concerned with authenticity and alienation as understood in the existentialist tradition. According to Jacob Golomb, Nietzsche’s notion of *Wahrhaftigkeit* [truthfulness] is practically synonymous with what has been called authenticity in later existentialist literature.³⁰ From a Nietzschean point of view, authenticity can be defined in a broad sense as wholeness of an individual’s life and self-identity. Rather than discovering a fixed, static self, becoming authentic entails a continuous dynamic

process of self-creation. Alienation, in turn, means not realizing the potential of one's existence. Alienation can be caused in various ways, for instance through the influence of upbringing or by succumbing to the temptations of a comfortable life, thus not growing to one's full potential. Literary decadence generally cultivates experiences of alienation and presents human life as fragmented. In Lehtonen's early novels, the Naturalist-decadent depiction of entropy and determinism puts into question even the possibility of freely constructing oneself. Heredity becomes a curse, like it does in Zola's paradigmatic Naturalism and Huysmans's decadence. The paradoxical Nietzschean decadence of the Finnish fin de siècle is a genre that manifests itself mainly in Lehtonen's early novels and in the early works of L. Onerva, particularly her novel *Mirdja* (1908), which depicts a decadent female character in an urban setting.³¹ The neo-Romanticist story world of the poem *Perm* is far less complex and nuanced. The main character can be described as rather flat, somewhat reminiscent of the characters of Leino's short epic poems in the collection *Helkavirsiä I* [Whitsongs I] (1903), such as the Übermensch characters Ylermi and Kouta, or the rebellious slave Kullervo, known from the *Kalevala* and many re-interpretations by Aleksis Kivi, Leino, and others.

Nietzsche's Übermensch, as the idea is described particularly in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), can be interpreted as the realization of the ideal of authenticity, of becoming whole by actualizing one's potential and organizing one's life and identity as if one is a work of art. The same applies to the potential of collective entities like nations. According to Golomb, the Übermensch is a 'regulative idea', meant as the antithesis and counterweight of inauthenticity, alienation.³² It is never fully realized but instead always points to the future as it entails a continuous re-evaluation and overcoming of oneself. The Nietzschean *pathos of authenticity*, the drive to become what one is, is a yes-saying, life-affirming pathos, and it is meant for the 'higher men', those actual human beings who possess the courage necessary to realize their full potential and the potential of human existence.³³ In fin-de-siècle literature, however, concrete representations of exceptional mental and/or physical prowess and immoralism are often – though not always or exclusively, as I will

argue – inspired by readings of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* and/or interpretations of the Nietzschean ideas that circulate in the culture of the time. Lehtonen’s character Perm is a tragic Nietzschean hero of willpower, vitality and authenticity.

The *Übermensch* is not always presented as a positive ideal. Volter Kilpi’s novel *Bathseba* (1900) is a version of the biblical story of King David falling in love with a woman called Bathseba who is married to a man named Uria.³⁴ In Kilpi’s version, David orders the death of Uria by sending him to the front line in a battle. Kilpi presents David as a narcissistic ruler of the world who thinks of himself as an *Übermensch*, beyond morality and the constraints of ordinary men. In this respect he is reminiscent of Raskolnikov in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866). In both stories, immoralism and narcissistic *Übermensch* fantasies conclude with the defeat of the main character.³⁵ Kilpi expresses his fascination with Nietzsche for instance in his 1902 essay collection *Ihmisestä ja elämästä* [On Being Human and Life] and in his 1905 essay ‘Nykyaikaisista taidepyrinnöistä’ [On Contemporary Artistic Endeavours], in which he considers Nietzsche an immensely important influence for the whole of Kilpi’s contemporary culture and literature, not only in terms of his philosophical ideas but also as a stylistic influence.³⁶ As far as philosophy is concerned, Kilpi can be interpreted as more in line with Schopenhauer’s thought than Nietzsche’s.³⁷ All of his early works present a view of earthly existence as a realm of irrational Will and endless suffering. In a sense, Lehtonen’s *Perm* seems to express an opposite Nietzschean take on the harsh realities of life: hardships and struggle are embraced as necessary conditions for both the personal growth of the individual and the strength and unity of the collective will of the people.

