



MEMORIES OF MODERNITY IN SWEDISH PROSE FICTION

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If the modern Swedish novel told the story of the individual and his place in history, the postmodern novel reminiscing modernity tells many different stories about the individual and his lack of place in any version of history. Fiction is not so much a means of communicating a better, future society, but rather an alternative view on the present.

Lenin once answered the question 'What is socialism?' with two words: electricity and Soviet power. Paraphrasing that question, what is modernity in Swedish prose fiction? Railroads and childhood memories.

Were it not for the railroads, the Swedish welfare state would not exist. It united the country's southern regions with the isolated north; it transported raw materials to factories. It also helped shape the Swedish novel. Railroad tracks are the ultimate literary symbol for Swedish urbanization and industrialization. Or in other words, for Swedish modernity. And the history of these railroad tracks is often forged in the mold of a childhood memoir. In fact, one could argue that Sweden has been, and in some respect still is, the Promised Land for coming-of-age accounts.

There are of course childhood memoirs in every national literature, and the reader of Maxim Gorkij's *My childhood* will feel at least somewhat at home reading Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart* or J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*. He or she will also find strange and unfamiliar things in them, but will always hit upon some common ground to depart from.

During the 1930s in Sweden, a group of writers without formal educations appeared on the literary scene. Self-taught members of the working class, they often came from extremely humble backgrounds. These authors revitalized the novel by uniting a new social experiment with aesthetic modernism. They wrote autobiographical novels, and their young heroes were amazingly often busy with laying down railroad tracks and floating lumber for railroad ties. In doing so, the proletarian authors also lay out a

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path for themselves. They wrote themselves out of their class and into a state of freedom, often a lonely place, but one that allowed them to write novels not only about their own transformation from poor farmhands into free authors, but also about Sweden's transformation from a poor farming society to a modern, industrial nation. In the Swedish novel there is usually someone growing up, leaving his or her roots behind, and on the way out observing an entire social transformation. In the pre-Second World War novel, this transformation is still full of possibilities; the hero has his glowing face turned towards a future full of promises.

The generation that debuted in the 1960s, and that still has a remarkably tight hold on readers and critics alike, depicted this social transformation, this coming-of-age of the welfare state and engineer society, from a small-town perspective. These writers observed the way in which modern Sweden was built around railroad hubs and how it exploited the Northern provinces. In fact, the scarcely populated northern province of Västerbotten, on the northern east coast of Sweden, on the Baltic, is the most author- and fiction-rich backwoods in Sweden. These author's stories deal with the price of modernization, with betrayal and with failed utopias.

One example can be found in the work of Sara Lidman. She started out in the 1950s in the footsteps of the autobiographical writers with rural stories about young women striving for freedom. In the sixties, she went to Africa and wrote novels with a political, anti-colonial cause, and in the beginning of the 1980s, she returned to the village in Västerbotten where she was born and had grown up. In an expansive series of novels entitled *The Iron Path* epic, she depicts the modernization of the northern provinces of Sweden as a form of colonization, and what this transformation meant for the old, traditional ways of life.

In recent prose, however, the trains have stopped running; the welfare state is full of cracks, and the world is just a flicker through a car window or an intricate pattern underneath an airplane wing. Young Swedish writers still write childhood stories and still like to move in milieus that are far from the big city – the outskirts, sparsely populated areas, small towns or suburbs created in the 1970s for the many middle-class families who moved to them from the countryside as part of that decade's social transformation. While this is not unique to newer fiction, since the world beyond the big city is undeniably the most common playing field for Swedish literature, there is no monumental modernization project for this younger generation of authors. The railroad has been built, urbanization has already gone too far, and all alternative lifestyles have been tried. The characters in the most recent prose fiction live in a vacuum, in forgotten corners and county seats that are only important within a small radius. They seem to have experienced everything – from the very old to the very

new, and there is no utopia for them. Just as the countryside serves a different function for the younger generation (it is a place for solitude rather than one from which to break away), so literary material, like documents and facts, plays a different role for people who grew up with round-the-clock media saturation than for those who seldom had more than a daily newspaper and a crystal radio in their childhood homes.

