



Arms and the Men: Linnea Axelsson's *Ædnan* (2018) and the Epic Tradition

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Abstract

The article explores how the epic work *Ædnan* (2018) by Linnea Axelsson makes use of the epic genre. By simultaneously employing and recontextualizing epic conventions, *Ædnan* brings about a decolonization of the epic tradition in which inherited structures of this tradition are re-examined and where possibilities still available in the epic genre are highlighted. The article especially dwells on questions of orality, sound, and embodied language. It points to epic traditions associated with Johann Gottfried Herder, which are re-evaluated within a deterritorialized understanding of the epic, inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

Keywords

postcolonial epic, decolonization, sound, multilingualism, deterritorialization

Linnea Axelsson's prizewinning work *Ædnan*, published in Swedish in 2018 and in English translation in 2024, declares itself on the title page to be an epic, "epos".¹ Reviewers and literary critics have observed the title's allusions to ancient epic traditions, and occasionally also other traits that connect this fictional work on twentieth- and twenty-first-century Sámi history to the epic genre. The title *Ædnan* means in Northern Sámi 'the land' and 'the earth', and it also resembles words like *ædno*, 'the river', and *ædni*, 'the mother' – all this is explained at the end of the book (Axelsson 2024, p. 427; 2018, p. 763). At the same time, the aural as well as the visual impressions of the word *Ædnan* remind the readers of works like the *Aeneid*, the *Iliad*, or the *Edda*.²

In this article I will explore how *Ædnan* connects with and makes use of literary traditions related to the epic genre. I will claim that *Ædnan*, by simultaneously employing and recontextualizing classical epic conventions, brings about a decolonization of the epic in which inherited structures of the epic tradition are re-examined and where possibilities still available in this tradition are highlighted. In my discussion of the epic genre, I will

1 Many thanks to Christina Kullberg for her generous and helpful comments on this article. I am also grateful for the opportunity to present parts of this work at workshops in September 2022 (arr. Ingela Nilsson) and December 2022 (arr. Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed and Janne Lindqvist), both at Uppsala University.

2 See Forssblad 2018, p. 20; Beddari 2018; Karlsen 2020, p. 63; and Broomans 2022, p. 130.

especially dwell on its connections with orality, sound, and the body, as well as ideas of language and the territory as agents of identities, voiced in traditions that have been associated with Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder's ideas of the ancient epic and especially Homer as paradigmatic for the idea of a nation anchored in song and the mother tongue will be supplemented by ideas of a deterritorialization of the epic, in a reading inspired by Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's notion of minor literature. The focus on exile and multilingualism in the understanding of the epic tradition will lead us towards Vergil's *Aeneid* as an epic intertext in *Ædnan*.

Ædnan and the Epic Tradition

Ædnan is divided into three parts, called "Ædnan" (the land), "Ædno" (the river), and "Ædni" (the mother), consisting of 16, 23, and 21 songs respectively.³ In each song, one distinct voice associated with an identified fictional person is speaking; several of these voices, however, reappear in two or more songs of the work. The work tells two subsequent, only partly parallel narratives, the first of which begins in 1913 when Ristin and her husband Ber-Joná, who are semi-nomadic reindeer herders, get two sons. One of them, Nila, is born with a disability, while the other, Aslat, dies following an accident in the mountains. Their family story is followed through the forced dislocations of Sámi people, resulting from the 1919 grazing convention between Norway and Sweden as well as the Swedish hydropower expansion in the early twentieth century, which flooded the lands along Lule River and made them inhabitable (Össbo 2014). In the 1940s, Ristin and Ber-Joná settle in an apartment in Porjus, a small place built around the Swedish hydropower plant.

In the very same apartment, but twenty years later, the next story begins. It is told by several members of a family reflecting on their Sámi identities. The main protagonists of this story are Lise, who lost her Sámi language at the residential school (Nomad school, "Nomma"), where she also experienced racist skull measurements; her husband Rolf, a worker at the hydropower plant who does not have a Sámi background; and their children Sandra and Per. Sandra is strong and committed; through her, the narrative also addresses the famous Girjas case, a conflict around land rights between the Sámi community of Girjas and the Swedish state. In 2016, the District Court of Gällivare declared that the Sámi community of Girjas had the sole right to hunting and fishing within the area.⁴ Sandra's brother Per's relationship to their Sámi background is less straightforward, and the same can be said of Lise, who struggles with her memories from the residential school as well as with ideas of Sámi identities resulting from her forced assimilation into the Swedish nation-state. This part of the work also draws attention to identities of non-herding Sámi.⁵

The title *Ædnan* suggests associations to the *Aeneid*, the *Iliad*, and the *Edda*, but the prime poetic tradition evoked in *Ædnan* is the joik, which in the early parts of the work is wholly integrated in the protagonists' lives, but in the narrative gradually becomes suppressed and silenced. In the late sections of the work the joik is again revived, especially in

3 In the English translation, however, the third part consists of 18 songs only. In line with the epic tradition, I will call them songs; they could also be understood as poems or chapters.