The *Übermensch* and the weakened people

Perm represents a mix of *Kalevala*-inspired neo-Romanticism and Nietzscheanism, but it presents the once mighty people of Perma as decadent: a weakened people that seems to be at the late stage of a civilization’s life cycle. Early in Lehtonen’s poem, ‘Päärilivaaran vanha vaari’ [the old man of

Päärilivaara] (p. 6),³⁸ a leader among his people, reminisces how his generation defeated foreigners who invaded the land. Independence and freedom came at a great cost: the man himself lost his wife and his entire 'poikaparven' [flock of boys] (p. 10). The young generation now lives in peace and abundance, paid for by the blood of the older generation. The leader sees the youth as weakened, the men in particular made effeminate by the blessings of wealth and peace. Culture seems to thrive still as the young people play their traditional *kantele* instruments, but the leader sees that the young are not ready to defend themselves against enemies.

An important historical context of *Perm* is the First Period of Oppression, a period of Russification efforts in Finland, which was at the time an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. The threat to the autonomy of Finland and the development of its young culture began with the February Manifesto issued by Czar Nicholas II in 1899. The Finns were divided into three political camps viz-à-viz the oppressive efforts: one favoured acceptance of the new demands, while the other two opted for either passive or active resistance. Lehtonen himself was part of the passive resistance movement, which refused to follow the new laws and rules set by the authorities.³⁹ Lehtonen refused mandatory conscription into the Russian army, and as a punishment he was expelled from the University of Helsinki, which was at the time called the Imperial University of Alexander.

The story of *Perm* has distinct allegorical elements relating to the situation of Finland during the First Period of Oppression, although the allegory is not completely straightforward. It is somewhat surprising that the work did not end up censored by the authorities, as was feared by the publisher Otava.⁴⁰ In the story, the land of Perma loses its independence when foreigners from the south led by a 'pajari' [boyar] come to demand taxes. Boyar is a word used for Russian nobility.⁴¹ The depiction of the weakness and lack of unity of the people clearly reflects the political divisions among the Finns at the turn of the century. In addition to the different views on acceptance of the new demands and the two forms of resistance, the political differences between working-class and bourgeois institutions and Finnish- and Swedish-speaking Finns divided the will of the people.

The allegorical setting of *Perm* and the depiction of the decadence of the people is highly reminiscent of Eino Leino's play *Sota valosta* [War for the Light] (1900), which is set in the land of Kalevala. In both works, the strong protagonists, in Leino's case the leaders of Kalevala, are ready to fight for independence, but their people are passive and weak in the face of danger. The works share in common a Nietzschean juxtaposition of the exceptional individual – or individuals, in Leino's case – and the masses. At the same time, the decadence of Kalevala or *Perma* reflects a historical change in the perception of the common people at the turn of the century in Finland, as Pirjo Lyytikäinen has argued in the case of Leino's play: negative views of the common people, who were idealized in nineteenth-century national Romanticism, began to gain more ground particularly after the general strike of 1905, which not only brought an end to the First Period of Oppression but also saw the rise of tensions between the Finnish working class and bourgeois society, anticipating the horrors of the Finnish Civil War that broke out after the declaration of independence in the Spring of 1918.⁴² Leino's play is in one sense ahead of its time in its negative depiction of the people as it was published five years before the general strike.

The depiction of decadence in Leino's *Sota valosta* is much more complex than the allegory of *Perm*. Leino presents the people of Kalevala as driven by a herd morality that only seeks material comfort, welfare and equality, and knows nothing of higher values, much like the people at the beginning of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* who turn down Zarathustra's preachings of the *Übermensch* and want instead 'the Last Man', the antipode of the *Übermensch* and the personification of modernity's most banal material blessings. Like Nietzsche, Leino presents both socialism and Christianity as symptoms of herd morality, *ressentiment*, and as interpretations of good and bad or good and evil that suit the psychological needs of those who lack genuine power. At the same time, the people of Kalevala are presented as driven by primitive, animal instincts, under the influence of the dark northern realm of Pohjola. In Lehtonen's *Perm*, the people are presented simply as weakened by peace and affluence. The idea that opposition and hardships build character (the notion that that which does not kill you makes you stronger), can of course be interpreted as

Nietzschean. For instance in *The Gay Science* (1882, aphorism 19) Nietzsche argues that strong individuals and peoples welcome struggle as necessary for one's growth into full potential, and in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886, aphorism 262) he similarly states that without struggle and external opposition 'a species' grows weak.⁴³

The protagonist of *Perm* is born a slave but rises in the ranks and ultimately becomes a viceroy working for the foreign prince who enslaves his people. 'Näki Päärliwaaren vaari' [The old man of Päärliwaara] notices his strength of character already when he is a child:

Näki Päärliwaaren vaari
orjapoikasen pahaisen,
nimettömän repaleressun
kisoissa kultakujilla.

