

CLASS REVISITED IN CONTEMPORARY SWEDISH LITERATURE

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In the mid-1990s, the Swedish socialist writer and critic Göran Greider argued that neoconservatism in politics and political thinking had left visible traces in contemporary Swedish cultural life and literature. "It is no coincidence," he wrote, "that the concepts of realism and the socially conscious writer disappeared at the same time as political discourses took a right turn ideologically" (Greider 1994, 9).¹ According to Greider, the literary "aesthetic turn" of the 1980s, with its focus on language, form and structure, was a direct consequence of this ideological shift and came at the expense of socially anchored, realist literature that featured the living conditions, work environments and struggles of ordinary people – in short, the main features of the traditional Swedish working-class literature that was born during the same interwar era as Sweden's welfare state.

But Greider made this claim more than twenty years ago, and much has changed since then. In the past two decades, a number of novels with a significant focus on class have appeared, and many of them have attracted considerable popular and critical attention. Writers are again preoccupied with depicting class-related changes in contemporary society, refocusing on the link between literature and sociopolitical discourse. The shift emerges from a renewed awareness of the alienation of the individual in Sweden, a country that had formed a distinctive national identity rooted in its welfare state during the twentieth century only to see this transformed by a globalizing society and economy going into the twenty-first century. The Swedish welfare model has long been associated with the Social Democratic Party (*Socialdemokraterna*), whose parliamentary win in 1932 ushered in decades of welfare reforms, and the party continued to dominate Swedish politics for most of the next six decades. Since the turn of the millennium, however, support has decreased markedly for the Social Democratic Party and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (*Landsorganisationen i Sverige*, or LO), the country's largest umbrella organization for workers' unions. Between 2006 and 2014, Sweden was governed by a center-right

coalition, the Alliance, which implemented neoliberal political reforms such as lower taxes and extensive privatization.²

In this article, I argue that class consciousness has become crucial once again to contemporary Swedish literature. There is a clear thematic connection among a number of novels published around the turn of the century, which motivates a claim for a new generation of Swedish working-class literature. The novels are linked by how they explore ways of narrating and making visible the experiences of living in a rapidly changing capitalist society where traditional class politics are no longer articulated in public discourse. I argue that the novels are oriented toward the individual, delineating a society in which the meanings of concepts such as community, solidarity, compassion and democratic influence must be reinvented. Although the focus is on the individual, the narrative is loaded with social critique. Thus in addition to examining the characteristic features of exemplary works of prose fiction, I parse their connections to an established tradition of working-class literature, to significant political developments in Sweden in recent decades, and to the much-changed sociopolitical context of the new millennium.

Let me briefly introduce some examples. Susanna Alakoski's *Svinalångorna* [*The Swine Rows*] and Tomas Bannerhed's *Korparna* [*The Ravens*] each won the prestigious August Prize from the Swedish Publishers' Association for the best book of fiction in 2006 and 2011, respectively.³ *Svinalångorna* deals with the survival strategies of a young girl of Finnish descent who grows up poor in a socially stigmatized small-town district nicknamed "the swine rows." *Korparna* places the young, alienated boy, Klas, in a rural environment where his father's traditional farming methods are driven out of competition by an increasingly globalized agriculture market. Eija Hetekivi Olsson's *Ingenbarnsland* [*No Child's Land*] (2012) delineates in excruciating detail the circumstances of a young suburban girl in material and existential destitution.⁴ Hassan Loo Sattarvandi's novel *Still* (2008) depicts a group of alienated, unemployed young people of immigrant backgrounds, drifting and self-medicating in suburban Stockholm. And Kristian Lundberg's much-acclaimed *Yarden* [*The Yard*] (2009) deals with dockworkers in the Malmö harbor on the verge of unemployment, at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy.