4 After the appearance of *Ædnan*, the final verdict was delivered by the Supreme Court in 2020. See Allard & Brännström 2020, Bengtsson 2020–21, and Torp 2021.

5 *Ædnan* was endowed with the prestigious August Prize in 2018 as well as the 2018 literature prize of the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*. In 2020, *Ædnan* was also transformed into a play (Gindt 2022). In previous research, *Ædnan* has been discussed in relation to its anticolonial dimensions (Heith 2020, pp. 65–69), the role played by female characters and the Sámi literary tradition, including the joik, in the work (Karlsen 2020), the question of land rights, forced migration, and identity (Broomans 2022, Heith 2022, Reed 2023), as well as the role of memory and trauma in the work (Broomans 2023, Wasilewska-Chmura 2023).

a scene where the joik resounds in the church of Porjus (Axelsson 2024, pp. 401–02; 2018, pp. 707–08). Thomas A. DuBois has emphasized that the joik should be regarded as “an embedded, context-dependent ethnographic event” rather than an isolated, autonomous work independent of its original framework (DuBois 2016). The early Sámi epic traditions are preserved only in fragments, such as those collected by Jakob Fellman (1795–1875) or Anders Fjellner (1795–1876) in the early nineteenth century (Gaski 1987, Gaski & Fjellner 2003). Like most ancient epics they should be understood as an early oral song culture, the nature of which we can only partly grasp through late mediations. Fjellner was inspired by romantic authors, and when published, his epic works were regarded by romantic critic Vilhelm Fredrik Palmblad as counterparts to the Finnish epic *Kalevala*; Palmblad also drew a parallel to the oral traditions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Lundmark 1979, pp. 20–21, 41–42). As the fragments of Sámi epics were published by ethnographers over the centuries, they were at the same time decontextualized and atomized in the way DuBois criticizes. One example is the joik by Olaus Sirma (c. 1655–1719) that was picked up by Herder in his *Volkslieder*. Deprived of its context, it entered transnational world literature through allusions and renderings by, among others, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Heinrich von Kleist (Lundmark 1979, p. 47; Gaski 1987, pp. 18–19; Wretö 1984, pp. 47–51; DuBois 2016). This is the way literature works, in a constant betrayal of its origins. To enter a field of shared experiences, literature always leaves its roots behind. In Sámi literary history, however, this constant betrayal is inscribed within the colonial history that has denied the Sámi their right to speak for themselves. The epic *Ædnan*, by way of its explicit epic ambitions, relates to and works through the history of the Sámi epic and its decontextualization in reception, and also relates to the oral joik tradition of today.

At the same time, *Ædnan* belongs to a complex, transnational literary tradition without clear boundaries, where epic practices from Sápmi and other parts of the world blend. When the epic genre has been discussed in relation to *Ædnan*, it has exemplified a tradition in which the journey is in focus, as in the *Odyssey* (Reed 2023, p. 168), or where the origin and greatness of the nation is celebrated (Karlsen 2020, p. 63–64). To use the venerable epic genre to document Sámi history is an action that assigns value to a people and a history that has been neglected, one critic claims (Karlsen 2020, p. 69), but also a way to make the tragic curve of Sámi history visible (Reed 2023, p. 168). Another critic draws attention to how *Ædnan*, with its focus on female protagonists and recent history, partly rejects the epic tradition (Wasilewska-Chmura 2023, pp. 340–41).

In my reading, I will focus on the potential of the epic genre to articulate emotions of belonging, but also questions of exile, migration, and hybridity, a potential that has been brought to the fore by postcolonial critics over recent years. Édouard Glissant distinguishes between the “excluding epic”, which is based on claims on ethnic exclusivity, and the “concluding and participatory epic”, which is associated with rhizomatic openness and relational identities (Glissant 2000, pp. 221–22). As Sneharika Roy has underlined, the epic may appear as “*inherently incompatible*” with a postcolonial agenda, as its traditional focus on origins, territory, and identity seems to foreground colonial conquest. However, the genre also allows for dialogic resistance, decentralized ambivalences, and “a politics of migrating identities irreducible to a single national norm”, she claims (Roy 2018, p. 1, 19). By returning to Herder’s ideas of the epic, which shaped the European reception of Sámi songs as well as the canonization of Homer, I wish to take further this understanding of what a decolonized use of the epic genre may look like.