Rehki ressu rajumpi muita,
tuli kulmista kimoili.
Käski itseä isommat
kivet käsin kääntämähän
kartanoiksi kultaisiksi.'

[Old man of Päärliwaara
saw a wretched little slave-boy,
a nameless ragged waif
among the games in the golden lanes.

The ragged one toiled fiercer than the rest,
fire flashed from his brows.
He ordered those bigger than himself
to turn stones with their bare hands
into manors of gleaming gold.] (p. 14)

Beginning from an early age, Perm shows exceptional ambition and willpower, being somehow even able to command those physically much stronger than himself. It is clear that he is destined for greatness. Later the young Perm frees himself of slavery by threatening to kill the old man of Päärliwaara. The old man is forced to acknowledge Perm's strength of character: '

Itse jo ylenit, Perm!
Otit jo osasi uhallalla
väkevän veresi annon.
Siksi sukesit vapaaksi!
Kellä on sitehet sille,
ken ei siteitä suvaitse!

[You have risen now, Perm!
You took your share with daring,
with the offering of your mighty blood.
Thus you broke yourself free!
Who can bind the one
who will not suffer any bonds?] (p. 28)

Perm's willpower becomes personified in his personal majestic god, who demands that he subjects everything to the pursuit of concrete power – wealth, status or whatever there may be left to conquer in the world. Manly life is constant struggle:

Lapselle on lepo rinnoilla äidin,
vanhalle kalman kamea multa,
muita ei lepoja uroilla.

[A child finds rest on its mother's breast,
for the old, grim grave-soil is their rest,
and men have no other resting places.] (p. 50)

Once he is free, Perm amasses wealth for himself as a hunter and trader of furs, and with the status he gains, he becomes the husband of Sulemi, the daughter of the old man of Päärlivaara. Ultimately, however, Perm must abandon the temptation to settle and build a home with a woman by his side. This 'feminine' sphere of life runs contrary to his amoral Nietzschean will to power, which seeks continuous growth and expansion. As fate would have it, Perm's wedding is interrupted when a messenger arrives and tells that a boyar from the south has attacked the land. In one of his brutal acts, Perm kills the messenger because he sounds desperate and weak.

As the foreign invader arrives to demand taxes from the Permians and subjugates them, Perm sees the weakness of his people and devises a plan. He becomes a viceroy for the invaders and in his position of power torments his own people so that they will get angry and start a rebellion. The plan succeeds, and Perm is ultimately killed in a graphically brutal way by his own people who gain back their strength and free their land. The tragic character, in a strange way a hero, sacrifices himself for the future of the nation. At the moment of his execution, Perm is haunted by his inhumane actions:

Koston kammot kamalat
kuiskuttivat korvissansa.

Kosto veren valutun,
taaton kosto, kosto Perman
naisensa, sukunsa siiton.

[Dreadful terrors of revenge
whispered in his ears.
Vengeance for blood once spilled,
a father's vengeance, and the vengeance of Perma
for his woman, for the seed of his kin.] (p. 86)

Perm has turned his back on his father who is still a slave and in his most bizarre act killed his own pregnant wife so that no human bond stands in the way of his will to power and his mission to gain back the freedom of his people. In his haunting sense of transgression against basic humaneness and morality, even Perm is not ultimately completely whole.

Lehtonen's poem depicts a Nietzschean 'blonde beast', a personification of masculine will to power that is also presented as strength of the people as a collective. Material welfare causes decadence, the decline of the nation. *Perm* seems to present war and violence as expressions of cosmic willpower and vitality, forces greater than Perm himself or his people, personified in Perm's harsh god. In this sense even a quasi-fascist tone can be read in the poem, even though Lehtonen was certainly never a fascist in terms of his political views. For Perm, war itself, regardless of what the fight concerns, is '[s]ota on kostava, nostava vaisto | häitä voiman ja elämän' [an instinct that avenges and lifts | the wedding of power and life] (p. 50), and 'Verten leimu suurin juhla' [the blaze of blood is the grandest feast] for the 'children of the stern god' [lapsille jylhän jumalan] (p. 9). Nietzsche seems to similarly glorify war as an outburst of vitality in some of his texts, for instance in *Zarathustra*, although as for instance Ervasti notes, Nietzsche's ideal person is not a brutal warrior but instead a philosopher who leads the people with his mental abilities, creating new values.⁴⁴ *Perm*'s Nietzscheanism is simplified, concretized as the depiction of willpower, ambition, and even violence and war as vitality.