Like their predecessors, the younger authors are distrustful of the validity of documents as well as of their own points of departure, but they often go further, with a daring blend of fact and fiction, science and science fiction. The pursuit of truth often contains the seeds of doubt as to the possibility of discovering it, at least within a factual framework. Nor are they as interested in the course of events and chronology – in finding the causal relations and explanations in history – in the way their predecessors were. The realism they cultivate is one of unreality. Their favorite tense is the present tense.

Language as a tool for communication and power also plays a special role in the new prose. There is a quite uncomplicated explanation for why so many of the younger authors mix different languages and voices. Several of them are first-generation Swedes. They speak a language other than Swedish with one or both of their parents. This singular experience creates a particular kind of linguistic awareness, sometimes to such a degree that the language itself determines the reality in which one finds oneself. There are several examples, of which I will discuss a few.

No sooner had proletarian literature been declared a dead genre in Sweden than a new one – the immigrant novel – turned up in reviews in the arts sections of newspapers, and Jonas Hassen Khemiri's debut work was one of the first books to be labeled as such. His main characters are not immigrants, but the children of immigrants. And his subject is not exile; it is language. Otherwise, his debut novel *An eye, red* adheres very closely to the perpetually powerful archetype: a very young man's journey away from his highly circumscribed beginnings and into a self-selected adult life. In this story, his name is Halim; his mother is dead; his father is an immigrant and the owner of a store that sells a little of everything. Halim's teenage perspective reigns supreme. There is nothing between him and the narrative, no adult hindsight; just a string of days and comic or tragicomic situations. However, Khemiri plays against expectations on two crucial points. His story does not follow the conventional learning curve from immutable darkness to personal insight. By and large, Halim is the same person at the end of the book as he was at the beginning. And, in point of fact, Halim is the fundamentalist, while his father encourages critical thinking. Although for his son's sake, the father moved the family from the immigrant suburb to the city district of Stockholm, as soon as he can Halim takes the subway back to the suburb, stops using "proper"

Swedish, which he has mastered, and becomes monolingual in his own way. Literally, in his own way; his “immigrant Swedish” is an artificial language, a construct he has devised to express an experience that is his alone. Whether he is at the center of the action or on the periphery, he is always an outsider; he writes and speaks a language of solitude. Accordingly, his path is a delimited one; such a language can lead only to artistic creativity or to silence. The readers know the outcome – the book they are reading is Halim’s diary.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s first novel became a big hit on two fronts – it remained at the top of the bestseller list for a long time and also enjoyed success as a stage play. Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s main characters speak a language that sounds like immigrant Swedish but is really a made-up language, similar to the artificial language that Sara Lidman created in the 1970s when she juxtaposed the Västerbotten rural dialect with the authorities’ standard Swedish. Likewise, Khemiri brings immigrant Swedish into the literature as a separate but equal language, a means of power and empowerment. This is not only a political issue but a philosophical one as well: where is the dividing line between language, experience, and understanding of reality?

This focus on a linguistic reality does not mean that the younger generation of Swedish writers has lost sight of society; only that it is less interested than was the previous one in examining the individual’s place in history with the help of an epic and often political narrative. Instead, this new generation directs its attention to its own means of expression and lets language be the vessel for society’s transformation. A transformation that in the last 20 years has been at least as radical as the one that occurred in the decades after the Second World War.

In his very original contribution to the genre of realistic childhood memoirs, *In the red queen's castle*, Lars Jakobson mixes historical fact with fantasy taken from science fiction, computer games, and other strange worlds. For him, childhood is the sum of many people’s stories, and his tale is an alternative story of the second half of the 20th century, one in which the manned exploration of Mars begun as early as in the 1950s and the Cuban crisis is still going on. But it is also a story of the narrator who is clearing out his childhood home and trying to come to terms with his father, who’s dead. In Jakobson’s work, the narrator tries to arrive at his own true story by telling several different stories about other people, both imagined and real. Identity, memory and consciousness’s dependence on language are unifying threads.