The classical epics, as they are handed over to us, are also not faithful to their origins; Homeric epic, too, was context-dependent and local, but has been decontextualized and

made “transcendent” (DuBois 2016) as literary works, with help from Herder and others. *Ædnan* should be understood not only as an attempt at an epic in the tradition of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and *the Aeneid*, but also as a metaliterary work commenting on the epic tradition *per se*, a tradition that includes the decontextualization of ancient epic and the revitalization of it, as an epic language in a complex tradition. While Fjellner’s epic fragments by way of cosmogony and aetiology described how the Sámi came into existence as a people and how they got their lands, *Ædnan* describes how they are forced to leave these lands and how their identity and traditional ways of life are taken from them. In this way, *Ædnan* continues and supplements ancient Sámi epic.

Understood as a work that comments on epic tradition, further dimensions of the title *Ædnan* are discernible. As mentioned, “Ædnan” means “the land”, and variations of the word (*ædno*, *ædni*) refer to the river and the mother. The land, and the land as mother, are themes in Sámi epic tradition. Recently, “Eadni”, the mother, has also been suggested as a designation for a literary epoch in Sámi literary history. The period in question, 1940–80, is characterized by the residential schools and, following from them, the loss of language and tradition (Hirvonen 2008, pp. 91–103). This is also a theme in *Ædnan*, especially in relation to Lise, mother of Sandra and Per. While telling stories about losing and recapturing language and tradition, *Ædnan* also comments on the reconstruction and writing of Sámi literary history, from the epic past to present times.

Epic Tradition and the Territory

On one level, the turn in *Ædnan* towards the epic tradition is motivated by the ambition to describe the close historical and emotional ties between an indigenous people and the land (Reed 2023). This close relation between the territory and the human, mediated via the living body, is emphasized by Ber-Joná in the third song, where he states: “We heard / heartbeats in the ground / / Faint / beneath the inherited / migration paths”, thus connecting the sounds of the heart with native soil and traditional ways of life (Heith 2022, p. 210).⁶ The close connection with the land and the earth is also activated in the work through Sandra and her commitment to Sámi land rights (Heith 2022).

In his account of epic’s modern history in Britain, Herbert F. Tucker declared that “it is the very idea of epic to tell a sponsoring culture its own story, from a vantage whose privilege transpires through the successful articulation of a collective identity that links origins to destinies by way of heroic values in imagined action” (Tucker 2008, p. 13). In neat condensation this phrase catches the support an epic has been supposed to give a dominant community of shared origins, history, and identity. One may add to Tucker’s definition the importance of the territory: an epic has been supposed to legitimate the claims of a group on a certain area (sometimes obtained by colonization), be it the Rome of Aeneas in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, or the Britain of Brutus in the chronicle *Historia regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Historically, claims on the land in the epic genre have often come from the colonizers, rather than the colonized.

Further, one may add the role played by expressions of cultural nationalism voiced by Herder in the late eighteenth century. As Philip V. Bohlman observes, Herder claims “that epics grow from a particular people at certain moments in their history, and that song represents their language and natural conditions” (Bohlman in Herder 2017, p. 169). This suggests a common ground for a people and its epics: the native soil and the song that is

6 English translation by Saskia Vogel in Axelsson 2024, p. 14. Swedish original in Axelsson 2018, p. 30: “Vi hörde / hjärtslagen i marken / / Svagt / under de ärvda / flyttstråken”.

assumed to grow naturally from the people. Within folk culture generally and poetry and song specifically, Herder understands the identity of a group as communicated over generations (Barnard 2003, p. 181).

Ædnan evokes associations to this epic tradition by way of recurring motives and themes that are related to language, song, and poetry (the joik), but also to clothing, cooking, and other phenomena. In Herder's theory of the epic, traditional culture is active in and activated by each generation, while its history and origins are unclear. Charlton Payne connects this element of keeping tradition alive with the orality associated with the epic:

Herder describes a lack of certainty with regard to knowledge about the origins of popular traditions, and in so doing suggests that the "honor of the nation" is itself not traceable back to an originary moment but is rather "secured" and confirmed in the course of its transmission by colloquial stories. Herder's remarks emphasize that national honor and popular legend have the quality of being "lively": the words of these legends are lively and maintain their presence through the practice of oral story-telling, just as their content continues to circulate and transform over time. (Payne 2012, p. 41)

Homer is the main model in Herder's understanding of the epic because he embodies this continual reactivation of tradition through orally transmitted poetry. Further, in the tradition of Herder the epic or folk song was expected to nurture a certain relation to the native language, the *Muttersprache*. The mother tongue, considered as crucial for the collective identity of a nation, was assumed to express the affective and acoustic dimensions of language, the sounds of poetry, as summarized by Tanvi Solanki:

In his [Herder's] conjectural history, language – and, therefore, culture – began with inchoate screams, tones, and wild, inarticulate sounds. While these sounds differentiated into distinct languages over time, each individual language still retained its own "vital tone," in interjections, for example, or in the roots of simple verbs. Ancient cultures had strong communities due to the close affective bonds created by their musical, richly tonal languages, and their ritualized oral performances of epic poetry. (Solanki 2018, p. 552)

Epic poetry is fundamental for Herder because of its proximity to the oral and to the *Muttersprache*. This, Solanki points out, is also crucial for Herder's idea of monolingualism:

The concept of *Muttersprache* introduced monolingualism as the norm [...]. Herder described the mother tongue as a guide without which the poet would be lost in a labyrinth full of a multitude of foreign languages, and even a bark that would prevent him from drowning in a boundless ocean of foreign tongues. Through a variety of metaphors, Herder described multilingualism as a state of confusion. Only the poet's *Muttersprache* would provide unity to an immersion in foreign languages. (Solanki 2018, p. 553)

The Herderian interpretation of the epic tradition thus includes a focus on the earth or territory, as well as an emphasis on questions of language, poetry, song, and poetic acoustics.

While a conventional role of the epic in history has been to legitimate practices that connect identities with territories, the epic tradition also contains efforts to transcend such practices. These diverging tendencies are designated by Payne as epic's "patriotic" and "cosmopolitan" moments, the latter of which "seek to narrate border crossings, intercultural encounters, and shared political histories or religious myths" (Payne 2012, p. 14). In an

exploration of epic's possibilities to question the practices of a dominant culture, such tendencies seem important. In the last section of this article, I will suggest that Vergil's *Aeneid* is a significant classical intertext in *Ædnan*, and an intertext that contributes to border crossings within the work. This understanding of *Ædnan* will support a postcolonial interpretation of the epic tradition, which does not negate epic's connection with the territory or the mother tongue, but which adds further dimensions to it.

Song as Creation Myth

The overlapping narratives in *Ædnan* of two Sámi families are told by a distinct lyrical voice, which is carried forward by several different protagonists from these narratives, but still remains relatively constant through the work (Ringgren 2018). As readers have observed, however, there is a shift of tone between the early parts of *Ædnan*, telling the story of the nomadic life of Ber-Joná and Ristin, and the rest of the work. In the first part, as Karlsen observes, nature is resonant, as is the poetical language itself, which is filled with alliterations and assonances. In the second part of the work, the land is silenced, and at the same time the poetical language also becomes austere, deprived of sonorous euphony (Karlsen 2020, p. 74).

In those early songs, nature is evoked or even sung into being in a way that reminds of a creation myth (Gindt 2022, p. 277). Thus, nature, the Sámi lands, is from the start closely associated with audible song and language. One example is found in the third song, where Ber-Joná recalls how he and his wife sang forth the world in the songs they used to sing to their son:

Ski stroke by ski stroke
song after song

we spread out the
landscape of our kin
in his body

–

Singing forth
the world around us

–

We sang the mountain
That looked like
an old woman⁷

This is a mythical origin where a close bond united song, earth, and the body, and where nature is created in and through singing. Territory and the mother tongue are intimately connected in this epic past, where the Herderian idea of folk song seems eminently fulfilled. Song is the carrier of identity and origins, and a vehicle of belonging. Also, nature

⁷ Axelsson 2024, p. 16. Axelsson 2018, p. 34: "Skidtag för skidtag / sång efter sång // bredde vi ut det / släktlandskapet / i hans kropp // - // Sjöng fram / världen omkring oss // - // Vi sjöng berget / som liknade / en gumma".

is not separated from human, but already embraced by human voice, part of a shared natureculture. In this way, *Ædnan* seems related to works by literary precursors such as Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (Áillohaš, 1943–2001), whose poetry is restrained in form but overflowing with sound and resonance (see for example Valkeapää 2017).⁸ Valkeapää is known as a multifaceted artist, famous for his joik compositions as well as his paintings and poetry. The precise lyrical voice that speaks in *Ædnan* shares this tone with Valkeapää's poetry, a relation that locates *Ædnan* not only in a shared landscape, but also in a musico-poetic tradition.⁹

The epic past is disrupted in the work, first by the accident that kills Aslat, and then by the forced dislocations of the people of Sápmi. The accident silences Ber-Joná and his family: “My brother and I / Aslat / we sang nothing // we no longer sang forth / the earth and / the memories”.¹⁰ “We sang nothing” is repeated twice over the coming pages (Axelsson 2024, p. 46, 48; 2018, p. 88, 92). With the 1919 grazing convention, moreover, Ber-Joná and Ristin are forced to leave their lands, and with them their songs. The colonial language that displaces the singing is a language of a new kind: while the song used to spring from the inside and unfolded the lands within the body, the Swedish language is poured over Ber-Joná and Ristin from above, and invades the body from the outside:

The ruling language
drizzled over us

Swedish words
impossible to pronounce

–

They penetrated
our clothes
coated our skin¹¹

The bailiff that announces the agreement between Norway and Sweden seems constantly speaking; he enters the landscape “To hold forth / among our / does in heat”.¹² This colonial language stands in stark contrast to the songs that are united with the earth and traditional paths: “Migration paths and songs / had to be stifled / stricken from memory”.¹³ Just as the ancestors cannot be brought from the ground they are buried in, the songs cannot be transposed into new lands (Axelsson 2024, p. 75; 2018, p. 143). “I could hardly / sing us anymore”, Ristin says, “After all I didn’t know / what the ground was like / across which he was moving”.¹⁴

8 Connections between *Ædnan* and Valkeapää are discussed in Heith 2020, p. 67, and Karlsen 2020, *passim*.

9 Reviewer Åsa Beckman (2018) locates this tone in *Ædnan* to the linguistic scarcity and exactitude of the work.

10 Axelsson 2024, p. 45. Axelsson 2018, p. 87: “Min bror och jag / Aslat / vi sjöng inget // sjöng inte fram / marken och / minnena mer”.

11 Axelsson 2024, p. 69. Axelsson 2018, p. 133: “Härskarspråket / dröp över oss // Svenska ord / omöjliga att uttala // – // De trängde in / genom kläderna / la sig över huden”.

12 Axelsson 2024, p. 70. Axelsson 2018, p. 135: “För att länge tala / bland våra / brunstande vajor”.

13 Axelsson 2024, p. 71. Axelsson 2018, p. 136: “Flyttleder och sånger / måste förträngas / fördrivas ur minnet”.

14 Axelsson 2024, p. 87. Axelsson 2018, pp. 163–64: “jag kunde knappt / sjunga oss längre // Jag visste ju inte / hur markerna låg / där han nu flyttade”.

The pattern is repeated in connection with the hydropower expansion, where the words “dämma” (dam) and “dämpa” (muffle) are closely associated in *Ædnan*’s text, demonstrating how the damming of the rivers silences not only the rivers but also the singing (Axelsson 2024, pp. 93–94, 97; 2018, pp. 172–74, 179). It is sound only that unites the words “dämma” and “dämpa”, not meaning or etymology.¹⁵ Swedish colonialism, on the other hand, is associated with (silent) reading and with books, as in the song when Ber-Joná and Ristin get in their hands “a large book”, with “a wide / / glossy cover”.¹⁶ The letters are deciphered to them by a relative, and the experience of estrangement is reinforced by the circumstance that the book entails a photograph of their own son, who in the book represents a “Feeble-minded man” (Axelsson 2024, p. 106; 2018, p. 196: “Sinnessvag man”). Books and reading, and also symbolic representation, are in this way integrated components of colonial violence.

In the parallel narrative of *Ædnan*, this theme is also articulated as the loss of language, which takes place above all at the residential school (the Nomma). When Lise as a grown-up woman recalls how she longed for her parents at the school, the Sámi language is characteristically used for the affective words “mother” and “father”:

Oh how I missed
you Ieddne when I was
at the residential school

oh how I missed
you Áhttje¹⁷

Over time, the colonial Swedish language becomes internalized and is associated with thought. The mother tongue remains connected with the body and with bodily affect, but now with shame, rather than intimacy:

The Swedish
language grew
along my thoughts

–

The Sámi since long
asleep in the body
of shame¹⁸

The aural voice, “rösten”, is now enclosed in the body, “Clamped / shut up inside”.¹⁹

In this narrative of loss, *Ædnan* can be understood within a Herderian paradigm where the native language is the only language in which it is possible for an individual to unfold their identity, and to experience, feel, and express themselves properly (Yildiz 2012, p. 7). For the

15 The word “dämpad” is also used for Lise’s brother Jon-Henrik’s silence much later in *Ædnan* (Axelsson 2024, p. 177: “subdued”; 2018, p. 317: “dämpad”).

16 Axelsson 2024, p. 105. Axelsson 2018, p. 194: “en stor bok / / – / / Med breda / / glansiga pärmar”.

17 Axelsson 2024, p. 176. Axelsson 2018, p. 313: “Å vad jag saknade / dig ieddne när jag / bodde på Nomman / / å vad jag saknade / dig áhttje”.

18 Axelsson 2024, p. 191. Axelsson 2018, p. 337: “Det svenska / språket växte / längs tankarna / / – / / Samiskan sov / sen länge i kroppen / av skam”.