Perm is in his own way a tragic hero of authenticity: a relatively flat character who personifies the Nietzschean ideal of wholeness and realizing one's potential. Two intertwined models of authenticity can be discerned in Nietzsche's works: the biological and the artistic model

of authenticity.⁴⁵ The artistic model means that a person constructs oneself as if one were a work of art or a literary text in which style and intentional composition is crucial. The combination of wholeness and depth of substance is the ideal. The biological model, in turn, means that one realizes one's potential in the same way a plant actualizes the potential inscribed in the seed. Like the *Übermensch*, these are both regulative ideas, meaning that they are in practice never completely realized. Becoming authentic involves taking a critical stance towards socialization and the moral values transmitted by tradition. Secondly, becoming what one is – to quote aphorism 270 in *The Gay Science* and the subtitle of *Ecce Homo* – means using one's creative powers in the construction of one's identity.

The rebellious main characters of Lehtonen's early novels express a pathos of transgression, which is aimed at the conservative Christian-patriarchal values of society. Still, having rebelled against tradition and society, the protagonists of *Paholaisen viulu*, *Villi*, and *Mataleena* – unlike the strong hero of *Perm* – feel they have become at least partly alienated from what they could have been, from their innate potential or from what they perceive as their ideal self. Constructing oneself is identified with artistic creation. The main characters have grandiose fantasies of creating art, but they are doomed to remain dilettantes, only artists of their own lives. Literary decadence, in general, similarly puts into question the possibility of creating authentic and original art and at the same time the Nietzschean ideal of constructing an identity that is original, coherent, and whole. In the case of Lehtonen's antiheroes, degeneration, decay and the lust for pleasure are the leitmotifs of their existence. Even the desirability of the kind of will to power over the self, advocated by Nietzsche, becomes questionable as the protagonists, particularly the eponymous main character of *Villi*, express a decadent desire to free themselves of the burden of life, indulging in numbing sensual pleasures and ultimately contemplating suicide. Villi, the most decadent of Lehtonen's characters, is in the end too weak even to kill himself.⁴⁶ As his decay intensifies, he becomes the polar opposite of Perm's overflowing Nietzschean will to power.

It is noteworthy that everything that looks Nietzschean or closely related to Nietzsche's thought in fin de siècle culture does not necessarily trace back only to Nietzsche's influence. Of particular interest in regard of Lehtonen's *Perm* is that the Norwegian author Henrik Ibsen's early play *Brand* (1866) depicts an uncompromising hero of authenticity who is in some ways similar to Nietzsche's Zarathustra. A Finnish translation of *Brand* by Kasimir Leino was published in 1896, and the play was performed in Helsinki's Finnish Theatre in 1899. Ervasti compares *Brand* to Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and even argues that Ibsen's play came to represent a symbol of the voice of conscience for an entire generation.⁴⁷ Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, published a year later in 1867, depicts an opposite kind of character, an opportunistic and hedonistic man who has no lasting principles.⁴⁸ Ibsen's works were influenced by Søren Kierkegaard, whose ideas concerning authenticity are in many ways close to those of Nietzsche. One common element is that both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard view the ideal of self-creation, authenticity, as if the human being is a work of art or a literary text, ideally a person whose life is as complex and full as it is coherent and whole.⁴⁹ Ibsen's *Brand*, in his quest for wholeness and authenticity, is almost as uncompromising as Lehtonen's *Perm*, and he has his own view of Christianity as a demanding faith.⁵⁰ In the end, however, the play seems ambivalent about whether *Brand*'s harsh faith should be a model of ethical life and authenticity. According to Ervasti, early-phase Ibsen could not be regarded as a credible prophet of individualism by Finnish intellectuals of the turn of the century because in *Brand* absolute duty seemed to stifle the individual self and Ibsen failed to resolve the contradiction between collective duty and individual freedom.⁵¹ The inhumaneness of Lehtonen's character *Perm* is even further from a viable model of authenticity, and the character can be best understood as a Nietzschean fantasy combined with the theme of national struggle. *Perm* achieves wholeness and strength – authenticity, essentially – by submitting himself to his harsh god, which is paradoxically the personification of his own egoistic drive to power.

