

ANNA BOHLIN:

Textens anatomi. Läsningar av politik i Elin Wägners *Silverforsen*, Selma Lagerlöfs *Löwensköldtrilogi* och Klara Johansons *Tidevarvskäserier*.

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SOFI QVARNSTRÖM:

Motståndets berättelser. Elin Wägner, Anna Lenah Elgström, Marika Stiernstedt och första världskriget.

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Anna Bohlin's and Sofi Qvarnström's doctoral dissertations, defended at the University of Umeå in 2008 and the University of Uppsala in 2009 respectively, both cover not just several authors but also genres beyond the traditional literary ones. Bohlin's material consists of around 50 light-hearted columns by Klara Johanson in addition to the novels by Wägner and Lagerlöf; and while Qvarnström analyses prose fiction by each of her chosen authors, she also includes journalism, pamphlets, lectures and travel books. The range in both cases is most welcome, as is the comparative study of the work of a number of authors. The gender of the authors involved is quite deliberate in the case of Bohlin, whose focus is on writing by women in the immediate aftermath of the introduction of female suffrage in Sweden in 1919/1921 but, as it turns out, accidental in the case of Qvarnström,

who simply wanted three instances of Swedish writers combining, during the First World War, the roles of authors of prose fiction, debaters and intellectuals. Qvarnström's dissertation is part of a bigger project based at Uppsala, 'De svenska författarna och kriget. Första världskriget i litteraturen och litteraturen under första världskriget' (The Swedish Writers and the War. The First World War in Literature and Literature during the First World War). Bohlin's aim is to investigate the feminine political voice in her chosen texts, with a special emphasis on the relationship between the voice and the body. Qvarnström on her part explores the critique of the First World War, pinpointing the differences between the narrative as witness, as accusation, and as exhortation.

Bohlin's *Röstens anatomi* consists of an introduction, a chapter on each of the three authors studied here, and a conclusion. The chapter analyzing Klara Johanson's 'Anmärkningar' (Comments), the columns she published in the radical weekly *Tidevarvet* from the launch in November 1923 until the end of September 1924, strikes me as the most interesting in Bohlin's study. The concept of *röst*, ranging across the spectrum of meanings that is at the centre of this investigation, turns out to be crucial to these texts by Johanson (here, as so often, signing herself 'K.J.'): and Bohlin explores the role of irony, highlights the relevance of Socrates, Plato and Kierkegaard, and clarifies the relationships between K.J.'s texts and works by Otto Weininger and Rosa Mayreder, to demonstrate that Johanson's texts are deconstructing the identity politics which, in Bohlin's reading, is central to the texts by Wägner and Lagerlöf. Although the argument is not always easy to follow (more generous indications of findings so far and summaries of key points would have been welcome), the discussion here is largely persuasive, and this thorough analysis of part of K.J.'s work is useful and welcome.

Bohlin's overall argument pivots on the alleged contrast between Johanson's columns on the one hand, and Wägner's novel *Silverforsen* (1924) and Lagerlöf's *Löwensköld* trilogy (1925-28) on the other. While she offers interesting discussions of both Wägner and Lagerlöf, her readings of identity politics in these novels, foregrounding not just the 'social motherliness' advocated by Ellen Key but more especially the role of Christian love, strike me as disappointingly restrictive. Why not expose the texts of Wägner and Lagerlöf too to more open-ended and radical analyses, including

