

Problems and possibilities for Swedish working-class literature in a neoliberal age

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Abstract

In recent decades, inequality has increased in Sweden. The increasing gaps are connected with policies that are often called neoliberal. How does working-class literature relate to these social problems and what literary possibilities does it open up? In this article I discuss these questions based on some literary examples from Swedish contemporary working-class literature. These literary examples have attracted much attention. My perspective is that I see working-class literature as literature with a distinct use value and a literature that has specific functions in the working-class literature context (Felski, 2008).

Kristian Lundberg, Johan Jönson and Jenny Wrangborg all give personal accounts from workplaces. Such can be valuable. The problem with Lundberg and Jönson is that they tend to be introverted and egocentric. Especially Lundberg lacks the class perspective. Perhaps Lundberg's *Yarden* (The Yard, 2009) should be described as confessional literature rather than working-class literature. With Susanna Alakoski the working-class is hidden behind the concept of poverty. The working-class as actor is absent. The labor movement as well. Instead, it is the middle class who appear as actor. Through the role of jester, Jönson makes class society visible. The role of jester could be seen as a specific rhetorical strategy and a literary device to create a distancing effect, or *Verfremdungseffekt*. Wrangborg connects to the legacy of early working-class literature with struggle poems. From within the workplace she describes work situations and experiences of class.

Emil Boss takes a close look at language and concepts in a postpolitical age when old concepts have changed meaning. It is a crucial task for working-class literature to explain, interpret and examine old concepts that have changed meaning in a new political era, when the labor movement has lost contact with previous ideals and social democratic governments pursue rightwing politics, thus making it difficult to distinguish between left and right.

Keywords

Working-class literature, use of literature, Swedish literature, Sweden, neoliberalism

In recent decades, inequality has increased in Sweden. In fact, class gaps have grown faster than in any other OECD country (Ahrne et al., 2021). One could speak of a silent revolution as this social change also took place during a number of social democratic governments.

The increasing gaps are connected with policies that are often called neoliberal. Neoliberalism, as geographer David Harvey defines it, is a theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (2007, p. 2). To date, few other countries have progressed as far and as quickly with privatization as Sweden, according to sociologist Liv Sunnercrantz (2021, p. 188).

At the same time as this problematic social development, working-class literature has received a boost. According to Rasmus Landström (2020), Swedish working-class literature has never before been as broad and vibrant as it is today.

My perspective in this article is that I see working-class literature as literature with a distinct use value and a literature that has specific functions in the working-class literature context. For example, to strengthen solidarity and class consciousness (Felski, 2008).

How does working-class literature relate to these social problems and what literary possibilities does it open up? I want to discuss such questions here based on some literary examples from Swedish contemporary working-class literature. These literary examples have attracted much attention.

The working-class literary tradition is strong in Sweden. It had its golden age in the 1930s, in recent years it has thus had a renaissance. What characterizes this new wave is the diversity of expression: poetry and prose and even comics. The new working-class literature is also distinguished by the many female authors and the depictions of work in health care and the service sector.

There are different opinions among working-class literature researchers about contemporary working-class literature in Sweden. Magnus Nilsson believes that working-class literature has an avantgarde position in political thinking through its understanding of class and class politics. According to Nilsson (2014, p. 100), Kristian Lundberg's *Yarden* (The Yard, 2009) and Johan Jönson's *Efter arbetsschema* (According to Work Schedule, 2008) are gateposts – here Nilsson's use gateposts alludes to the famous Swedish working-class writer Ivar Lo-Johansson who called Martin Koch and Gustav Hedenvind-Eriksson gateposts for Swedish working-class literature – for a new working-class literature that seeks away from realism and is characterized by both formal and thematic renewal.

Beata Agrell (2015) points to egocentric and self-reflective tendencies in contemporary working-class literature which are not only attempts at literary renewal away from social realism, but are also an expression of the individualism and narcissism that characterize our neoliberal age. Meanwhile, Åsa Arping (2022) describes the contemporary autobiographical trend as the working-class writer entering a witness position and recounting previously silenced class experiences.