Scholars and critics in Scandinavia and elsewhere have already brought attention to the fact that socioeconomic class has fallen out of focus in scholarly research and public debate in recent decades. Magnus Nilsson (2010; also in this volume) claims that class has been replaced by ethnicity and gender as primary tools for political and cultural analysis. Class, he argues, is today a concept reserved for the past, for the industrialized society

or the Swedish welfare model of the twentieth century. The economic perspectives that once were an integral part of traditional class analysis have been neglected and must be reclaimed, insists Nilsson (2010, 18, 54–61, 74–9, 221; see also Ahrne 1995, 14–25). The current Swedish situation is described in a book by journalist Rebecka Bohlin, *De osynliga: Om Europas fattiga arbetarklass* [*The Invisible: The Working Poor in Europe*] (2012). She gives an account of unacceptable, inhuman working conditions among the poorly paid in Sweden and Europe, often immigrant employees and young people. Collective bargaining agreements are insufficient and the obstacles for social mobility insurmountable (Bohlin 2012, 54). Europe is undergoing structural changes in which industrial society has been replaced by an expanding workforce of service jobs: cleaners, restaurant workers, cashiers and home helpers (Bohlin 2012, 99). Although Sweden, with its welfare model, differs in many respects from the development of other European countries, recent figures provide cause for concern. A growing number of Swedes live on the verge of poverty, despite the fact that incomes have risen faster there than elsewhere in Europe. Those at risk are primarily young people, the unemployed, and those who have not finished high school (Statistics Sweden 2012). From a more general perspective, literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels (2006, 5–12) argues that a narrow focus on cultural diversity and difference in prevailing political discourse tends to mask the neglect of growing socioeconomic inequality (see also Amanda Doxtater's article in this volume).⁵

Class consciousness is crucial to the literary depiction of a society in which the famous "Swedish model" has been successively abandoned due to political reforms of deregulation and privatization of the public sector. However, it seems impossible to separate class from categories such as gender, ethnicity and race. But Åsa Arping (2011) argues that rather than obscuring class, intersections with these other categories can deepen our understanding of both diversified modern literature and society.⁶ As I show in the following, class is frequently intertwined with, for example, gender and ethnicity in recent class-conscious literature. In Lundberg's novels, Swedes and immigrants share class experiences, as Nilsson explains in his contribution to this volume. In Alakoski's writings, gender is an inseparable aspect of the protagonists' class experience.

Many of the issues these novels bring to light also dominate contemporary sociopolitical debates in Sweden. The novels deal with the alienation of young people who are out of work and their acute feelings of powerlessness due to poverty and social subordination. European political discussions have used the term "social exclusion" for highlighting the concern for growing segregation due to unemployment and poverty

(Rothstein 1995, 11; Atkinson and Davoudi 2008, 348–9; Dahlstedt 2009, 50–1, 59–60; Bauman 2011). Moreover, a Swedish government report about new civic challenges stresses the importance of “the influence of the citizen on his/her everyday life” (Dahlstedt 2009, 55).⁷

Most of the characters depicted in the novels discussed here belong to the working class, defined here as people with relatively low income who work for others and have little power over their own work (Jones 2011, 144–5). Writers have responded promptly to – and indeed, anticipated – the political rhetoric and sociological concerns. Literature is of course never an immediate social reflection of existing conditions; rather, it presents imagined worlds and challenges perceptions of reality. The novels create a distancing effect, illuminating habitual language and behavior and offering fresh perspectives on class, democracy and individual power.

In Dialogue with Tradition

Swedish working-class literature had its breakthrough in the 1920s and 1930s and made an unprecedented impact, leading to its integration into the literary canon – something not found many other national literary traditions.⁸ An obvious explanation can be found in this literature’s ideological correspondence with the platform of the Social Democratic Party, which came to power in 1932. Referencing this established tradition, some critics have called for similar narratives in the new millennium that are situated in working environments such as hospitals and health care, the building trade and the service industry (Jönsson 2011, 14–6). Such stories certainly do exist, although their narrative foci differ. To a great extent, they are narrated from individual perspectives.⁹

Around the turn of the last century, before the establishment of the welfare state, writers were occupied with calling attention to the struggle for freedom from oppression and to unacceptable working and living conditions, parallel to political movements of the time. The Social Democratic Party was founded in 1889 and was closely linked to the Swedish Trade Union Confederation founded nine years later, in 1898. As the Social Democrats came to power, they implemented welfare reforms for modern housing, universal health care, and universal education. Starting in the 1920s and 1930s, working-class writers began to narrate a collective experience, highlighting structural inequalities in Swedish society. These themes, evident in novels by canonical writers such as Ivar Lo-Johansson, Moa Martinson, Maria Sandel, and Rudolf Värnlund, to mention only a few, created individual working-class protagonists set in environments familiar to working-class readers. These successful literary

incursions contributed to a sense of collective impact and confidence that paralleled the significant influence of trade unions in the Swedish labor market, particularly during the decades following the Second World War, when Sweden's economy was expanding.