The ending of *Perm* echoes the beginning, but the mood is slightly different:

Perma, sammunut sävele,

illan ruseiden riemu mennyt,
aarehelmiä helinä!

Kansa kullassa kulisi.
Tuli vainooja väkevä,
verikourin kuristi kansan.

Kansa kultansa kokosi:
soihutäsin, soitatellen
tulivyönä välkkyväisnä
katosi kallion kupuihin,
alle vuorten vinkaloitten.
Vuoret velhoten kumosi
syksyönä synkeänä
yli itsensä, ilojen.

Synkehinä syksyöinä
tuikehtivat tulet lietten
läpi kumpujen kameitten,
lyövät kulkijan jaloissa.

Pitää pitkiä iloja
kansa alla öisen kummun.
Siellä sarkojen kimellys,
raharyntäiden välähdys,
kirkas kannelten helinä.

Laulu kumma kuului yöstä,
tuuli haikeesti tohahti.

[Perma, an extinguished melody,
the joy of evening's red glows gone,
the chime of treasure-pearls!

The folk would wander clad in gold.
Then came a mighty persecutor,
with bloodied hands he strangled the people.

The people gathered up their gold:
with torches in hand, playing their songs,
as a gleaming belt of fire
they vanished into the hollows of the cliff,
beneath the mountains' twisted roots.
The mountains, with sorcery, toppled
on a gloomy autumn night
over themselves and over all joys.

On the darkest autumn nights
the fires of their hearths flicker
through the humpbacked mounds,
flare beneath the traveller's feet.

Long joys they keep
under the night-bound mound.
There the shimmer of chalices,
the flash of coin-reeds,
the bright ringing of kanteles.

A strange song rose from the night,
the wind sighed wistfully.] (pp. 89-90)

The ending of *Perm*, 'syysyön unelma' [an autumn night's dream], as the subtitle goes, presents a vision of a long-gone people just like the beginning of the work. It seems that after the people rid themselves of their oppressor, a new 'persecutor' arrived and ultimately subdued the land. The people have gone into hiding inside a mountain, where they spend their time in endless jollification. The question arises, whether they have abandoned their path of newfound strength and reverted back to their comfort-seeking complacency, the antithesis of Nietzschean self-overcoming. The narrative seems ambivalent in this regard. On the one hand, it glorifies war as the expression of will and vitality and, on the other, it extols the material affluence of the medieval Fenno-Ugric realm. The people gain the unity of their collective will through suffering, but it seems that they have not adopted Perm's masculine will to power as the guiding principle of their life. They live through a life-cycle that consists initially of their rise to power and wealth, but which then becomes their decadent state of affluence and flourishing culture, somewhat reminiscent of the often-envisioned decline and decadence of the Roman Empire.⁵² A newfound show of vitality is brought about by Perm's brutal actions but finally, it seems, Perma is defeated and fades away from the stage of history as a distant memory.

Conclusion

Perm combines some key literary tendencies of the Finnish fin de siècle: the allegorical presentation of a nationalist theme, the use of the modified *Kalevala* metre as a verse form, and a Nietzschean fantasy of a tragic hero of authenticity and willpower. There is also a thin autobiographical dimension in *Perm*. This is nowhere near as pronounced as in the novel *Mataleena*, the last and the

most appreciated of Lehtonen's early works. Lehtonen himself was 'nimetön repelaressu' [a nameless ragged waif] (p. 14) like Perm, orphaned at the age of half a year, but unlike the character of the poem, Lehtonen did not actually have to fight for a better life as he was adopted by a wealthy clergy family.