Journalist and author Kajsa Ekis Ekman (2009) believes that left-wing intellectuals often legitimize themselves by assuming the position of marginalized. In order to speak, one must be silenced, or rather present oneself as silenced using various rhetorical strategies and literary devices. But what social critical function can these testimonies have in contemporary working-class literature? Do they not primarily appear as reports on individual problems in a post-political era? Without connection to class consciousness, social outlook, social movements and collective solutions, perhaps they rather risk reinforcing the prevailing system. The story of neoliberalism is that deviations, defects in a fundamentally optimal system are corrected. Today's suffering can be justified by the fact that the system will work better in the future.

An international outlook on working-class literature research may be relevant in this context to gain further perspective. Danish working-class literature researchers are ambivalent about the question of how the class-oriented contemporary literature in Denmark is related to the working-class literary tradition. Distinctive, according to Nicklas Freisleben Lund (2020), are

depictions of those who are outside the labor market or are in a permanently unstable, insecure and vulnerable relationship to it, such as the long-term unemployed, social welfare recipients and those on sick leave (p. 71).

There are also depictions of upward class journeys, where the protagonist, with a working-class background, depicts the climb up the social ladder retrospectively (p. 73). Several of these works convey an ambiguity, notes Freisleben Lund. On the one hand, they present a positive vision that the working-class is no longer helplessly tied to its class origins. On the other hand, these particular protagonists are presented as exceptions to the rule, as the majority of working-class characters included in the story cannot follow the protagonist's upward trajectory. While the protagonist, through various circumstances, such as special personal characteristics, help from benefactors, or pure chance, is able to get out of his class, the class as such remains stuck in a degraded social existence.

Freisleben Lund (2020) further notes that much of the Danish working-class literature is characterized by descriptions of the working-class as dysfunctional and destructive with broken families, violence and abuse. Although the depictions express sympathy with the working-class and criticize the prevailing conditions, these texts differ from older classical works of working-class literature in that they do not highlight the human, social and political potential to change these conditions. The focus is on the unorganized working-class, and although the stories express sympathy and compassion, the lower classes are almost never depicted as a potentially progressive social force. The majority of contemporary class-oriented literature lacks an ideological anchoring and utopian impulse, which distinguishes it from much of the older working-class literature (Freisleben Lund, 2020, p. 74).

Working-class literature researcher Anker Gemzøe (2016) is on the same track and believes that the relationship between Danish working-class literature and the labor movement has undoubtedly been stronger and clearer in earlier periods. At the same time, he continues, the depictions of the so-called *Underdanmark* (Lower Denmark) have several genre, stylistic and attitudinal similarities with the early twentieth century (p. 124). Just like a hundred years ago, the autobiographically anchored family novel, which depicts growing up under difficult conditions at the bottom of society, is now a prevailing trend. Just as before, the focus is on childhood.

As one of his literary examples, Anker Gemzøe (2016) highlights Yahya Hassan's bestseller *Digte*, (Poems, 2013), which Gemzøe describes as a verse novel that has clear common features with, for example, Martin Andersen Nexø's (1906–1910) autobiographical account of growing up in *Pelle Erobreren* (Pelle the Conqueror). Andersen Nexø is seen by many as the pioneer of the Nordic working-class literature. The story about Pelle the Conqueror became world famous and was translated into 25 languages.

Based on the career of migrant working-class writer Md Mukul Hossine, working-class literature researcher Luka Lei Zhang (2021) sheds light on the situation of working-class writers in today's neoliberal market in Singapore. Singapore has a large group of migrant workers in many industries. Md Mukul Hossine worked in the construction sector. In 2016, his first poetry collection, *Me Migrant*, was published. It received a lot of media attention and reached a large readership. The following year, in 2017, the sequel *Braving Life* was released. Mukul participated in television shows and literary events along with politicians and writers. However, the situation quickly changed for the young poet. Mukul himself describes it as trying to express his feelings in words but being scolded and ridiculed. He also lost his job and was forced to

move back to Bangladesh. The construction manager must not have felt comfortable with the migrant worker's fame. Mukul had made too many contacts in literary circles and in the media industry and, therefore, he was fired (Lhei Zhang, 2021, p. 58).