19 Axelsson 2024, p. 191. Axelsson 2018, p. 337: “Tilltäppt / slutet inom sig”.

protagonists of *Ædnan*, the acoustics of the first language is deeply rooted in the body, just as the mother tongue is associated with emotion and affect. For Herder, this close bond to a native language is also the foundation for the nation-state, which is, in his understanding, monolingual by definition. For him, languages should be distinct, belong to one people and one nation-state. Yasemin Yildiz remarks that “[w]hat this position cannot abide is the notion of blurred boundaries, crossed loyalties, and unrooted languages” (Yildiz 2012, pp. 7–8).

Sounding Words

Yet, in *Ædnan* boundaries are blurred in different ways, and not least by the obvious circumstance that *Ædnan* itself is not written in a Sámi language, the *Muttersprache* of Ristin and Ber-Joná, but in Swedish, the language of the colonizers. This was noticed by reviewers of the work, one of them writing: “Is it possible to render this story, which is so important for the entire Scandinavia, in this ‘ruling language?’”²⁰ Rather than a shortcoming of the work, this circumstance should be regarded as crucial for the reflection on the epic genre in *Ædnan*. It contributes to dimensions of the work that elaborate and re-evaluate the Herderian interpretation of the epic.

The multifaceted role that plural languages play in *Ædnan* is articulated in a scene in song 17 of the second part of the work, “Ædno”. The scene takes place, the narrative states, in 2015 and is presented by the woman Lise, who reports from a visit at a language café (conversation club), designed for exchange between local inhabitants of the town Porjus and newly arrived refugees. It is told by Lise that over two hundred refugees had recently come to Porjus, which before this had 350 inhabitants (Axelsson 2024, p. 255; 2018, p. 447). Lise herself had been deprived of her Sámi language in line with the monolingual ideal: to assimilate as a Swedish citizen, you were forced to forget your first language. At the language café, Lise now tries to communicate, in poor English, with one of the young, recently arrived men. As the symbolic aspects of language fail, sound and acoustics take over. Lise reflects on her lost language and wishes she could share her experiences with this man:

But all I can do is smile
and he smiles back

nods knowingly
raises his cup

–

Does he know that I’m
sitting here listening
to his language

–

Between the words
that are no more than sounds
to me

20 My transl. Orig. in Zimmerman 2018, p. 10: “Är det möjligt att på ‘härskarspråket’ återge denna för hela Skandinavien så angelägna historia?”

and which I
do not understand

-

I can sense something
he has left behind
has lost

-

and that he does
not want to do without

-

Will he also
have a child here
at some point

Which language will
his grandchildren
get to speak

-

Which birds and trees
will they learn
the names of

and which songs
will they sing

-

About sun and wind
war and men

-

rich and poor²¹

21 Axelsson 2024, pp. 259–60. Axelsson 2018, pp. 454–57: “Men jag kan bara le / och han ler tillbaka // nickar menande / och höjer koppen // - // Vet han om att jag / sitter och lyssnar / på hans språk // Mellan orden / som bara är ljud / för mig // och som jag / inte förstår // - // Anar jag något / han lämnat // - // Något han har / förlorat // och som han / inte vill mista // Kommer han också / att få ett barn här / nångång // Vilket språk ska / hans barnbarn / få prata // - // Vilka fåglar och träd / kommer de att lära / sig namnen på // och vad ska de / sjunga för sånger // - // Om solen och vinden // Kriget och männen // fattig och rik”.

Here, at the language café in Porjus, the most overt allusion to Virgil and the classical epic tradition appears. The line “war and men” translates “Kriget och männen” in the original Swedish, which in turn translates the initial words of the *Aeneid*, “Arma virumque” (“Arms and the man”). Notably however, in *Ædnan* the “men” are in the plural (“männen”) albeit singular in the *Aeneid* (“virum”, man), while “the war” is in the singular in *Ædnan* (“Kriget”) but technically in the plural in Vergil (“arma”, weapons). The war, continuous and never-ending, is one and the same – but the hero is not one, but many.

It seems not a coincidence that the allusion to Virgil, “the classic of all Europe” as T.S. Eliot had it (Eliot 1957, p. 70), is found in this episode, which tells of an encounter between strangers at the language café. The allusion draws attention to Aeneas not primarily as a conqueror and colonialist but as an exile, migrant, and refugee, forced to leave his Trojan home in the Middle East. Roy regards Vergil, rather than Homer, as “a founding figure of the epic of the imagined national community” (Roy 2018, p. 14). At the same time, Glissant has pointed to the paradox that the founding works of communities over the world, including the *Aeneid*, “were all books about exile.”²² In *Ædnan* we never get to know where the young male refugee at the language café has travelled from; most immigrants in 2015, however, were Syrian refugees who crossed the Aegean Sea to reach Europe, just as Aeneas did. The refugee does not have a name in *Ædnan*, which invites us to think of him as one of the many embodiments of Aeneas in the world of 2015.²³ While the experience of exile has often been associated with urban spaces and the metropolis (Englund & Olsson 2013, p. 5), here it unites two people on the European margin who share the experience of loss. They also share the experience of how power structures in the past and the present are played out in language.

