Liisa Lindgren

The Spectacle of Grief

From the late 19th century commissions of funerary memorials were a crucial part of the oeuvre of many sculptors in Finland. However, there has been very little problematisation of the representations of mourning and commemoration that would link funerary sculpture with broader cultural discourses. Funerary art has mainly been interpreted in the context of high art. There has been an active interest in memorials and burial places of the Civil War and the monuments of World War II. The study of funerary sculpture has been guided mainly by criteria of national importance and artistic innovation. It has been indifferent to the ways of commemoration in private tombs that emerged with modernization and the rise of the bourgeoisie.

I propose that one important aim of Lutheran cemetery culture and funerary art in late 19th and early 20th-century Finland was to secure the impression of a coherent world and to conceal the rupture between the premodern and modern world. The rites of commemoration assist in mediating the past to the future within the protective structures of the institutional order of society. Burial places and practices reflect cultural values. Grave markers, inscriptions and epitaphs reveal not only changes in aesthetic taste but also in attitudes about death and the afterlife.

The Cemetery as a Place of Melancholy

While Finland was still the eastern part of the Kingdom of Sweden, a nationwide ban on burial within churches was proposed by the Senate in 1772, for health reasons. At the request of the clergy, burial within churches was banned at the Diet of 1779. However, keeping to the decision was left to the individual congregations. In 1809 Finland became the western part of the Russian Empire, and finally a decree by the Tsar in 1822 banned burial in churches throughout the country. Founding cemeteries at the outskirts of the town, separate from church graveyards, was linked with urbanization, the growth of population, and concerns about public health.

The first Lutheran cemetery physically separate from the churchyard was founded in Porvoo in 1789. The Turku cemetery, founded in 1807, Pori Old Cemetery from 1809 (fig. 1), the Cemetery of Mary in Kokkola from 1809 and the Helsinki Old Cemetery from 1829 with its extension, the New Cemetery from 1864, are representative examples of the 19th century. Especially for Turku and Helsinki the park-like setting of the Cemetery of Père Lachaise in Paris was exemplary.

In churches and churchyards, burial places had had different status, and in the new graveyards, too, the status of the burial location was determined by the social rank of the deceased. Poor people were buried in common graves. As burial in coffins became popular this soon resulted in an increase of private tombs. The popularity of private tombs in turn led to the erection of personal grave markers, especially elaborate among wealthy citizens. Linked with social forms of mourning and remembrance, the privacy of even a private funerary monument is, however, only relative.

Fig. 1 Grave marker, mid 19th century, Pori Old Cemetery

In 18th-century aesthetic theory the experience of the sublime required confrontation with a phenomenon beyond human comprehension. The fearful experience of the sublime was intertwined with the liberating experience of transgression. As a proper place for experiencing the sublime, the cemetery led one to meditation on death; through contemplation of death, terror recedes into melancholy.

19th-century literature represented the cemetery as an elegiac location for peaceful meditation. Zachris Topelius, the beloved Finnish storyteller, reflected on the relations between the dead and the living in his writing. In his *Tales of Winter Evenings* (1880–97) in the story *The Election of the Pastor of Aulanko* he describes the churchyard as a romantic pastoral scene: "The Aulanko cemetery was in a beautiful place, between the old church on the hill and the river rushing through the dale. Remindful of a small forest, there was a group of tomb monuments – some the shape of a peace symbol, the cross, but most semicircular, ugly and all wooden – between yellow turfs of grass, with other similar disappearing mementoes leaning half-rotten against their neighbours, or lying on the ground without any

Fig. 2 Walter Runeberg, Towards Light, 1905, funeral monument for Zacharis Topelius, Helsinki Old Cemetery (Postcard from 1905)

Fig. 3 Ferdinand Öhmann, funeral monument for Johan Ludvig Runeberg, 1888, Näsinmäki Cemetery, Porvoo (postcard from the 1920s)

kind of care. Some stone monuments erected on bourgeoisie tombs seemed to wish to maintain the social difference even after death."