Through this example, Lhei Zhang (2021) shows, how literature serves the function of showcasing the lives of migrant workers to the majority population. There is an overarching idea that the texts should give readers an insight into the lives of migrant workers. Lei Zhang can discern a neo-colonial pattern in the very view of migrant workers' literature. Although good intentions are expressed, it seems that the migrant workers' texts are primarily intended to fulfill the purpose of 'we' (i.e. the majority population), to teach 'us' about (and thereby distinguish 'us' from 'them', i.e. the migrant workers). These texts are produced for 'our' curiosity, 'our' knowledge and 'our' sympathy (p. 60).

The capitalist logic and neoliberal context within which the literary work emerges is made visible in the example of Md. Mukul Hossine, argues Lei Zhang (2021). The mode of production follows this pattern: first created, then consumed and finally condemned, or damned. The way in which the migrant working-class writer is given access and space in the literary field is described as 'catwalk empowerment' and Lei Zhang refers here to Malin McGlenn's definition: 'that is, empowerment that calls for visual recognition to be meaningful. The project participants, much like models on a fashion catwalk, are shown off in order to attract the gaze of others' (as cited in Lhei Zhang, 2021, p. 71).

Regarding Swedish contemporary working-class literature, Kristian Lundberg's *Yarden* has been mentioned before. Here, the narrator is the only native Swedish temporary worker among foreign-born. The narrator's tribulations interspersed with memories of a proletarian childhood, marked by social exclusion and a single mentally ill mother. These two layers can also be said to constitute two different strategies for presenting oneself as marginalized.

My thoughts go to Hayden White (2004), who reasons about how testimony relates to fact and fiction. Within the genre of testimonies, the camp descriptions from Auschwitz and the Holocaust occupy a special position, he believes. White highlights how Primo Levi's journey in to Auschwitz in his book *Se questo è un uomo* (If this is a man, 1947) resembles in form Dante's journey into hell in *The Divine Comedy* (White, 2004, p. 114).

Testimony has become an umbrella term for a number of different kinds of autobiographical narratives, many times by marginalized or oppressed groups. According to John Beverley (1989, p. 13), testimony is characterized by a strong urge to address an urgent problem related to oppression, poverty, disadvantage, captivity or struggle for survival. The narrator represents not themselves, but an entire group or an entire society – and, at the same time, speaks to the reader in the form of a clearly marked 'I' that demands attention and recognition. As Paul Ricœur (2005) point out, testimony is based on dialogue and mutual trust. For testimony to work, it must reach a recipient, an audience that receives and accepts it (p. 216).

Lundberg's (2009) testimony is a descent, if not to hell, then at least a couple of stairs down. As a temporary worker, the narrator is not even a name, just a number that has signed off clothes (p. 27). Every now and then the narrator thinks of his story as a message in a bottle that he throws into the ocean hoping that there will be someone on the other side who will pick it up and, at least for a while, feel less alone (p. 32). At the same time he emphasizes that he cannot tell everyone's story, only his own (p. 143). Thus, the testimony becomes ambiguous from a class point of view. It depicts class injustice, but above all from an individualistic perspective.

The testimony in *Yarden* portrays the class traveler's doubt as to whether he really belongs in the place he once started and to which he has now returned – the anxiety of falling back to the starting point. According to Erik Wiklund (2010) this anxiety is directed inwards. There is no hope that anyone else will understand, nor that there will be any way out together. The working poor are imprisoned by the fear and insecurity of the neoliberal system.

Lundberg's (2009) narrator describes his own surprise at how working life has changed in Sweden. The last time he worked at the port, he was in the union and was impressed by the workplace library. Now neither he nor any of the other temporary employees are in the union, and union struggle is not something they reflect on either (p. 65). There is a kind of nostalgia that pervades *Yarden*, which is interesting because the narrator accuses author colleague Fredrik Ekelund's depictions of Malmö's old stevedore workers as nostalgia estranged from the world. I think, perhaps, a Fredrik Ekelund also lived or lives in Kristian Lundberg (p. 78).

One could possibly also see Lundberg's depiction of the staffing industry as a testimony of a silent revolution. The fact that old concepts such as the Swedish model and the welfare state are still used gives an impression of continuity. In fact, these concepts have changed meaning under the neoliberal hegemony.

