

PETER LEONARD SASS Paper DRAFT May 7th

In 2003, a fictional fifteen-year-old native of Stockholm named Halim started a journal in a book with a bright red and gold cover. He began his story with a sentence that placed himself temporally and spatially, with grammar performing no less of a locative function than verbs and nouns. *I dag det var sista sommarlovsdagen och därför jag hjälpte pappa i affären.* Halim's refusal to invert the word order of his subject and predicate, despite starting the sentence with a mention of time (idag), was jarring to many readers, including a reviewer who complained that:

Språket får en konservativ oförberedd läsare att resa ragg tills man efter några sidor ger sig, förstår att man befinner sig i en annan verklighet: inne i huvudet på en mycket ung invandrarkille med [...] helt andra referensramar än de lagomsvenska.

The language makes a conservative unprepared reader see red until after a few pages you surrender, understand that you're in a different reality: in the head of a very young immigrant boy with [...] completely different reference frames than the everyday Swedish ones.

This critic, writing in *Nerikes Allehanda*, was wrong about the way she described Halim who was, as (most) readers discover, a boy born in Sweden. But her mischaracterization of him as an *invandrarkille*, no less than Halim's own prose style, served as fair warning that Jonas Khemiri's book would trouble those preoccupied with the *lagomsvenska* as it probed disjunctures between individual and society.

Indeed, Halim wrote in a time when Swedes of all backgrounds were noticing tension in social and cultural categories. One dramatic example was the announcement from the Swedish government's Central Statistics Bureau that the number of Swedes with "foreign background" had dropped from 21 percent in 2002 to 15 percent in 2003. The eventual explanation for this apparent decrease in Sweden's ethnic diversity probably

¹ Niittymäki, Maija. "Långt från det lagom svenska." *Nerikes Allehanda* 27 Aug. 2003: 26

disappointed *Sverigedemokraterna* nationalists, for no great counter-migration had eliminated a quarter of Sweden's immigrants. Instead, the government had merely moved the goalposts. Starting in 2003 the Bureau decided that citizens of the Swedish state would need *two* foreign-born parents to have a "foreign background," whereas previously, one parent was enough.²

At least one self-identified Swede found himself with a particularly bad case of whiplash: the great-grandson of famed nature painter Bruno Liljefors. Despite this famous last name (and its attendant connection to national fauna), Mats Liljefors found himself categorized as *utländsk bakgrund* until 2002 (due to a grandfather's career in the States) and then pushed out of that same category in 2003. He went public with his exasperation in the pages of *Svenska Dagbladet*, saying

*"Invandringen" utgörs alltså inte bara av människor som flyttat hit från andra länder utan också av inbörder som flyttar i och ut ur de begrepp, genom vilka vi talar om dessa människor.*³

"Immigration" is thus made up not only of people who have moved here from other countries, but also of meanings which flow in and out of the concepts through which we speak of these people.

We might see echoes, then, in the twilight of the Welfare State, coping with a sudden heterogenization of its society, of British colonial census in Southeast Asia effecting what Charles Hirschman has called, "an extraordinarily rapid, superficially arbitrary, series of changes, in which categories are continuously agglomerated,

² *Sveriges framtida befolkning 2003–2020: Svensk och utländsk bakgrund* Örebro: Statistiska centralbyrån, May 2003. In this document *svensk bakgrund* is defined on page 10 as "personer med en eller båda föräldrarna född i Sverige." The closest corresponding document from SCB the previous year is *Befolkningsåret 2002*, in which those born in Sweden with *one* foreign-born parent are presented in the same context, and indeed the same paragraph, as those born in Sweden with *two* foreign-born parents.

³ Liljefors 6

disaggregated, recombined, intermixed and reordered...⁴ This would-be wholesale assimilation of tens of thousands of individuals with foreign background into the Swedish nation was accomplished overnight, proving once again the power of the state, through the census, to shape “the nature of the human beings it ruled.”⁵

If this instability in numbers, persons and identities unsettled not just recently-arrived immigrants but also that (apparently variable) percentage of Swedes with no “foreign background,” it at least set an appropriate backdrop in first few years of the twenty-first century for the emergence of *Ett öga rött* and other books by young Swedish writers who focused attention on just this disjuncture between state-given and self-defined identity. They produced compelling narratives of Swedes imagining themselves – and often set these practices in explicit opposition to the Swedish state’s privilege to define and delimit its citizens. For precisely those authors whose ethnic had called into question, the message was clear: two can play at this game.