Topelius's tales for children served for religious instruction, and they were central in forming 19th-century views about death and commemoration. As important vehicles for the socialisation of children and youth, the stories moved the heritage of the 19th into the 20th century. The fairy tale *The Summer that Never Came* tells about the death of the writer's one-year-old boy. Topelius, in whose stories the cemetery is shown as an area of melancholy, is buried in the Helsinki Old Cemetery near his son. The writer is protected by the well-known guardian angel of his own stories. (fig. 2).

The cemetery as a place of melancholy is a high cultural discourse, and far from the rural reality of 19th-century Finland. In 19th-century cemeteries, the sublime experience was far from transgressive. People's relationship to cemeteries was still utilitarian, when part of the cantor's and the sexton's pay was grazing rights in the cemetery.

The picturesque mode of 19th-century European landscaping gained ground in Finnish cemeteries towards the end of the century, as the trees grew older and larger. Thus the sharp contrast of light and darkness necessary for an elegiac atmosphere became ennobled by the overstory of trees. Still, in the 1860s the Old Cemetery in Helsinki was more or less bare sandy land. Later, gateways, fences, hedges, some individual mausoleums and small-scale site furnishing such as benches, ornamental sculpture and planted vegetation created ideal spaces for reflection.

The Culture of Death and Social Distinction

I would propose that the culture of death of the 19th and the early 20th centuries molded the self-image of the modern man in a decisive way. The existentially opposing concepts of man's limited lifetime and timeless, limitless eternity structured the modern experience and were the background to the reflexive building of self. The reflexive self-project was, however, open first and for a long time exclusively to wealthy people, who could depart from the everyday in search of their individuality.

As a means of social distinction, cemetery culture served to raise the self-awareness of the bourgeoisie and the educated class of the 19th century. Not just economic, but also political and cultural hierarchies can be seen in grave markers. The newly emerging middle class was keen to distance itself from lower social classes and to present its social status by permanent markers that also secured an immortality of sorts. In the late 19th century, especially the wealthy Swedish-speaking bourgeoisie emphasized its status with showy tomb sculpture. The educated elite planned for themselves monuments in which they eloquently represented their national merits. Thus the project of constructing the self was extended beyond death and was "perfected".

Cherishing the memory of educated and prominent people in the 19th century included social conventions, such as processions, hymns, poems and speeches composed and presented at the funeral by people as renowned as the deceased himself. These customs, which had taken form by the 1850's, continued well into the 20th century. The demarcation of the distinctions in social status elaborated the rites (figs. 3 and 5).

Traditional grave markers, such as crosses by unknown artisans, were often made of impermanent materials, such as wood, which is vulnerable to natural weathering and deterioration. Cast iron markers appeared in the 1840s. Little by little memorials gained a more permanent character. The growth of international trade can be seen in fashionable decoration that was imported from e.g. Russia, Sweden, Poland and Germany. Domestic cast iron fences and grave markers, cheaper than marble and granite markers, were marketed through manufacturers' cat-

alogues. Markers often contained classical symbols of death such as urns and upside-down torches, of eternal life such as wreaths, of resurrection such as rays, or of the deceased's profession. Traditional symbols of death, such as the hour glass and the scythe, or the skeleton as a personification of death, were seldom used as memento mori.

Monument forms offered by Neoclassicism, such as steles, obelisks and pyramids as symbols for the eternity of the spirit, urns and tomb vases were popularized by the romantic taste for classical imagery. During the last decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century products of the Finnish stone industry, such as grave markers were also exported to Russia, Sweden and the Baltic countries.

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The academic teaching of visual arts created a precondition for domestic production of funerary sculpture. The Swedish-born sculptor C. E. Sjöstrand had a special impact here as the first teacher of academic sculpture in the school of the Finnish Arts Society. He had embraced the ideals of Neoclassicism during his studies at the Arts Academy in Stockholm in the 1840s (fig. 4).