Susanna Alakoski's *Oktober i Fattigsverige* (October in Poor Sweden, 2012) has the character of a diary but also contains journal entries from the family's contacts with social services and psychiatry during the 1960s and 1970s. Alakoski builds authority on exclusion by bearing witness to the Swedish-Finnish family's vulnerability in the form of poverty, mental illness and alcohol and drug problems and through descriptions of how she was exposed to sexual abuse as a young person (pp. 133, 141). The testimony is also about the economic crisis of the 1990s and the increasing poverty in Sweden. From a class point of view, it can be said that the class journey motif is distinctive in this work, perhaps most clearly illustrated by the author's many trips and assignments during the month of October and by the fact that the book is partly written in a work apartment at a fashionable address in the old hometown Ystad.

The ideological function of stories about individuals' upward class journeys in our time has been discussed by Irena Molina and Lena Sohl (2013, pp. 40-41). The explanation for the interest in these stories being so great is possibly, they think, that they seem to contradict an increasingly segregated society. Stories about individuals who move up in the class hierarchy contribute to establishing the image of a relatively egalitarian Sweden, regardless of real political changes.

At the same time, it can also be said that Alakoski (2012) hides the class issue behind the concept of poverty. Although it appears that the parents had jobs, albeit poorly paid, they are reduced to paupers. The parents are therefore not workers but poor, mentally ill alcoholics. Nor do they appear as individuals, as flesh and blood people with whom the reader can identify. Rather they seem to be props to fulfill a certain purpose for the story. It is illustrative that it is through documents in the form of authority records that the family of origin appears. It is also problematic from an ethical perspective, for example when the mother's suicide attempt is reproduced through quotes from the psychiatric clinic's records, without any further context (p. 131; see also p. 16).

It is the social workers, and not the working-class, who appear as political subjects. It is not the working-class but social workers, together with psychiatrists, teachers and the police who can change the system. In connection with a talk to social workers at City Hall in Malmö, Alakoski

(2012, p. 239) writes that she dreams of a renewed social policy commitment where social managers, social workers and social researchers give a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves.

The labor movement is strikingly absent in Alakoski's historiography. The welfare society seems to be built by politicians, (unclear of which ideological affiliation) social workers and other government officials in association. The book could be described as a middle-class story. It is the middle class she addresses and it is the middle class with which the reader must identify. At the center of this middle-class story is the sociologist Barbro, who is described as a role model and mentor for the author, who herself once worked in the same profession (Alakoski, 2012, pp. 212, 251, 293).

When Alakoski (2012) occasionally refers to an older generation of Swedish working-class writers such as Jan Fridegård, Ivar Lo-Johansson, Moa Martinson, Vilhelm Moberg and Majgull Axelsson (pp. 21, 38, 56, 61, 231, 236-238, 248), it appears in the context as a kind of ceremonial working-class literary symbolism. Admittedly, Alakoski has origins in the working-class and writes about workers in the original family. At the same time, as I said, the class injustices and the working-class as a political subject are made invisible by the author's consistent use of the term 'poverty'. The testimony works in the sense that it is accepted by several critics and columnists, who in turn are inspired to testify about their own experiences of poverty and vulnerability. One critic testifies about his mother who had to take out a loan from the bank to afford to buy Christmas presents (Lundberg, 2012). Another testifies about a visit to the recycling station. As he drives off, having left the plastic Christmas tree, CDs and old toys, he sees people circling outside (Sandahl, 2012; see also, e.g. Karlsson 2012).

In *Efter arbetsschema* the poet Johan Jönson (2008) also builds authority by describing an exclusion in his depiction of low-wage poverty in care. If Lundberg's testimony is a descent into a well, perhaps Jönson's testimony could be described as a descent into a sewer. The narrator tells us that he wants to express a worker's subjectivity because 'it is something denied, something silenced' (p. 506). At the same time, there is a paraphrase or nod to Swedish working-class poetry from an older generation – Stig Sjödin's portrait poetry in *Sotfragment* (Fragments of Soot, 1949) with a collection of portraits of workmates that offers an opening towards a working collective.

The turned-up tone that characterizes Jönson's depiction of class can be connected with an ambition to break through an ideologically conditioned silence around class issues in particular, according to Magnus Nilsson (2014, p. 115). I would like to try the idea that Jönson takes on the role of the classic court jester, who with humor and impudence makes society's social boundaries and taboos visible. In this case, the role of jester could be seen as a specific rhetorical strategy and a literary device to create a distancing effect, or *Verfremdungseffekt*, thereby making class society visible.