Through his allegorical narrative, Lehtonen seems to be calling for national unity, willpower, and decisiveness in the face of Russian oppression, and Tarkka even interprets the 'tone' of the poem as 'quite activist'.⁵³ The active resistance movement during the First Period of Oppression favoured direct and even violent resistance to the Russification efforts. The most (in)famous act of the active resistance was the murder of the Russian General Governor of Finland, Nikolai Bobrikov, in 1904 by Eugen Schauman. The fact that *Perm*, which depicts a Fenno-Ugric people struggling against Russians, was not banned as seditious is a small wonder. At the turn of the century, allegorical narratives had the potential function of presenting political themes in a way that would avoid censorship, but in *Perm*'s case the interpretation of the allegory seems quite obvious.

¹ The folklorist and poet Martti Haavio has authored a study on the knowledge and beliefs associated with the land of Perma: *Bjarmien vallan kukoistus ja tubo: historiaa ja runoutta*, poems trans. by Aale Tynni (WSOY, 1965).

² Joel Lehtonen, *Perm: syysyön unelma* (WSOY, 1904), p. 1. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Subsequent references to the poem are given inline.

³ Haavio, pp. 14-15, 55-56, & 78.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 159, 176-79, 185, & 196.

⁵ Elias Lönnrot, *Kalevala*, 100-year anniversary edition of the new *Kalevala* (first pub. 1849; Finnish Literature Society, 1949), p. 11.

⁶ Haavio, p. 6.

⁷ Eino Leino, *Sota valosta*, in *Tuonelan joutsen; Sota valosta; Väinämöisen kosinta; Karjalan kuningas* (first pub. 1900; Finnish Literature Society, 1999); Eino Leino, *Helkavirsiä I* (Otava, 1903). The fascination with the *Kalevala*, folk poetry, and the Fenno-Ugric past, which is a salient tendency in Finnish literature of the time, particularly of Symbolist (or neo-Romanticist) literature, is called Karelianism, referring to the region of Karelia in eastern Finland and beyond the Russian border that was romanticised as the birthplace of Finnish folk poetry and the *Kalevala*.

⁸ See, for example, Kai Laitinen, *Suomen kirjallisuuden historia*, 4th rev. edn (Otava, 1997), pp. 233-36. Laitinen's literary history was first published in 1981, and the latest revised edition from 1997 retains the concept of neo-Romanticism, although Laitinen also uses the concept of Symbolism.

⁹ See Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi: Minä ja toinen vuosisadanvaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (SKS, 1997).

¹⁰ See Esko Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I: 1900-luvun vaihe ja siihen välittömästi liittyvät ilmiöt* (University of Turku, 1960).

¹¹ See, for example, Pekka Tarkka, *Joel Lehtonen I: Vuodet 1881–1917* (Otava, 2009), p. 80.

¹² Joel Lehtonen, *Pabolaisen viulu* (WSOY, 1904); Joel Lehtonen, *Villi: kuvitteluja* (Otava, 1905); and Joel Lehtonen, *Mataleena: laulu synnyinsendulle* (first pub. 1905; Finnish Literature Society, 1998).

Lehtonen is better known and more appreciated for his later neo-Naturalist works, most notably the one-day novel *Putkinotko* (first pub. 1919–1920; Finnish Literature Society, 1995), which depicts in a comical light the hardships of the crofter Juutas Käkriäinen and his family and the tensions between Käkriäinen and his landlord Aapeli Muttinen, Lehtonen's alter ego.

¹³ See, for example, Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Decadence in the Wilderness: Will to Transgression or the Strange Bird of Finnish Decadence', *Nordlit*, 28 (2011), pp. 245–56 <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.2062> (pp. 251–53).

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Francis Golffing (first pub. 1872; Anchor Books, 1956).

¹⁵ See Lyytikäinen, 'Decadence in the Wilderness', and Antti Ahmala, *Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on? Autenttisuus ja itsestä vieraantuminen Joel Lehtosen varbaistuotannossa* (PhD thesis, University of Helsinki, Unigrafia, 2016).

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. by Adrian Del Caro (first pub. 1883–1885; Cambridge University Press, 2006); Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. by Francis Golffing (first pub. 1887; Anchor Books, 1956); and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, intro. by Michael Tanner (first pub. 1908; Penguin, 1992).

¹⁷ See Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I*.

¹⁸ Kasimir Leino, 'Uusia suuntia Ranskan kaunokirjallisuudessa', *Valvoja*, 1 (1892), pp. 25–41.