From the 1870s onward, domestic demand was met by Robert Stigell, Walter Runeberg (fig. 7) and Johannes Takanen (fig. 6), and later by many others. Finnish sculptors of the late 19th century completed their studies abroad and most of them lived and worked for years and decades in European art centres such as Rome and Paris. There they could use the professional services of art foundries that did not yet exist in Finland. There

Fig. 4 Carl Eneas Sjöstrand, portrait medallion in the funeral monument for the actor Frithiof Rad, deceased in 1872, Helsinki Old Cemetery

Fig. 5 Funeral procession for Johan Ludvig Runeberg, Finland's national poet, 1877, drawing by Jac. Ahrenberg (engraved picture published in the newspaper)

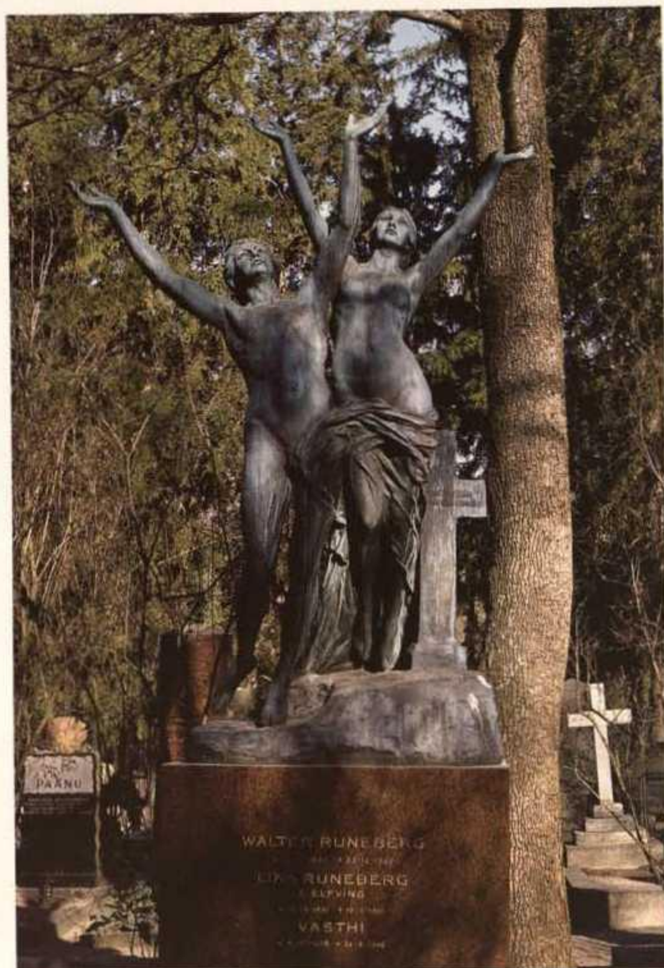

Fig. 6 Walter Runeberg, Ascension, 1896, funeral monument for Walter Runeberg, Helsinki Old Cemetery

Fig. 7 Johannes Takanen, Angel, 1883, Helsinki Old Cemetery

they were also trained in the contemporary continental cemetery culture and in new waves of funerary art.

In Finland romantic ideas of the sublime culminated at the end of 19th and the turn of the new century. Ville Vallgren (1855–1940) had worked in France since 1877 and had been trained in the continental tradition at Léon Bonnat's studio, popular among Scandinavian artists, and at the École des Beaux-Arts in Jules Cavelier's studio. In the Parisian Salon exhibitions and in the international exhibitions of the 1890s Vallgren gained fame and a steady buying and wealthy clientele. Melancholy as the basic mood of life and a sign of the modern experience had made death, sorrow, and feelings of loss crucial subjects of symbolist art. The thematics of death as well as romantic and quasi-religious melancholy permeates the oeuvre of Vallgren, his refined art nouveau sculptures and "objets d'art", his urns and tear bottles.

At the dawn of the new century Vallgren made some highly elaborated memorials with fine figural imagery, such as spirits, angels, mourners, and effigies (fig. 8). These memorials, which he made in Finland, express deep grief and devotion. But what exactly are the mourners and angels grieving for? I propose that their grieving is not just for the deceased but that it represents absence sharpened by feelings of sorrow and loss that structures the modern experience of the world. In the cultural experience coloured by melancholy, the modern represents a break in which wholeness and immediacy were projected onto the premodern.