Efter arbetsschema is as absurd as it is a brutal depiction of the work in care, where the old and mentally disabled are presented as the package to be fed and pooped. In one scene, the narrator is covered in feces from a patient who has received treatment for his constipation (Jönson, 2008, p. 64). In another scene, when he temporarily works as a handyman at a paving company and builds a garden wall at the home of a new rich family in Äppelviken, a suburb in Stockholm, he expresses his class hatred by wiping his herpes-infected cock on the family's, and also the children's, towels (p. 542).

Through Jönson's drastic formulations the role of the court jester also tangibly makes visible the political reorientation of the labor movement. Jönson testifies from a kind of pitch black ground zero and exposes the absurdity of class injustices. After the right wing wins the election in September 2006, he writes: 'Is it now possible for the yellow union LO to at least open its mouth?' (p. 727). When the Municipal Workers Union removes the vision of a six-hour working day from its program, he notes that 'They have never raised a finger for it in pragmatic politics, and now the idea should not be considered either' (p. 500).

Just as with Lundberg, Jönson's anxiety is above all directed inwards, towards his own self, often in self-pity. The testimony is written in despair, there seems to be no way out for the workers as a collective to be able to change their own living conditions. Possibly, however, Jönson's absurd humor, the witness position as a court jester, can work subversively from a class point of view, awakening class consciousness and making class injustices visible to the reader.

Jenny Wrangborg distinguishes herself with her poetry collection *Kallskänken* (The Kitchen, 2010) by not portraying herself as an outsider or marginalized. Instead, the author appears in the role of a trade representative who testifies to the strength of the collective (p. 77). After being denied overtime pay, the restaurant workers form a union. *Kallskänken* is a collection of struggle poem that brings to mind early Swedish working-class literature. The poems become a political tool for changing society. In the role of a trade union representative, the narrator wants to create cohesion and readiness to fight among the workers. Of course, there are also elements of the narrator's personal experiences here. However, the aim is not to express the unique, or peculiar. Instead, just as in the early working-class literature, the personal and the public are united by allowing the experiences of the poet's self to symbolize the experiences of the collective (Nilsson, 2006, p. 158). In this way, Wrangborg's poetic self is portrayed as a representative of her class and in the role of a union representative and agitator.

Just like Jönson, Wrangborg was inspired by Stig Sjödin and draws a number of portraits of her colleagues in the kitchen, such as the Dishwasher, the Coffee Maker, the Chef, the Black Eye, the Daughter and the Fryer (pp. 14, 16, 19, 23, 39, 41-42). This also includes a self-portrait, where the poem self is presented from the outside, as part of the collective. What is distinctive is precisely that the workplace is portrayed from a collective perspective; it is always 'we' and 'us', and 'I' is always included in this 'we'. The proud collective is portrayed in the light of dawn when 'the Avenue wakes up' and 'the sun pushes up behind the houses' and 'we' right in those moments, do not want to 'be anything other than cafe assistants/ we have the best job in the world' (p. 11).

Wrangborg's poems depicts the restaurant kitchen, but they also connects the working conditions on the floor with the surrounding class society. Wrangborg's poetic self directs criticism at the political reorientation of the labor movement in recent decades. 'Don't forget where we started/ don't forget where we were going/ we remember and we're tired of waiting/ soon we'll go without you' (p. 47).

As discussed above, Wrangborg's book distinguishes itself by highlighting the collective rather than the individual. In the role of trade representative and agitator, she also expresses a vision – and she dares to write the word socialism (p. 78). *Kallskänken* is thus something other than a deviation report that can be inserted into the narrative of neoliberalism.

Swedish working-class literature grew hand in hand with the labor movement and the construction of *folkhemmet* (the peoples home). In Ivar Lo-Johansson's autobiographical novel *Författaren* (The Author, 1957) there is a section that describes how the main character, a yet unredeemed author, finds inspiration during a walk at Stockholm Exhibition in 1930 for a new language to express the 'subject' he is carrying.