The acoustic aspects of language that were important to Herder reappear in this scene, as Lise is listening to the sounds of a language she cannot understand, but in which she can sense a meaning, or a loss. The communication between Lise and the refugee, in whose face Lise recognizes something from her own life,²⁴ takes place between the words and outside the symbolic realm, in sounds and smiles. This draws attention once again to the non-cognitive, acoustic, affective, and emotive dimensions of language. Sound can cross borders and blur boundaries. This is partly in line with Herder’s emphasis on the aural dimension of culture and the importance of sound (Herder 2017, pp. 141–42).²⁵ At the same time, however, it takes the role of sound beyond Herder’s focus on the mother tongue and its connections with identity and rootedness. Sound here becomes a vehicle of difference and of what Glissant formulates as “the right to opacity”. An understanding based in transparency erases differences, while opacity allows for “irreducible singularity” and differences that escape appropriation (Glissant 1997, pp. 189–90).

The role of sound and immediate sensation is reinvigorated in recent studies on literary multilingualism, where it has been emphasized that a failure to understand the semantics of a literary work should not always be understood as a failure to appreciate the work as such. An undue focus on the semantics of multilingual literary works has led to a neglect of other ways of literary meaning-making, Julia Tidigs and Markus Huss claim. The communication that takes place beyond semantic comprehension includes the recognition of difference, of non-understanding, affect, and auditory effects (Tidigs & Huss 2017, pp. 212–14). In this

22 Glissant 1997, p. 15. Erich S. Gruen (2010, p. 210) reflects on the fact that Rome understood itself as originating from abroad.

23 Notably, in a newspaper article from 2 September 2016 about the literary reception of Virgil, Kristoffer Leandroer drew attention to the parallel between Aeneas and recent Syrian refugees (Leandroer 2016).

24 Axelsson 2024, p. 256; 2018, pp. 449–50. See also Wasilewska-Chmura 2023, p. 351.

25 Bohlman remarks that Herder in his discussion of aurality anticipates sound studies, see Bohlman in Herder 2017, p. 271.

sense the language café can be seen as an emblematic place which is multilingual by definition. The focus on sound rather than meaning draws attention to the inevitable diversity and mixture of languages and identities.²⁶ At the same time, mother tongue is an important notion, as can be seen from Per's reflections in *Ædnan* on the process of acquiring a language that has been wounded:

How does a language heal

I suppose you have to start
somewhere

–

Find your way forward letter
by letter
word after word

get to the roots

–

At some point
another voice
emerges

–

But it will be
another

–

Not the same
for that other voice
was not to be

–

The one called
mother tongue²⁷

26 See Dembeck 2014, p. 24: “Für eine Philologie der Mehrsprachigkeit ist jeder Begriff von Mehrsprachigkeit irreführend, der von ko-figurativen, je in sich begrenzten Spracheinheiten im Sinne von langues ausgeht. Die Voraussetzung, dass Äußerungen in der Regel einsprachig sind, muss vielmehr umgekehrt werden: Die philologische Präferenz für die Parole impliziert, dass Vielfalt oder Zerstreung von Sprachigkeit in jedem Text für möglich gehalten werden muss.”

27 Axelsson 2024 pp. 341–42. Axelsson 2018, pp. 601–02: “Hur läker ett språk // Man får väl börja / någonstans / / – // Leta sig fram bokstav / för bokstav / ord efter ord // ända till rötterna // – // Någon gång / växer en annan / röst fram // – // Men det blir / en annan // Inte samma // för den rösten / blev inte // – // Den som kallas / modersmålet”. See Gindt 2022, pp. 282–83.

The acquired language is a language of letters and words – a written language. From this written language a voice will grow, but this aural language will never coincide with what is called the mother tongue; there will always remain a gap, a difference, or a wound.

Parallel with the issue with land rights that are raised by the protagonists in *Ædnan*, the work also seems to contribute to a deterritorialization of the epic genre in the sense elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In their discussion of what they label “minor literature”, they state that such a minor literature can emerge within a major language by deterritorializing this language, or through “the possibility of setting up a minor practice of major language from within” (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p. 18). Deterritorialization can be understood as a process through which the inherited logic of a field is questioned, repealed, or restructured. The epic practice of *Ædnan* works as such a “minor practice” of a major epic tradition from within, which questions and restructures this tradition.