Sculptures with the theme of mourning had already become popular as memorials in the late 19th century. The sculptural decoration as a sign-post was traditionally referential: it guided one to contemplation and devotion. The goal of the articulated imagery of funerary sculpture was the production of both the object of memory and the requisites of remembrance. The elegiac form of the sculptures is meant to lead to a feeling of consolation. Women in mourning represent presence, just as women have had a role of presence in many social rites. The cemetery offered a place to reflect on the past, present and future.

The emotional weight of the elaborate cemetery culture is thus given tension by the dichotomies of time and timelessness, presence and absence, sorrow and comfort. I therefore also would like to propose that one important aim of cemetery culture and funerary art is to secure the impression of a coherent world and to conceal the rupture between the premodern and modern world. The rites of commemoration assist in mediating the past to the future within the protective structures of the institutional order of society.

Vallgren's mourners are modern angels and spirits with fashionable haircuts and sensual and mundane bodies. Evoking views on feminine sympathy, Vallgren's mourners are iconic in representing views about modern womanhood. Their sorrow is connected to eroticism, aware of Christian moral codes, but tuned by transgression. Mourning is also connected to experiencing art: the expressions of grief represent a complete narcissistic and aesthetic experience (fig. 10).

Although melancholy was considered the bane of geniuses Vallgren himself was neither a melancholic nor a deeply religious personality. "Ville de Paris", as he was called, was a visible part

Fig. 8 Ville Vallgren, funeral monument for Aurora Karamzin, 1905, Helsinki Old Cemetery

Fig. 9 Ville and Viivi Vallgren, Weeping Angel, 1940s, Näsinmäki Cemetery, Porvoo

of the Scandinavian art elite living in Paris and was known as a bohemian who threw legendary artists' parties. In 1879, together with his close friends, Swedish and Finnish artists, Vallgren had founded the Knighthood of Jesus Syrach, a brotherhood dedicated mainly to amusement. At the turn of the century Vallgren's free works also expressed a new "joie de vivre", he replaced his "pleureuses" with dancing "femmes-fleurs".

However, in funerary sculpture, Vallgren continued to represent mourners, though open grief at the graves soon became old-fashioned. Vallgren died in 1940 and he rests at Porvoo Cemetery. A sensual angel, designed by the artist and executed by Viivi Vallgren, the sculptor's spouse and an artist herself, is weeping on their grave (fig. 9).

From cemetery to necropolis

In Finland, cemetery culture reached the height of its popularity between the 1880s and 1930s, little later than on the Continent and in Great Britain. The Civil War of 1918 changed attitudes to mortality and soon angels and mourners seemed inappropriate and exaggerated, even idolatrous. Luxurious markers were seen as displays of wealth and status, and last but not least of femininity. The vitalistic life rhetoric of 20th-century modernism rejected the melancholic mood of the thematics of death as decadence. Classicism gave approved models for new, masculine monuments, stripped of excessive decoration. In private memorials mourning maidens were replaced by young men carrying attributes of art that link death with spiritual freedom and aesthetic experience (figs. 11 and 12).

Hietaniemi, the extension of the Helsinki Old Cemetery, established at the beginning of the 1930s, is the foremost example of the period in its formal plan based on classical principles of axial organization and parkways that are terminated by sculptural focal points. Monuments were de-emphasized and plot-defining barriers eliminated in favour of open space and unbroken scenery. The comprehensive planning of modern cemeteries was based on principles of economy and democracy. Smooth terrains do not search for the picturesque. The productification of death can be seen as represented by the more regulated and usually low grave markers and standardized industrial gravestones. Modern cemeteries soon raised complaints that the expressive value of grave memorials had declined.

As an allegory of 20th-century modernism, the cemetery received a negative meaning. For Lewis Mumford, the critic of cities, the cemetery was the end-product of erroneous development, the horror of Babylon and Nineveh, a necropolis. In *The Culture of Cities* (1938) Mumford writes that everything that is dead, obsolete and backward in society is crystallized in the monuments. Monuments evoke false expectations of eternity and continuity, which are not based on an optimistic cycle of life. As a living organism, the city's vital sign was its ability to renew itself. Vitalistic modernism saw cemeteries as horror images of a petrified culture. Modern views of culture developing in cycles of growth and decay made an end to the 19th-century spectacle of grief.

