

“Once I even imagined I could be a writer”: The Immigrant Letters as Folk Literature

Anna Williams

During the mass emigration from Europe to North America, millions of letters were sent from immigrants to family and friends back home. Some 1.3 million people emigrated from Sweden, and the immigrant letters are an invaluable source for knowledge about the individual response to an often life-changing experience. The letters are important research material, not the least for those interested in Swedish-American cultural and literary history. As Dag Blanck has observed, the fascination for the social and cultural aspects of human migration still remains.¹ To this end, the letters provide information about ethnic identity, language, and literature. They have been defined as vernacular writing and folk literature, written in traditional and everyday language, often by writers with limited writing experience. They have, furthermore, been viewed as a distinctive textual and literary genre with common characteristics.² Reading such texts requires the use of literary methodology and interpretation through which, according to the literary scholar Orm Øverland, we “may recapture for our own time a folk literature that played an important role in our past and make of the immigrant letters a literature that is of interest in its own right.”³

It is indeed inspiring to view the immigrant letters as folk literature, subsequently as part of the influential Swedish working-class literature. There are obvious similarities between the two genres in their description of work and life. Not every letter-writer had a literary ambition like Axel Johansson, quoted in the title of this essay.⁴ However, many letters contain rhetorical elements, stylistic figures, literary or biblical allusions, and original phrasing that give them a creative quality (some aspects of which are unfortunately lost in translation), regardless of the writers' intention. One example is a letter by the signature E. A. in 1908, who assures his love of his native country:

Our country needed not its glorious past, without precedent in the world; it needed not its departed heroes of war and peace, fostered only on Swedish soil; it needed not its intelligent and informed people, to obtain my love. I would love Sweden even if it lacked history and was poor, ugly, disdained.⁵

The letter includes alliteration, assonance, and repetition, most likely inspired by popular patriotic poetry from the 1890s. Its style is also marked by the persistent homesickness that permeated so many immigrant letters.

The aspiring writer Axel Johansson mentioned above spent the years 1913–1916 in the United States as a manual laborer. In his letters to his sweetheart Elin Samuelsson back in Sweden, he shared his impressions of America, observing especially the equality in the workplace:

Furthermore, things are different here from at home in Sweden, one laborer is as valued as another, regardless if he works with the spade or the pen. You would not see workers in starched shirts and cuffs, looking down with derision on the manual laborer.⁶

Any reader who had experienced rigid class divisions must have been affected by such an account—one of many similar in the immigrant letters. Suddenly, a different social order is exposed. Moreover, the letter gives the impression of describing a general social system by using

metonymy—the spade representing the manual laborer and the pen the white-collar worker. Axel Johansson was an avid reader, which obviously influenced his writing. But he complains about his lack of talent and dismisses his own literary ambition as vanity: “Once I even imagined I could be a writer [...]. Good Lord, what folly.”⁷ The phrasing reveals at once his own innermost desire and a sober, probably class-related, assessment of the state of things.

From a far earlier immigrant can be extracted a condensed narrative about life and death. Ida Lindgren writes home from Kansas in 1870 to her mother and sister:

One thing that is pretty here are the fireflies, they look so pretty in the evenings. They do not shine steadily, rather there are a couple of seconds between each time they flash, and when there are many fireflies and they fly sometimes among the trees, sometimes high, sometimes low, it looks so lovely, for it gets dark right away in the evenings here. [...] Claus and his wife lost their youngest child at Lake Sibley and it was very sad in many ways. There was no real cemetery but out on the prairie stood a large, solitary tree, and around it they bury their dead, without tolling of bells, without a pastor, and sometimes without any coffin. A coffin was made here for their child, it was not painted black, but we lined it with flowers and one of the men read the funeral service, and then there was a hymn, and that was all.⁸

She moves swiftly from the beautiful nature scene to brutal death, capturing contrasting existential experiences in a few lines. The writer needs no elaborated language to communicate her feelings, which—probably unintentionally—adds a literary quality to the letter.

In the comprehensive anthology *American Working-Class Literature* (2007), less traditional genres such as memoirs, reportage, song lyrics, and letters are incorporated. The definition of *writer* is likewise generous, embracing anonymous writers as well as those who never even published their works.⁹ The approach is in line with a current scholarly discussion about a more inclusive definition of working-class

literature. By acknowledging immigrant letters as folk literature, it is possible to view them as part of Swedish working-class history and literature. It opens dimensions for further exciting research in literature and emigration history.