In contrast, the fiction of the new millennium neither forges nor acknowledges such common ground. Significant social and political changes, such as the weakening of organized labor and the privatization of the public sector, are made visible through language and critical reflection, providing interesting points of comparison with the aesthetic and social aims of millennial working-class authors' predecessors. As Nilsson argues in this volume, Lundberg explores new narrative ways of dealing with class struggle in a society in which the worker's voice is weakened. Olsson applies the vulnerable perspective of a young working-class girl to speak of the disappearing welfare model. Today's working-class protagonist is keenly aware of living in a society in which social democratic values such as equal opportunity, common welfare, and solidarity have been co-opted by neoliberal principles such as every man for himself, free market solutions, and individual industriousness.

This turn has radically permeated public debates on national identity in Sweden. Political scientist Leif Lewin (2012) has argued that the neoliberal alliance has taken charge not only politically, but also intellectually, affecting how people think and reason. For more than half a century, the governing Social Democrats influenced Swedes' ways of thinking by developing an ambitious agenda of social engineering that formed the basis of the Swedish social welfare state.¹⁰ The Social Democrats' "pro-worker" ideology formed the core of social welfare policy in the twentieth century and thus became a fundamental component of modern Swedish national identity.¹¹ Today, the bourgeois party that long has been the Social Democrats' primary opposition, the Moderates (*Moderaterna*), bills itself as "the workers' party" in its political advertising and public discourse, cleverly hijacking a nationalist political identity that had been associated with the Social Democrats for more than half a century. Owen Jones (2011) has discerned a comparable change in British politics and public debate. In the 1980s, "Thatcherism" managed to change the way class was defined, individualizing the concepts of community and prosperity:

All were now encouraged to scramble up the social ladder, and be defined by how much they owned. Those who were poor or unemployed had no one to blame but themselves. The traditional pillars of working-class Britain had been smashed to the ground. To be working class was no longer something to be proud of, never mind to celebrate. Old working-class values, like solidarity, were replaced by dog-eat-dog individualism. (Jones 2011, 71)

In Sweden, the Moderates had a brief term in power from 1991-1994 before the Social Democrats regained control. Then in 2006, when a center-right Alliance took charge in the Swedish Riksdag (parliament), led by the Moderates, introduced the neoliberal concept of *arbetslinjen*, which roughly translates as “the path to work,” into public policy. This concept reflects a political orientation that prioritizes job creation over extending benefits to the unemployed (and in Sweden, these taxpayer-supported benefits are typically administered by labor unions). This new model, the Moderates claimed, was a “pro-worker” politics for the new millennium.

While contemporary working-class literature tends to reflect the alienation of the individual worker in such a society, rather than the themes of solidarity that characterized its precursors, in some ways this new body of literature has come full circle; it is, after all, driven by the same realist urge to recount lived experiences. “I have to describe what I observe,” claims the narrator in Lundberg’s novel *Och allt skall vara kärlek* [*And everything shall be love*] (2011). “That I must describe what I see. That what happens in society right now must not go on without me talking about it. That I cannot be silent” (Lundberg 2011, 99–100).¹³