'Utställningshallarnas blanka maskinlemmar krävde en ny poesi. Den höga stålmasten på utställningsområdet reste sig som en signal, som en ilning av lycka mot knallblå luft. Den nya tidens stil var ju avskrapningen av stilar. Dess nakna språk hette fakta. Jag översatte direkt arkitekturens språk till litteraturens. Jag gick och såg mig omkring efter den nya mänskan' (Lo-Johansson, 1957, p. 5)

The shiny machines of the exhibition halls required a new poetry. The tall steel mast in the exhibition area rose like a signal, like a rush of happiness against bright blue air. The style of the new era was, after all, the scrapping of styles. Its bare language was called facts. I directly translated the language of architecture into that of literature. I went and looked around for the new man.

Ninety years later, a completely different Stockholm and Sweden is portrayed in the poem 'Ingen har berättat för mig var vi ska gå!' ('No one has told me where we are going!') by Emil Boss. Here, rather than finding a new language, it is important to first try to find a zero point, a restart, and decipher and decode a language that is associated with the history of the labor movement but that has changed meaning under the neoliberal hegemony. Boss has published several poetry collections, is active in the labor movement in the Syndicalist Movement, and works with organizing migrant workers as a trade representative and negotiator.

The poem, which is included in the Association of Working-Class Writer's twelfth anthology, *Världen vi lämnar* (The world we leave), published at the end of 2020, stands out compared to other contributions. It is not a single testimony or an individual voice from a workplace but a critical ideological reflection on the state of the working-class as a collective today which, among other things, is embodied through a May Day demonstration that seems to have gotten lost before it has even been set in motion. The poem has certain similarities with Wrangborg's 'Soon we'll go without you', and could possibly be seen as a response to or further development of the same poem.

It could also be interesting to compare Emil Boss with Stig Sjödin. They belong to different eras and operate in widely different cultural and institutional contexts. Sjödin operated during a period when literary life in the labor movement was very active, and was able to publish his poems in the trade union press. Meanwhile, Boss, in addition to his book publishing, has mainly published in Association of Working-class anthologies. Each is a sort of insider critic of the labor movement – one a social democrat, the other a syndicalist – but while Sjödin engages in polemics with a labor movement that he perceives has lost touch with old ideals, hardened, and increasingly become a kind of museum object, Boss goes a step further and tries to explain, interpret and examine old concepts that have changed meaning in a new political era.

'LO:s ledning värnar
Strejkrätten'
'Svenskt Näringsliv värnar
den svenska modellen'
Solen går aldrig ner över det

socialdemokratiska språket
och ändå:
Låter inte framtiden
alltmer gaggig?
Rentav senil?

ett minne av
en demonstration på första maj
strax innan tåget skulle
sättas i rörelse från Sergels torg
vinkade fanbäraren fram mig
panik i blicken
det röda skynket vajade
tio meter framför den långa ormen
av ansikten:
'Ingen har berättat för mig
var vi ska gå!'' (Boss, 2020, p. 292)

'The management of the Swedish
Trade Union Confederation
protects the right to strike'
'The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise
protects the Swedish model'
The sun never sets on the
social democratic language
and yet:
Doesn't the future seem
more and more muddled?
Even senile?

a memory of
a demonstration on May Day
just before the march was due
to start from Sergel's square
the standard-bearer beckoned me forward
panic in the eyes
the red curtain swayed
ten meters in front of the long snake
of faces:
'No one has told me
where we are going!'

Through the image of a disoriented May Day demonstration, Boss portrays the political confusion at a time when the social democratic government pursues right-wing politics and it difficult to distinguish between right and left. The poem can be said to make visible the post-political, not to say the post-democratic condition. With the concept of post-democracy, Colin Crouch (2011, p. 17) describes how democracy retains its external features but is emptied out in its content when the parties agree on everything except who should carry out the actual leadership. In the post-democratic society, you can still exercise your right to vote and thus force a change of government, but the public political debate is a tightly directed play. Behind

the scenes, politics is shaped in meetings between representatives of the popularly elected government and an elite that mostly represents the interests of the business world.

In his poem, Boss (2020) goes back in history – all the way to the Swedish contract-work system in agriculture depicted by, for example, the working-class writer Ivar Lo-Johansson which could be seen as part of a kind of collective working-class literary memory – to gain perspective, gain a clearer view, and try to find an ideological compass and a political strategy for the future.