In this paper I’ll examine two books – Halim’s journal, which is a novel called *Ett öga rött* written by Jonas Khemiri, and a collection of short stories by Alejandro Wenger – for what traces of what Liljefors called those “meanings which flow in and out of concepts” in the discourse about a hetrogenizing Sweden. I’ll examine the way that some protagonists in these texts appropriate state methods to construct their own demographic identity, and how other stories seek to interject uncertainty into putatively rationalistic assimilation discourse by engaging the transformative power of the supernatural. Finally, I’ll suggest a way that the very style *Nerikes Allehanda* found so disturbing can be a testament to literature’s power in the social sphere.

⁴ Anderson 165 (paraphrasing Hirschman)

⁵ Anderson 164

For it is my contention that the books of these Swedes of (contestably) foreign background defined the literary response to the larger question of what an ethnically- and culturally-heterogeneous Sweden would be. First-person testimony to the way Europeans imagined themselves in a time of demographic and cultural change, these books reveal the contours of what Svenska dagbladet called, in its own review of *Ett öga rött, det där alltmer svårdefinierade begreppet som kallas Sverige*.⁶

IDENTITIES FIXED AND MUTABLE

At play in Halim's journal is the relationship between the Swedish state and the individuals it contains. At the same time the Central Statistics Bureau was re-defining who was who in the Swedish nation state, Halim performed his own, highly individual, census of his Swedish high school:

Idag jag har filosoferat fram en teori om svennarna och svartskallarna på skolan:

[...]

Blattarna på skolan är inte så många men kommer ändå i två versioner. Nummer ett är den vanliga blatten: knasaren, snikaren, snattaren, ligisten [...] Blattesort nummer två är duktighetskillen som pluggar prov och använder finord och aldrig plankar tunnelbanan eller taggish. Som exempel[...] alla [...] iranier som smörar lärare och vill bli tandläkare och ingenjörer. Dom tror dom får respekt men egentligen alla lärare skrattar åt dom för man fattar dom är vilsna.

Men i dag jag har filosoferat fram det finns också en tredje blattesort som står helt fri och är den som svennarna hatar mest: revolutionsblatten, tankesultanen. Den som ser igenom alla lögnen och som aldrig låter sig luras. [...] Förra terminen jag var nog mest knasaren men från nu jag svär jag ska bli tankesultan. (36)

What is significant here is the way that a teenage boy appropriates the techniques, and thereby the privilege, of the state to categorize and order his world. His division of “svennar” and “blattar” is simplistic on the surface, but contains fractal-like detail as the two categories develop into groups with competing agendas *even within the same ethnic category*. Halim's explanation of how to distinguish “svennar” and “blattar” visually and behaviorally is a first step towards imagining his own identity, as he must first define and

⁶ Rabe, Annina. “Vasst på bruten svenska.” Svenska dagbladet 4 Aug. 2003

organize his classmates finally turning his analytical lens on himself. His final act in this passage is to “philosophize” about a third kind of minority, distinct from both the gangster and assimilationist models, which represents a model of the citizen he would become.

Halim’s penchant for tongue-in-cheek Linnean categorization finds an echo in the writing of Alejandro Wenger. Born in Chile, Wenger came to Sweden at the age of two, and 23 years later published a collection of short stories called *Till vår ära*.⁷ In one particular tale, *Elixir*, we find a dark vision of assimilation told through the same first-person perspective as Halim’s journal. This time, however, the delineations and borders of identity are effaced in a dark parable of cultural assimilation as both miracle – and nightmare.