A common feature of today’s Swedish labor market is private employment agencies, which allow employers to evade the laws that protect workers. These intermediaries undermine any potential solidarity among workers since they lack a common relationship with a steady employer. It is no coincidence that the dockworkers in Malmö harbor in Lundberg’s two novels from 2009 and 2011 are hired through such an agency. There are no contracts of employment; the workers – many of them illegal immigrants with insufficient mastery of the Swedish language – do not know from one day to the next if they have a job, and the conditions are hard with long hours and outdoor work in cold weather. Worst of all is the anonymity and alienation, originating from a tenuous relationship with the employer and a lack of solidarity among the workers. When the protagonist, Kristian, in *Och allt skall vara kärlek* finally quits, it makes no difference at all: “I disappeared as unnoticeably as I had arrived, completely replaceable, not even a cog in the machinery” (Lundberg 2011, 32).¹⁴

Class struggle has been a structuring and symbolic element in the history of the Swedish worker movement. It is comprised of such fundamental things as organized labor and the building of a welfare state to care for citizens’ basic needs “from the cradle to the grave.” The dismantled worker solidarity that has been the primary effect of new, neoliberal paradigms therefore marks a radical change in Swedish national identity. The protagonist in Lundberg’s *Yarden* reflects on the term

klasskamp (class struggle), and finds it complicated. In his world, the system is built on the gap between people who have property and people who don't. He asks himself if solidarity is possible when those who protest are immediately replaced with others willing to work under the same conditions. The novel addresses the problem of growing individualism and the lack of a sense of community, conveying to the reader the feeling of a new alienation in a country with a history characterized by common struggle and collective agreements:

I just wonder where all the others are. I just wonder why it is so quiet? I burn a flare in the night, a rocket of stars and colored lights toward the blackened sky to say that here I am, you can come now, let us reassemble. (Lundberg 2009, 54)¹⁵

Many working-class writers of the interwar period were preoccupied with leaving their humble origins behind and dealing with mixed feelings of relief, guilt and confusion. However, the protagonist in Lundberg's autobiographical novels makes a class journey in reverse, from a middle-class life as a writer and critic back to his proletarian origins. It is a necessary move – he needs a job and money – but it is also a search for identity, which has become a common theme in contemporary class-conscious literature. I believe this theme to be connected to the systematic dismantling of the working-class movement in Sweden; the protagonists of these novels are striving to create, or recuperate, a sense of belonging to a collective. Arping (2011) observes that *Yarden* raises the question of what happens to one's identity when the worker is rendered invisible. Is today's working-class fiction about reconstruction or deconstruction? (Arping 2011, 194) Lundberg's protagonist realizes that no one is there to welcome him back. In *Och allt skall vara kärlek*, Lundberg describes a lack of visibility that symbolizes the loneliness of the modern worker:

One must not get the idea that a person who makes a reversed class journey is received with a special kind of love. On the contrary. Suspicion. He who falls, falls without a sound. He whirls away like a dry leaf. That is what happened. We could agree on that already from the start: keeping silent. The loneliness. That our shared despair was wider and deeper than anyone outside the walls could grasp. (Lundberg 2011, 33)¹⁶

Yet despite their "shared despair," new structural and systemic insecurities provide no platform for workers to organize collectively.

In this latter novel, the narrator recounts an episode in which he visits a library to talk about the challenges of modern working-class literature. But his thoughts are elsewhere, occupied with the despairing memory of the

woman he loved and abandoned (Lundberg 2011, 69). It is a metafictional comment, as the novel at hand is an attempt to emphasize the existential, inner dimension of one single person's life story. Like many other working-class narratives of the new millennium, the individual experience reflects deep concern for a society in which the value of responsibility to, and care for, others must be rearticulated in a vastly changed ideological climate. The dockworkers are forced into being objects without a voice or human qualities: "And it was here that I truly experienced that he who owns the language also gets to define the world" (Lundberg 2011, 107).¹⁷ Here the protagonist, and presumably Lundberg, acknowledge the importance of language skills in political struggle – a fundamental idea in the history of Sweden's working-class movement and one implemented via the country's *folkhögskolor* ("folk high schools," or community education) which were frequented by working-class writers (Furuland 1971). But this statement on language also speaks to the relevance of literature as an important voice in the ideological climate of the twenty-first century.