Notes

- 1 Dag Blanck, "Om att skriva svenskamerikansk historia," in *Konstellationer: Festskrift till Anna Williams*, Alexandra Borg, Andreas Hedberg, Maria Karlsson, Jerry Määttä, and Åsa Warnqvist, eds. (Möklinta: Gidlunds förlag, 2017), 179, 181.
- 2 Jennifer Eastman Artebery, *Up in the Rocky Mountains: Writing the Swedish Immigrant Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1, 6 f., 14, 18ff. Orm Øverland, "Learning to Read Immigrant Letters: Reflections towards a Textual Theory," in *Norwegian-American Essays 1996*, Øyvind T. Gulliksen, David C. Mauk, and Dina Tofsbj, eds. (Oslo: NAHA-Norway, The Norwegian Emigrant Museum, 1996), 210. Orm Øverland, "Inledning. Fra Amerika til Norge: Refleksjoner over norske utvandrerbrev 1838–1914," in *Fra Amerika til Norge VII. Norske utvandrerbrev 1905–1914 utgitt ved Orm Øverland* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 2011), 50.
- 3 Øverland, "Learning to Read Immigrant Letters," 223.
- 4 "En gång i tiden gick jag och inbillade mig att jag skulle kunna bli författare och jag försökte t.o.m. att skriva böcker. Gode Herre, vad dårskap." Letter from Axel Johansson, 30 March 1915, in Anna Williams, *Resa ut och komma hem: Axel Johanssons Amerika i brev och dagböcker 1913–1920* (Stockholm: LaGun Förlag, 2024), 136. All translations are my own, if not otherwise stated.
- 5 "Vårt land behöfde icke äga denna ärorika historia, som ej i hela världen äger motstycke; det behöfde icke ha dessa hänsogna hjältar, krigets och fredens hjältar, som endast kunna fostras uti svenska tjäll; det behöfde icke i dag ha ett folk, som är det mest intelligenta och upplysta, för att vinna min kärlek. Jag skulle älska Sverige om det vore utan historia, fult, fattigt, föraktadt." Letter from E. A., in *Emigrationsutredningen. Bilaga VII. Utvandarnes egna uppgifter. Upplysningar inbemädat genom Emigrationsutredningens agenter äfvensom bref från svenskar i Amerika* (Stockholm: Kungl. Boktryckeriet. P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 1908), 239.
- 6 "Och så är det inte som hemma i Sverige, den ene arbetaren är lika mycket värderad som den andra, han må arbeta med spaden eller pennan. Inte ser man en del af arbetarne gå i stärkskjorta och manschetter och med löje i blicken se ned på grofarbetaren." Letter from Axel Johansson, 3 August 1913, in Williams, *Resa ut och komma hem*, 98.
- 7 Letter from Axel Johansson, 30 March 1915, in Williams, *Resa ut och komma hem*, 136.
- 8 "Något som är vackert här ute äro eldflugorna, det ser så vackert ut om afnarna. De lysa ej för jemma, utan det är ett par sekunder mellan hvarje gång det lyser till, och när det då äro många flugor och de flyga än bland träden, än högt, än lågt, så ser det så vackert ut, då kvällarna här äro genast mörka. [...] Clausens miste sitt minsta barn i Lake Sibly och det var sorgligt på många vis. Der fanns ej någon riktig kyrkogård, utan ute på prärien stod ett stort ensamt träd och der omkring stöppade de ned sina döda, utan ringning, utan prest och ibland utan kista. Här gjordes kista till deras barn, svartad blef den ej, men vi klädde den med blommor och en af herrarna läste begravningsformuläret och så en psalm efteråt och så var det slut." Letter from Ida Lindgren, July 1870. Translation by H. Arnold Barton, in *Letters From the Promised Land: Swedes in America, 1840–1914* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 144. Original Swedish in Ida Lindgren, *Brev från nybyggehemmet i Kansas 1870–1881* (Göteborg: Riksföreningen för svenskhetens bevarande i utlandet, 1960), 18 f.
- 9 *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology*, Nicholas Cole and Janet Zandy, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xix f., xxi–xxiv.