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Short story writer Cecilia Davidsson observes a Swedish society in which democratization and efforts to achieve equality have gone so far that the differences are barely visible. A short story from her first collection presents a tangible illustration of this state of affairs. The title character, Kerstin, is an alcoholic who, when not doing housework for the first-person narrator, spends most of her time with like-minded individuals on the main square of her suburb. There is a friendly closeness between the two women, but only the narrator has options and resources at her disposal. When the narrator moves out of the neighborhood, their contact is severed, and when she comes back for occasional visits Kerstin refuses to even acknowledge her presence. Kerstin's longing for community is both too strong and too weak. Her disappointment exposes the wall between their different worlds, and suspicion prevails.

Jerker Virdborg's first book was a collection of short stories with the appropriate title *Land rise two centimeters per night*. The stories are all about small, seemingly harmless cracks that suddenly expand into gaping chasms. In Sweden, the greatest land rise is occurring along Sweden's Baltic Sea coast, at a rate of one centimeter per year. In Jerker Virdborg's world, that rate is 700 times faster. The stories' starting points are unremarkable enough: a transit hall immediately before departure, a living room in a suitably big house, a museum. In that book, Jerker Virdborg shows he is a technically skilled narrator with a clearly defined theme: the limits of personal responsibility. In his latest one, *the disappearing*, Virdborg has finally arrived at his inevitable destination, to his unique place in the documentary tradition, the childhood memoir and his own version of the big, though still splintered, story of the dissolution of the Swedish welfare state. The narrator in the novel has two missions. The first one is to document two gigantic, utopian projects, both of which quickly became obsolete – Stockholm's system of underground shelters and the planned but never built suburb of Hansta. The underground shelters were built after the Second World War, but have luckily enough never been used. The fear for a nuclear war in Europe diminished during the 1960s and 1970s and the shelters were thus forgotten. Hansta was meant to be the latest in a number of huge suburbs just outside Stockholm. During the 1960s people moved in large numbers from the rural parts of Sweden to the big cities, and the need for housing needed to be solved. Before Hansta was built, however, the winds had turned, urbanization had ended and the new, modern suburbia had already started to show signs of decay and social unrest. Hansta remained an unrealized plan. These are actual projects on which the narrator reports in the fact-filled passages of the novel, and to which Virdborg must have devoted considerable archival research. They are also, of course, two deeply symbolic projects – one offered hiding places, while the other represented dreams of social engineering. Memories of Modernity. The narrators' second task is a private one, which is not, however, independent of the first one. His childhood friend has disappeared without a trace and he steps out of his everyday life to search for him. He

has no hope of finding him, and so he seeks answers in memories, in childhood games and situations. These childhood memories possess a palpable spatial character; they take place on swimming piers, in newly built houses and in overpass tunnels – the connection of “the little life” to something bigger is almost overly explicit. However, in contrast to the narrators’ factual texts and the choppy descriptions of the search itself, these remembrances are not only powerfully visual; they are also characterized by sorrowful, yearning sensitivity.

Memories of modernity in recent prose fiction tell a story not of progress, but of loss, of disappearing dreams.

The proletarian writers in the 1930s had a strong belief in the future and its unlimited possibilities. They saw both art and industrialization as a means of liberation. The novel and the railroad were two sides of the same coin – a ticket for the journey from a dark and underprivileged background into the bright lights of Modernity.

The young writers of the 21st century regard the future as something passed. Modernization is not even an unfinished project; it is no project at all anymore. Grass grows on the railroad tracks, and all alternative life styles you can think of have been tried out. Fiction is not so much a means of communicating a better, future society, but rather an alternative view on the present. When these writers travel from the suburbs into the city and back again, they travel between languages: the division of power that was so important to leftists in the 1970s, is today a question of mastering more than one version of Swedish.

Words express both power and loss of power. But, in the end, only words can comfort us for our losses.

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