‘det har aldrig hänt
–*I detta land, kamrat* –
att de som har makten
över ekonomin
som själva blivit mycket rika
på andras arbete
har folkets stöd
Votering är beställd
av näringslivet
och ska verkställas
i detta land, kamrat
där ingen längre strejkar
ska strejker förbjudas
för att skydda strejkrätten

klarare sikt bakåt då kanske
över någon sorts kollektiv axel?
Statarnas sista flyttlass
gick ut genom godsets grindar
ut ur en tankevärld
som ville göra dem
obildbara
hopplösa
mottagare av gåvor
de egentligen inte förtjänade
också den världen var bebodd
av livs levande människor
i huvudbyggnaden
satt godsherren och lade sten på sten
till språket’ (Boss, 2020, p. 293)

It has never happened
– *In this country, comrade* –
that those in power
over the economy
who themselves have become very rich
on the work of others
has the support of the people
Voting is ordered
of business
and shall be enforced
in this country, comrade

where no one goes on strike anymore
 strikes should be banned
 to protect the right to strike

clearer view backwards then maybe
 over some sort of collective shoulder?
 The agricultural contract-workers
 last load of furniture
 went out through the gates of the estate
 out of a world of thought
 who wanted to make them
 unimaginable
 hopeless
 recipient of gifts
 they didn't really deserve
 that world too was inhabited
 by living people
 in the main building
 sat the landlord and laid stone upon stone
 to the language

The poem is framed by a child motif in the form of the poet's son Elis, who on his way to preschool finds a plant that his father has seen all his life along the curb but does not know its name. When they get home in the evening, they look up the name on their mobile phone and read that the plant has been here for several hundred years. The child motif adds additional layers and perspective to the poem. In her thesis, Sandra Mischliwietz (2014) shows through literary examples such as Ivar Lo Johansson's *Godnatt Jord* (Breaking Free, 1933), Moa Martinson's Mia trilogy (1936–1939), Harry Martinson's *Nässlorna blomma* (Nettle blooms, 1935) and Eyvind Johnson's *Romanen om Olof*, (The Novel about Olof, 1934–1937) how the child in Swedish working-class literature symbolizes a working-class that is exposed to injustice but also has the ability to fight it. In this way, the child also represents the position of the working-class writer – 'subordinate but vital and modern'. That the poet himself does not know the name of the plant that he has seen throughout his life could be interpreted as an image, or a metaphor, for the alienation of the working-class. With his curious questions, the son Elis breaks this alienation:

'Solstrimman korsar
 raderna av platta radhustak
 När vi kommer hem tittar vi i mobilen
 Den nya blomman heter vintergäck
 Den hade visst funnits här
 i fem hundra år' (Boss, 2020, p. 294)

'The streak of sunlight crosses
 the rows of flat townhouse roofs
 When we get home, we look at the mobile phone
 The new flower is called Winter Aconite
 It had certainly been here
 for five hundred years'

Conclusion

The literary examples point to both problems and possibilities. Kristian Lundberg, Johan Jönson and Jenny Wrangborg all give personal accounts from workplaces. Such can be valuable.

The problem with Lundberg and Jönson is that they tend to be introverted and egocentric. Especially Lundberg lacks the class perspective. Perhaps Lundberg's *Yarden* should be described as confessional literature rather than working-class literature. With Susanna Alakoski the working-class is hidden behind the concept of poverty. The working-class as actor is absent. The labor movement as well. Instead, it is the middle class who appear as actor.

Through the role of jester, Jönson makes class society visible. The role of jester could be seen as a specific rhetorical strategy and a literary device to create a distancing effect, or *Verfremdungseffekt*. Wrangborg connects to the legacy of early working-class literature with struggle poems. From within the workplace she describes work situations and experiences of class.

Emil Boss takes a close look at language and concepts in a postpolitical age when old concepts have changed meaning. It is a crucial task for working-class literature to explain, interpret and examine old concepts that have changed meaning in a new political era, when the labor movement has lost contact with previous ideals and social democratic governments pursue rightwing politics, thus making it difficult to distinguish between left and right.

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