As *Elixir* begins, a teenaged boy has received a mysterious package in the mail. Its origins are unknown: “[Marco] hade fått en paket och gick och hemta den i posten för han trodde det var från chile från hans mormor.” (33), but “frimärket och allt va från sverige så det va nån från sverige som skickade den.” (33)

Opening the package, the boys discover a small bottle within, containing a mysterious liquid. Upon drinking it, they discover what it does. “fetarslet Marco kollade på mej och sa, ”fan, du har ju fått lite blåa ögon!” och jag sprang och kolla i spegeln och det var sant. mina ögon var lite blåa. det såg fett grymt ut.” (35)

But the boys soon discover the effects of the elixir are more than skin deep:

“när vi snacka, så snacka han lite anor lunda. jag sa, ”va fan pratar du så där för, tjockis.” Han sa ”hur???” och jag sa ”du snackar fett som en svenne.” för han jorde det. man hörde inte att han var svarting och han sa ord som svenskar kan.” (35-6)

⁷ Immigrant Institutet. “Alejandro Leiva Wenger.” *Invandrare författare*. 2003. May 2003 <<http://www.immi.se/kultur/authors/latin/leiva.htm>>

In the mind of the narrator *svarting* status can be heard, and its absence in the idiolect of Marco is cause for consternation. The shift in pronunciation is complimented by a change in vocabulary as Marco begins using words which “Swedes” know.

The boys’ convictions about ethnic groups, in fact, make the psychological transformation of the *svarting* mind just as striking as their blond hair and blue eyes. Soon one of them demonstrates proficiency in exactly the kind of cultural knowledge which state apparatus – through the public education system – seeks desperately to instill in “new swedes”:

“...den dagen hade vi prov, och jag hade inte pluggat, och inte marco heller, så klart, för han pluggar aldrig, fetarslet. det var ett prov om svenska författare, typ strinberg ock såna. Men marco fick bäst i klassen! för vi fick tillbaka proven på fredag, och han hade nestan alla rätt. och läraren sa ”strålande marco.” flaco frågade ”fuskade du?” och marco sa ”nej jag svär, jag vet inte hur jag fick så bra.” För Fetarslet är ju ingen plugghÄst. han är tillomed lite dum. och ändå fick han så bra.” (36-7)

Soon the narrator himself notices a similar improvement in his own study skills:

READ THIS YOURSELF

“jag märke jag kunde konsentrera mej bättre på leksjonen plus att sen kom Flaco och sa han kunde inte komma ihåg nästan ett enda ord på spanska.” (39)

We see here vicious parody at work, as the goals of the Integration Ministry, filtered through a kind of magical realism, are accomplished overnight through an enchanted potion. But these changes prompt a moment of self-awareness on the boys’ behalf.

“vi sa fan, den där läsken gör att man blir svenne. Men sen sa marco nej jag vill inte bli för jag är stolt över att va svarting och jag sa jag med för jag är det. vi provade läsken bara för att prova. flaco sa nu måste vi sluta annars kanske vi blir iNne i själva järtat och i järnan. så vi sa att vi skulLe sluta innan det var för sent.” (39)

The boys’ realization of the transformative power of elixir stirs their imagination, drawing attention to how they perform their Latino identity. Yet the very *changeability*

of that identity is what frightens them, as the elixir's power to transform the body is matched by its ability to transubstantiate the soul. The boys' decision to stop "before it was too late", however, cannot prevent a shocking *dénouement*:

"men jag tror det var redan för sent, för när jag skulle åka hem från vårberg hit till Fittja så våga jag inte planka. jag stog där och sa till mij själv, kom igen, men vag vågade inte gå förbi spärren. så jag gick hem hela vägen och tänkte, är det för att jag har burjat bli i järtat??" (39)

Having provided the boys with blond hair and blue eyes, the elixir completes its work by exerting its pull on the behavior of the teenagers in the public sphere of the municipal subway. Here, in this site of transportation so linked with the development of the *miljonprogram* suburbs – Vårberg, Rinkeby, Skärholmen – housing Sweden's immigrant families, the narrator comes face-to-face with a frightening change in his interaction with the state infrastructure. As we remember that, instead of being a gift from a Chilean grandmother, the stamps confirm that the elixir was sent from "someone in Sweden," we find the Integration Ministry taken to its logical limit: Better Citizens through Black Magic.

THINKING THE NATION

I've examined how two protagonists push the borders of self in as they strive to clarify and make more solid their own identity, in the face of assimilationist pressure from the state. I'd like to take another excerpt from *Ett öga rött* and use it to suggest the way these texts themselves might function in the Swedish public sphere. Fittingly for a paper which began with a critic's reaction to Halim's journal, I close by examining Halim's own practice of active reading.

