The forgotten 33 %. Finland-Swedish literature from a database perspective

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Abstract

In the digital era, one could say, that literary history is partly written and shaped in databases and digital archives, via metadata about authors and literature. What is the impact of such resources on the visibility – or invisibility – of authors of literary work? And to what extent is the Finland-Swedish minority literature "forgotten" seen from a database perspective?

In my paper, I will approach these questions with starting point in my research on the amount of database references, which in turn indicates the amounts of secondary literature about the group of Finland-Swedish authors writing in 1830–1930 (Biström 2021). The study builds on data compiled especially from the database Finna (finna.fi), and bibliographies. I have analyzed the amount of database references about authors, with the use of Excel, in comparison with data such as the authors gender and year of birth.

The database or archive on which quantitative studies are based, is however not complete, as has been pointed out by Katherine Bode (2014: 7–25) in her critique of Franco Morettis' claims to accuracy and objectivity. I have approached this issue with the concept of "database visibility" – which represents not only the actual amount of literature about an author, but rather the visibility and accessibility of this literature. In my paper, I will also develop this concept a bit further against the background of my data, as different databases give different perspectives on the visibility of authors.

My ongoing research focuses "invisible authors" – those with no relevant database references in Finna-searches with the authors' name as subject, exploring the question what the Finland-Swedish literary field looks like from the point of view of invisible authors, with a theoretical starting point in the concept of cultural memory (Assmann 2010). Among other things, my data however indicates that these forgotten authors represent – not 99% (Moretti 2013)- but around 33% of all the authors, which supports a point made by Kristina Malmio (2021) about Finland-Swedish literary history and the year of modernist debutants 1916: As my results also indicate, the minority literature (in this case to some extent a privileged one) – is not always forgotten, but on the contrary made more visible due to its importance for the identity of the minority.

Keywords: Finland-Swedish literature, databases, digital archives, cultural memory, minorities

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