Autobiographical working-class fiction is an internationally established tradition. Classic novels in this tradition frequently depict a hero or heroine engaged with both individual quest and collective identity and draw on the *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, as well as the desire to reveal a culturally overlooked social reality.¹⁸ An example of such a writer from the Swedish tradition is the internationally renowned author Vilhelm Moberg (1898–1973). In the 1930s, he published a semi-autobiographical trilogy about Knut Toring, the dissatisfied son of a farmer from southern Sweden. Like Lundberg's main character, Knut Toring makes a class journey in reverse. Well-established as an editor in Stockholm, he leaves his urban life and settles in the village of his childhood to realize a wish to combine the life of a farmer and a writer.¹⁹ In Moberg's novel, as well, the writer conveys the idea that the narrative process is necessary to comprehend interrelationships between class, society, and identity. Class-conscious Swedish writers today who carry on this tradition thus both connect with and deviate from the narrative strategies of their predecessors.

Olsson's novel *Ingenbarnsland* (2012) engenders the same narrative urgency as its predecessors in the working-class canon: this is a story that needs to be told. The novel, set in the 1980s, depicts life in a Gothenburg suburb in southwestern Sweden where children are left without adult supervision or care in a world of abuse, poverty and shame. In a Swedish context, the word for "suburb," *förort*, has a symbolic and material association with distinctly working-class and multicultural spaces located

outside urban centers, and the word also features in significant compound words such as *förortssvenska*, or “suburban Swedish,” a creolized version of Swedish spoken in marginalized communities.

In a television interview (*Västnytt* 2012), Olsson stated that one purpose of her novel is to give children the right to speak and the ability to express their opinions. It is a political statement, and with increasing narrative speed, the novel depicts the downfall of a society from the perspective of its young people – the next generation. Society’s spiritual and material destruction is made tangible through protagonist Miira’s physical wounds, her attempt to burn down the school, and the worn-down and vandalized tenement housing where she lives (Olsson 2012, 65–7, 82–3, 94, 105). The narrator describes the abominable cleaning job passed on from mother to daughter (Olsson 2012, 292–3, 303). It is a disturbingly dark picture, although not without glimmers of hope. Miira is keenly aware that she needs education to escape her economic subordination.

Sattarvandi’s novel *Still* (2008) is set in a suburb north of Stockholm. The main character, Nemo, who has lost his girlfriend and mourns his deceased mother, kills time with drug abuse, assault, and aimless rambling together with other unemployed male companions of Swedish and immigrant backgrounds. The monotony is overwhelming, conveyed through a flowing narrative mode with sparse punctuation. The novel showcases an existential dimension of new class-conscious literature through which the spiritual consequences of social inequality are observed. British epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2010) have argued that the consequences of inequality for the individual in an unequal society manifest themselves in increased anxiety, depression, drug addiction and criminality (31–45). Their conclusions are based on statistics from more than a dozen of the richest countries in the world, including Scandinavia. The way this statistical reality “gets under the skin,” as Wilkinson and Pickett put it, is conveyed perhaps most tangibly in literature. Unlike statistics and social reports, literature holds complex dimensions in which emotional and intellectual reflection merge, facilitating empathy for the characters and critique of their life conditions. This process arguably expands the linguistic and aesthetic scope of a society’s self-understanding.

The underlying message of the novel *Still* is the harmful spiritual consequences of social inequality. Class is once again the heart of the matter. Money, and being able to afford things, forms the discriminating line between the “us” of the suburban ghetto and the “them” of the prosperous inner-city middle class. Nemo, the protagonist, responds thus to his friend who declares that they have been erased by the middle class:

"[W]e have lost, we do not exist and they do – that means everything and it is more and more true the older we get" (Sattarvandi 2008, 172; italics in the original).²⁰ The obscuring process is rooted in class and economic divides, which the novel nonetheless render clearly visible to the reader.

In contrast to the more urban working-class literature of other traditions, Sweden – still today rich in agriculture and natural resources – has a strong tradition of rural working-class narratives. In the early twentieth century, migrant farmworkers known as *statare* were depicted in sharply critical novels by writers such as Ivar Lo-Johansson and Moa Martinson. The *statare* lived under dire conditions; they were paid in kind and tied to their employers by almost slavery-like agreements. This system was abolished in Sweden in 1945. A twenty-first century reader realizes that these novels serve as fascinating narratives rooted in moments in history. In a sense, they contribute to the preservation of an important aspect of Sweden's national past. They are rich in detail about daily life and material things, and they were published on the verge of Sweden's shift into an industrial and large-scale production economy.