Before I do so, I'd like to call attention to Benedict Anderson's positioning of both the novel and newspaper as "two [new] forms of imagining"⁸ in the 18th century. Events recorded in both genres of writing, he claims, unfold untethered to an eschatological end goal and are united only by the clockwork of standardized chronology and national consciousness. Two centuries after the historical examples Anderson relies upon, Halim performs his own reading of a Swedish newspaper, *Metro*, and records his impressions in his journal:

Mellan vegan undersökning och Twilfit-annons journalisterna försökte smugla nyheten att flera bostadsbolag hotat vräka alla blattar som har parabolantenner på sina balkonger! ... Nu blattarna startade motorganisationer och hade demonstrationer på Platten för såklart dom var inga vingelpettrar som tyckte det var okey att bostadsbolagen lekte rasister. I samma tidning det stod reportage som sa polisen ska börja göra hårdare tag mot svarttaxi. Såklart jag fattade det var också som attack mot oss blattar för vem har någonsin sett en svenne ge svarttaxi?⁹

One cannot accuse Halim of shying away from synthetic thinking. But while his construction of everyday Swedish life as a power structure arrayed against his would-be revolutionary consciousness may strike us as paranoid, I have chosen to reproduce this passage because the events Halim notes are embedded in what Andersen calls modernism's homogenous, empty time: the actants do not know each other, nor does Halim know them personally, instead, he learns of them through the print media. Nevertheless, Halim imagines them as a representative body which includes himself, and thus demonstrates what Anderson might call his "complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity."¹⁰ Since Halim was born in Stockholm, his references to "oss blattar" have to be understood as an imagined community of something different

⁹ Khemiri 55

¹⁰ Anderson 26

than shared citizenship. As Halim reads between the lines of commodities (lingerie) and upper-middle-class conceits (veganism) to uncover the truth which the media tries to “smuggle,” he imagines his own self into being.

We may see in the overarching scope of Halim’s rhetoric echoes of Arjun Appadurai’s framework of imagined worlds. What Appadurai would call Halim’s own “deeply perspectival constructs”¹¹ demonstrate this central role of imagination in the construction of self. And it is this imaginary which is at large in the Sweden of Khemiri and Wenger.

For if the ‘third world’ engaged the conscience of Sweden in the 1970’s, then the offspring of these diasporas altered her consciousness in the 2000’s. If, as Svenska Dagbladet posited, the imagined solidarity of the post-war Erlander era is giving way to something more ‘difficult to define,’ then it is perhaps not surprising that homogenizing national discourse, predicated on such commonality, would emerge as a target for literary critique. Unlike their foreign-born parents, these ‘second-generation’ writers might be expected to have a surer sense of self. Yet for Khemiri and Wenger, writing in their native language of Swedish, it was precisely this intimate connection to the nation-state which proved so problematic. The double-edged euphemism “New Swedes” confirmed their nationality at the same time marked them as arrivistes, just as what some insisted on calling “*Rinkebysvenska*” located their ideolects on both the physical and cultural periphery of the *lagomsvenska*.

¹¹ Appadurai 33

With this in mind, it is helpful to consider the ways that ‘new publics’ spring forth into being at least in part by virtue of the manner in which they are addressed. The styles and practices examined here answer, I think, Michael Warner’s question, posed in *Publics and Counterpublics*, of “...how, by what rhetoric, one might bring a public into being when extant modes of address and intelligibility seem themselves to be a problem.”¹² Khemiri, in discussing his own childhood in Stockholm as a biracial Swede, once invoked in the course of a dedication ...*alla som kanske inte har någon mer i gemensamn nämnare än hårfärgen, eller det konstant felstavade efternamnet.* ¹³ When we consider the overactive imaginary of the narrators of *Ett öga rött* and *Elixir*, we would do well to remember Warner’s claim that “in modernity... an extraordinary burden of world-making comes to be borne above all by style.”¹⁴

¹² Warner 130

¹³ “Jonas Hassen Khemiri” Narr. Jonas Khemiri. Sommar. Sveriges Radio P1, Stockholm. Sommar 2 Aug. 2004. Private Recording.

¹⁴ Warner 129