This epic practice of *Ædnan* is shaped by the auditory workings of language, in line with Deleuze’s and Guattari’s discussion of (written) language as the deterritorialization of sound (Tidigs & Huss 2017, pp. 228–29). Language, Deleuze and Guattari argue, is initially based in a deterritorialization of sound – sound is deprived of any original content or context to become a tool for representational communication. Often, language compensates for this deterritorialization of sound by a focus on meaning and symbol, understood as a reterritorialization of sound: “Ceasing to be the organ of one of the senses, it becomes an instrument of Sense. And it is sense, as a correct sense, that presides over the designation of sounds [...]” (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p. 20.) By exploring dimensions of language that abandon sense, or go beyond sense – such as the focus in *Ædnan* on sounding qualities of language and on the collapse of verbal communication at the language café – a literary work may open a new space in language. Instead of an emphasis on meaning and representation, *Ædnan* makes room for listening, song, and the body. This implies, Deleuze and Guattari state, a rediscovery of the deterritorialized condition of language generally:

Since articulated sound was a deterritorialized noise but one that will be reterritorialized in sense, it is now sound itself that will be deterritorialized irrevocably, absolutely. The sound or the word that traverses this new deterritorialization no longer belongs to a language of sense, even though it derives from it, nor is it an organized music or song, even though it might appear to be. (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p. 21)

This way, deterritorialized sound can work as a vehicle for communication beyond sense and understanding.

This makes it possible to formulate some concluding remarks. While an epic in the Herderian tradition contributes to a (re)territorialization not only in the manifest sense, by articulating historical and emotional claims on a geographical territory, but also by advancing and strengthening a native language, the epic genre simultaneously has a deterritorializing potential. This potential resides not least in its connections with oral performance, song culture, and sound.

As *Ædnan* draws attention to the acoustic dimensions associated with the epic, it employs an inherited understanding of the epic genre as founded in song culture. At the same time, *Ædnan* expands this inherited understanding of the epic by using the language of the Swedish colonizers for a story about Sámi history, and by foregrounding the scene at the language café, where the symbolic dimension of language collapses. This way, *Ædnan* continues as well as destabilizes the epic tradition. The workings of sound and acoustics function as a means to undermine inherited structures and reinvent the epic, which is not

cleansed of its history, but also not discarded. The ambivalence already present in classical epic thus makes it possible to regain an epic voice in the modern work, without disregarding the colonial logic that the reception of classical epic entails.

In this article I have contextualized *Ædnan* in relation to the classical epic tradition. Evoking this tradition, *Ædnan* simultaneously confirms, expands, and transforms European ideas of the epic. A main device in *Ædnan* by which to achieve this remodelling of tradition is its exploration of sounding qualities of language. This exploration of sound is found on many levels: in the sonorous and insistent voice of the work itself; in its references to the Sámi joik tradition in history and today; in the sounds of non-human phenomena such as the river; in the struggles with mother tongues and acquired languages; in acoustic word-plays such as *dämmal/dämpa*, or the *Ædnan/Ædno/Ædni* constellation with its aural associations to the *Aeneid* and the *Edda*; and in the encounter with the refugee, where sound, rather than meaning, is the means of human communication. In this way, sound also comes with a utopian dimension in *Ædnan*.

Traces of this expansion of the epic tradition are also found in the narrative structure of the work. Instead of one coherent story, the narrative of *Ædnan* falls apart in two distinct stories: the story of Ristin and Ber-Joná, on the one hand, and the story of Lise and her family, on the other. This double narrative leaves us with a gap in the midst of the work. The two stories are united only by the apartment where both families live, but never simultaneously. The traditional epic narrative may be episodic and digressive, but is usually in some way understood as united (Tucker 2008, p. 14). The gap in the midst of *Ædnan* breaks with this narrative unity and points towards a wound that cuts through the story, while on another level indicating a shared experience over such a narrative gap.

Such a disruptive poetics of ambivalence and splits makes possible a renewed reading of ambiguities and rifts in classical epic as well, which shares, albeit too often unnoticed, with postcolonial epics the attentiveness to exile, hybridity, and rifts (Glissant 1989, p. 135; Roy 2018, p. 20). While the relation between script and voice permeates the epic tradition, Herder's insistence on "listening to difference", as Solanki phrases it (2022), enables us to add new dimensions to an old tradition. As *Ædnan* helps us to see in Aeneas an exiled migrant, it also helps us understand the epic tradition as on the one hand a tradition of justifying colonialism, but also, on the other, a tradition of contemplating and re-examining postcolonial identities, in a world in constant flux.

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