Today's class-conscious literature depicts a new stage in Sweden's socioeconomic development. Katarina Fägerskiöld's *Åsen* [*The Ridge*] (2012) and Bannerhed's *Korparna* concur in their depictions of social subordination but differ in their introverted perspectives. *Åsen* relates the life of a young farmhand mired in hard labor, boredom and listlessness, unable to free herself:

She was the most loyal of all dogs. Went home after a day's work, licking her wounds. Washed off what came off. Lay down in a red chair, her head resting in her hand. Sat close to the radiator. Put her feet on it. Let the hours pass by. (Fägerskiöld 2012, 54)²¹

In *Korparna*, the protagonist Klas grows up in the province of Småland in southern Sweden in the 1970s. It is a province historically marked by mass emigration (including to the Midwestern United States in the late nineteenth century), depopulation, and small-scale tenant farmers who were overwhelmed by Sweden's shift to large-scale production. Klas's father reluctantly realizes that he will not be able to provide for his family in the long run, and most importantly, that his son will not take over the farm's operations. The farm that has been passed down through generations of his family will disappear. He gives in to insanity, and the ending is tragic. The father is an archetype of twentieth-century Swedish rural literature: the stubborn, self-sufficient and brooding farmer. His son is a sensitive loner who occupies himself with reading, bird watching, and fearing his moody father. The story is set in an environment marked by

class, skillfully captured in the dialogue in the description of habits, body language and social interaction. It is clear that the father's extensive knowledge of farming techniques, the local landscape, and the history of the village will die with him (Bannerhed 2011, 224). In its consistent focus on alienated individuals (father and son, respectively), the novel amplifies the absence of a spirit of community and class consciousness.

Autobiography as a Critical Genre

As an undercurrent – and at times, a highly visible stream – in today's Swedish working-class literature runs the conviction that social inequality is a structural problem, aggravated by the fundamental political reconfiguration of society since the 1980s. As a result, a significant number of writers have chosen the genre of the autobiographical novel, or narratives with autobiographical features, to articulate urgency and unrest. One example is Alakoski's *Oktober i Fattigsverige* [*October in Impoverished Sweden*] (2012). The semi-autobiographical story, recounted as a diary, foregrounds her previous novel *Svinalängorna*. In *Oktober*, Alakoski traces the terms of impoverishment and social exclusion, underscoring the need for solidarity, democratic awareness and political responsibility. Recurring motifs are the concerns about homeless people, families with children evicted from their apartments and deteriorating public health due to poverty: "I see before me again the homeless Annika, what does she look like after the first severe frost night?" (Alakoski 2012, 261).²²

Alakoski's own family history includes violence, poverty and shame, and she depicts modern Swedish society through the lens of her experiences of growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. Her book joins with other representatives of the genre in contesting the neoliberal ideology that states that the responsibility for changing unfavorable social conditions rests with the individual. This shifting of responsibility from society as a whole to its individual members is hardly unique to Sweden; in fact, Jones (2011) claims this view is likewise gaining ground in British society: "More and more of us are choosing to believe that the victims of social problems are, in large part, responsible for causing them" (37). Alakoski, like many class conscious writers of her generation, articulates social critique through the perspective of a working-class individual, depicting in great detail a person who, through no fault of her own, has been deprived of fundamental human needs since early childhood.