¹⁹ Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I*, p. 116.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Tarkka, *Joel Lehtonen I: Vuodet 1881–1917*, p. 75. Tarkka does not specify his sources here, but Ervasti's study *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche* (1960) is one source that points in this direction.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Näin puhui Zarathustra: kirja kaikille eikä kenellekään*, trans. by Aarni Kouta (first pub. 1883–1885; Otava, 1907); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Antikristus*, trans. by Aarni Kouta (first pub. 1895; Otava, 1908); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dionysos: valikoima runoja*, trans. by Aarni Kouta (first pub. 1891; Otava, 1909).

²³ Kouta is not as appreciated as an author as for instance Joel Lehtonen, Eino Leino, or Volter Kilpi.

²⁴ Pekka Tarkka, *Putkinotkon tausta: Joel Lehtosen henkilöt 1901–1923* (Otava, 1977), p. 75.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁶ For a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of *Mataleena* in English, see Lyytikäinen, 'Decadence in the Wilderness'.

²⁷ Joel Lehtonen, *Mataleena*, p. 75.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 88 & 86.

²⁹ See Ahmala, *Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on?*

³⁰ Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (Routledge, 1995), p. 68.

³¹ On L. Onerva's *Mirdja*, see Viola Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound: Mimetic Strategies in L. Onerva's 'Mirdja'* (University of Turku, 2014).

³² Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity*, p. 83.

³³ Ibid., pp. 68–88.

³⁴ Volter Kilpi, *Bathseba: Daavidin puheluja itsensä kanssa* (first pub. 1900; Finnish Literature Society, 1995).

³⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. by David McDuff (first pub. 1865; Penguin Classics, 2002).

³⁶ Volter Kilpi, *Ihmistä ja elämästä* (first pub. 1902; Finnish Literature Society, 1990); Volter Kilpi, 'Nykyaikaisista taidepyrinnöistä', *Valvoja*, 9 (1905), pp. 454–70.

³⁷ Kilpi is highly international in terms of the storyworlds of his early works and his sources of influence, and he was well versed in philosophy, particularly German thinkers, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche ranking as the most important ones. National neo-Romanticism is a concept that is not very well suited to describe Kilpi's early works.

³⁸ Päärilvaara translates roughly as 'pearl hill', which is a place in the mythical land of Perma.

³⁹ Tarkka, *Joel Lehtonen I: Vuodet 1881–1917*, p. 47.

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 79. There is a text on the verso of *Permi*'s title page confirming that the book has been accepted for publication by the censorship authorities.

⁴¹ The boyars ruled in Russia before Ivan the Terrible forced them to obey the central authority of the Czar in the sixteenth century.

⁴² Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Kansa ja dekadenssi: Eino Leinon *Sota valosta*', in *Dekadenssi vuosisadanvaihteen taiteessa ja kirjallisuudessa*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen (SKS, 1998), pp. 32–57 (p. 33).

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (first pub. 1882; Vintage Books, 1972); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (first pub. 1886; Penguin Classics, 1990).

⁴⁴ Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I*, p. 58.

⁴⁵ See Ahmala, *Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on?*, pp. 33–50; Golomb, pp. 68–87.

⁴⁶ On Lehtonen's novel *Villi*, see Antti Ahmala, 'Alroy and Uncas in the Finnish Countryside: Decadent Bovarism in Joel Lehtonen's *Villi*', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Rikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Routledge, 2020), pp. 102–18.

⁴⁷ Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I*, p. 100.

⁴⁸ Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt: A Dramatic Poem*, trans. by Kenneth McLeish, Drama Classics (first pub. 1867; Nick Hern, 1999).

⁴⁹ Alexander Nehamas has studied this aspect of Nietzsche's thought in his study *Nietzsche – Life as Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1985), and the idea of the person as a work of art is also central in Jacob Golomb's (*In Search of Authenticity*) interpretation of Nietzsche as one of the philosophers of authenticity. On Kierkegaard and the poetic life see, for example, Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

⁵⁰ See Otto Reinert, "The Ending of *Brand*", *Scandinavian Studies*, 85.1 (2013), pp. 67-78.

⁵¹ Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I*, p. 46.

⁵² Cyclical views of history, discernible in literary decadence and more broadly in antimodern thought, stand in opposition to modernity's insistence on linear progress. See, for example, Peter King, *The Antimodern Condition: An Argument Against Progress* (First pub. 2014; Routledge, 2016) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315612461>, p. 14.

⁵³ Tarkka, *Joel Lehtonen I: Vuodet 1881–1917*, p. 79.