DAVIDA CARLANDER
SOFIE REUTERFELT
1895 † 3/2 1907

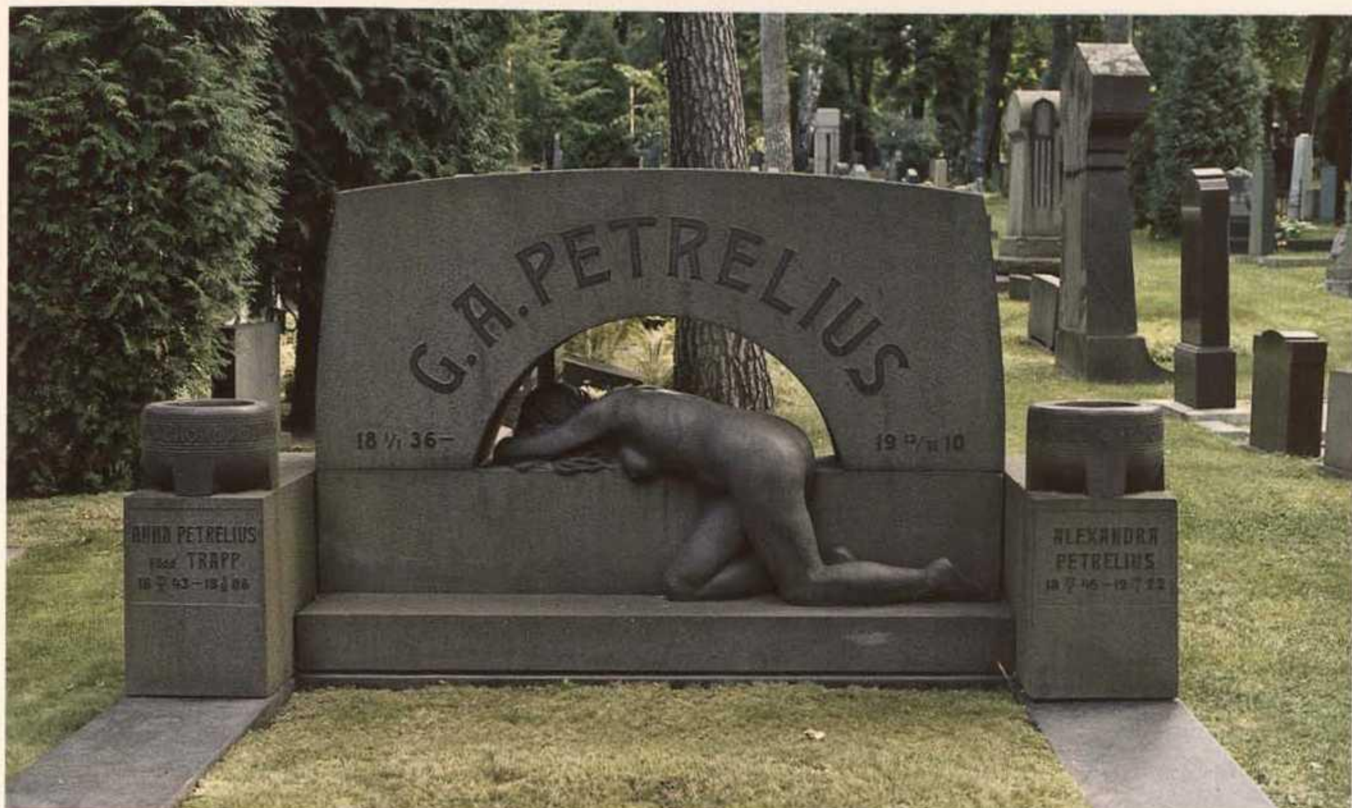

Fig. 11 Felix Nylund, funeral monument for G. A. Petrelius, 1913, Turku Cemetery

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Fig. 10 Ville Vallgren, La douleur and bronze relief, 1917, Helsinki Old Cemetery

Fig. 12 Emil Wikström, funeral monument for Santeri Ivalo, 1942, Helsinki Old Cemetery