The book associates with the biographical tradition of the 1930s, citing canonical writers Lo-Johansson and Martinson as peers in the experience

of poverty. In a perceptive paragraph, she merges individual experience and social consequence into an inseparable unity, charting the downside of Sweden's welfare state. Her narration illuminates how human beings are, as sociologist Joan Acker (2006) put it, not merely elements in theoretical structures, but rather "enmeshed" in class and gender relations (46-47). Alakoski writes in *Oktober*:

Poverty burns, aches, has a smell and a taste. It throbs. It shows in our life choices, occupation and education, in our paycheck, in our working conditions, at school, in our style of dress and eating habits. It appears as sleep deprivation, stooping, shows in housing, holiday customs, the extent of education, sick leave, worry, anxiety, agony, sports habits, economic and tangible heritages. And when we who climb the social ladder have climbed high enough, we notice class, for the simple reason that we are able to. (Alakoski 2012, 238)²³

Being poor, an immigrant and female are her three main disabilities, states Alakoski somewhat ironically, applying an intersectional approach that demonstrates how class, ethnicity and gender are interwoven. When asked by her readers (as related in the novel) what the most important difference was between her childhood and her current situation as a celebrated author, her answer is money. It is a political statement, and she elaborates on it with an artistic narrative about social inequality:

I cannot express in words the difference between being able and not being able to afford things. [---] Not being able to buy decent shoes, go to the dentist, afford a computer, go on vacation, own a car, buy something nice for the kids. There are no words. Money makes it all possible. Not least, the relief of pressure. (Alakoski 2012, 314)²⁴

The statement is not merely about money but rather demonstrates how structural inequality gets under the skin, is written on the body, and shapes the self. The experience is truly individual – with explicitly social consequences.

Democracy Revisited

Imagining and examining the consequences of a reconfigured social welfare state has become an urgent theme in Swedish literature of the new millennium. The scope of article is limited to prose fiction; however, such class perspectives are also abundant in contemporary poetry.²⁵ It is, accordingly, highly appropriate to talk about an important renewal of Swedish working-class literature, one that builds on the legacy of working-class pioneers in the interwar period and the genre's politically radicalized

revival in the 1960s and 1970s. Given the critical acclaim that has met this new body of work, it is already well integrated in the field of literary production, yielding valuable symbolic and cultural capital. Nilsson (2011, 188) has posed the critical question as to whether this integration is compatible with a political desire to abolish the exploitation that is founded on class divisions. This is, to a large extent, a question about the function and purpose of literature. Through aesthetic revelations of the class and power dynamics that recent political discourses had obscured, such literature is contributing to a greater understanding of contemporary Swedish society. In their keen focus on social change, the novels furthermore adhere to a phenomenon observed by literary scholar Lauren Berlant (see also Doxtater, this volume). In her suggestive book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), she examines the optimism that has prevailed in contemporary narratives around the turn of the century to the postwar social democratic promises of a better life in Europe and the United States. Despite the fact that social equality, upward mobility and job security cannot be provided in an era of neoliberal restructuring, our attachment to fantasies of a better life remains (Berlant 2011, 2–16). We certainly find similar attachments to unstable fantasies in the literature discussed here.

Paradoxically, then, the individualistic focus of Sweden's new body of class conscious literature is staged from a point of view of social awareness and a deeply felt concern about what it means to be human in a globalized, postmodern society. The novels seem to corroborate sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's (2010) definition of the welfare state as being obliged to guarantee not only the survival of its subjects but also survival with "*dignity*" (45). The only legitimate way to measure the human quality of a society, writes Bauman, is "by the quality of its weakest members." He continues: "And since the essence of all morality is the responsibility which people take for the humanity of others, this is also the measure of a society's ethical standard" (Bauman 2001, 79). The novels locate individual members of a society in transition, immerse them in a context of class, and insist on their social interdependence.

Notes

¹ All translations from Swedish are my own unless otherwise noted. Det är ingen slump att idéerna om den engagerade författaren och realismen försvann under samma period som den politiska idédebatten styrde mot höger.

² In the 2014 general election, a coalition of left-leaning parties led by the Social Democrats prevailed over the center-right Alliance. The left block won 159 seats, and the Alliance, 141 out of 349 seats in the Riksdag. The far-right, nationalist Sweden Democrats, which shocked the nation when they won enough seats to

enter the Riksdag in 2010, more than doubled their representation with 49 seats. See Sveriges Riksdag (2015).

³ This is considered Sweden's top literary prize. See Augustpriset (2015).

⁴ For a survey of research on class analysis from a gender perspective, see Arping (2008, 21–42).

⁵ See also the British sociologist Beverley Skeggs (1997; 2004, 87–91) who offers inspiring perspectives from research that looks for accounts about identity that are underrepresented within the middle-class norms of contemporary scholarship.

⁶ In response to Nilsson, Arping (2011, 196) argues that a multifaceted, intersectional approach offers possibilities rather than restraints.

⁷ [M]edborgarens makt över sin vardag. The prevalent discourse is converted into compelling statistics in Wilkinson and Pickett (2010). The conclusive message is that the level of social and economic equality in a society is directly related to the well-being of its citizens. The more material equality, the fewer social problems.

⁸ For an analysis of the integration of Swedish working-class literature into the national heritage, see Nilsson (2011, 178–91).

⁹ The individual perspective has been addressed by Arping (2008, 25).

¹⁰ The Social Democratic Party led the government during the years 1932–1976, 1982–1991 and 1994–2006.

¹¹ The same process has been observed in Great Britain during the Thatcher era; Jones (2011); see also Bohlin (2012, 133).

¹³ Att jag måste beskriva det jag ser. Att det som nu sker i samtiden omöjligt kan få fortgå utan att jag talar om det. Att jag inte kan tåla.

¹⁴ Jag försvann lika märkligt som jag hade kommit dit, helt utbytbar, inte ens ett kugghjul i maskineriet.

¹⁵ Jag undrar bara var alla ni andra är. Jag undrar bara varför det är så tyst. Jag sänder ut detta som ett nödbloss i natten, en raket av stjärnor och färgade ljus mot den svärtade himlen för att säga att jag är här, att ni kan komma nu, att vi kan samlas oss.

¹⁶ Man skall inte inbilla sig att den som företar en omvänd klassresa tas emot med en speciell kärlek. Tvärtom. Misstänksamhet. Den som störtar gör det ljudlöst. Han virvlar bort som ett torkat löv. Det var så det blev. Det kunde vi enas om redan från början: tigandet. Ensamheten. Att vi delade en förtvivlan som var större och djupare än vad man kunde förstå utanför inhägnaden.

¹⁷ Och det var också här jag på allvar såg att den som äger språket också blir den som definierar världen.

¹⁸ Barbara Foley (1993, 284–6) traces the characteristics of the American proletarian autobiographical tradition.

¹⁹ For an analysis of Moberg's trilogy, see Williams (2002, 138–76). For an analysis of the relationship between class and drug abuse in Swedish working-class literature with focus on *Yarden*, see Forssberg Malm (2011, 97–100).

²⁰ *Vi har förlorat, vi finns inte och det gör de – det betyder allt och det blir mer och mer sant ju äldre vi blir.*

²¹ Hon var den lojalaste av alla hundar. Gick hem efter dagens slut och slickade sina sår. Tvättade bort det som gick bort. Lade sig i en röd stol, hängde med huvudet i handen. Satt nära elementet. Lade fötterna på det. Lät timmarna flyta på.

²² Jag ser den hemlösa, Annika, framför mig igen, hur ser hon ut efter den första frostnatten?

²³ Fattigdom svider, värker, luktar, smakar. Den bultar. Den syns i våra livsval; yrken och utbildning; i lönekuvertet, på arbetsförhållandena; i skolsituationen; i klädsmak och matvanor. Den syns i form av sömnbrist, kutiga ryggar, boende, semestervanor, utbildningslängd; sjukfrånvaro, ångslan, oro, ångest, idrottsvanor, ekonomiskt och materiellt arv. Och när vi som gör våra klassresor rest tillräckligt långt ser vi klass, helt enkelt för att vi kan se det.

²⁴ Jag kan inte i ord beskriva vilken skillnad det är på att ha råd och att inte ha råd. [---] Att inte kunna köpa riktiga skor, gå till tandläkaren, ha råd till en dator, åka på semester, äga en bil, köpa något fint till sina barn. Det finns inte ord. Pengar öppnar upp till allt. Inte minst till avlastning.

²⁵ Åsa Arping (2011, 196–7) mentions poets like Emil Boss, Johan Jönson, Helen Rådberg and Jenny Wrangborg. Another notable poet is Johannes Anyuru.

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