deconstructive readings, rather than approach them as the unproblematic expressions of the authors' ideas and positions, as frequently happens here? This approach in no way fits with the constructionist understanding of text that underpins the narratological analyses that also appear in this study; worse still, the conflict between the different approaches is never discussed. Indeed, Bohlin claims to have made a deliberate slippage central to her study, as her understanding of the concept of *röst* 'kommer [...] att skifta från röstorgan över litterär röst till politisk rösträtt' (will [...] shift from vocal organ via literary voice to political suffrage, p. 25). Not surprisingly the resulting methodological muddle, with referential approaches appearing side by side with constructionist and biographical ones, frequently has a negative impact on the clarity of the analysis and argument. The problems are aggravated by a lack of attention to definitions, which are not only few and far between but sometimes very difficult to find at all. In the Lagerlöf chapter, to take one example, note 138 (p. 237) directs the reader to the Wägner chapter for a definition of *fokalisering* ('focalisation'). The Wägner chapter, however, is about 100 pages in length, and the only index in this dissertation lists names, not terminology. The definition in question appears on p. 98, but there are a number of similar examples. Incidentally, at this point in the Lagerlöf chapter, Bohlin would appear to confuse *fokalisering* with *fokusering* ('focusing on') as her illustration, the narrative about the gathering of the people for the casting of the dice in *Löwensköldska ringen*, clearly is an instance not of the focalisation of the people but of the near-omniscient narrator focusing on the people.

As far as I have been able to find, the bibliography and references are mostly reliable; however, they would have benefited from further checking. The categorisation of unpublished and published work in the bibliography is not always consistent, with some unpublished work among the published texts. And titles have occasionally become incorrect or mixed up, as is the case with Inger Hammar's chapter 'Kvinnokall och kvinnosak: några nedslag i 1800-talets debatt om genus, medborgarskap och offentlighet' (2001) and my article 'Kvinnoroll och kvinnosak. En studie i Elin Wägners romankonst' (1983), which are sometimes confused in the notes.

Sofi Qvarnström in her ambitious exploration of the critique of the First World War as represented in a selection of Swedish texts from the War

years tackles the fundamental relationship between literature and society - neglected by Bohlin - and draws on Swedish experts such as Lars Furuland, Johan Svedjedal and Stefan Jonsson in addition to the familiar international authorities. Taking her starting-point in work by Rolf Hugoson and Kurt Johannesson, she foregrounds the role of rhetoric in the debate for and against war, and more especially for the analysis of the arguments against war, of the narrator and the narrative technique, and of the emotional dimensions of the texts. Qvarnström's three chapters on Elin Wägner, Anna Lenah Elgström and Marika Stiernstedt respectively are preceded by a chapter demonstrating her approach in analyses of the critical representation of aspects of the War in texts by Ove Ekelund, Martin Koch, Emmy Gustaf-Janson and Artur Möller. With the exception of Koch, these writers are largely unknown today, but as is clear from Qvarnström's analyses, they amply deserve further exploration.

Qvarnström's aim is to investigate both how the resistance to the War 'utformas i litteraturen' (is formulated in literature) and how literature 'speglar i samhället rådande pacifistiska ideer och uppfattningar' (reflects the pacifist ideas and opinions prevailing in society, p. 18). With regard to the role and capacity of literature, the key verbs here, *utformas* and *speglar*, are both quite vague, with *speglar* implying that the function of literature in society is merely a passive one. This position is explicitly contradicted by parts of the argument in the concluding chapter, among them the point that the critique of the War in Swedish literature was part of an 'omförhandling och utveckling' (renegotiation and development): 'Här pågick en strid om vilka ideer som skulle bilda grunden för det samhälle som skulle byggas efter kriget och föra Sverige vidare in i moderniteten' (Here a struggle was taking place about the ideas that would form the basis of the society to be constructed after the War and that would take Sweden further into modernity). Qvarnström similarly highlights, also in her concluding chapter, the significance of literature and resistance: 'Litteraturens motstånd ligger i texternas vägran att fixera sig och i deras vägran av det endimensionella - motståndet kan lokaliseras till texternas både och. Genom att rymma tvetydigheter och parallella tolkningar gör litteraturen motstånd mot en ensidig och ytlig förståelse av kriget, samtiden och, inte minst, människan.' (The resistance of literature is to be found in the texts' refusal of fixity and their refusal of the one-dimensional

- the resistance can be pinpointed in the both-and of the texts. By making space for ambivalences and parallel interpretations, literature resists a one-sided and superficial understanding of the War, the times and, last but not least, the human being. pp. 352-53)

The notion that literature is in the vanguard of social and intellectual change only surfaces intermittently in Qvarnström's study, but it is prominent in her analysis of Wägner's *Släkten Jerneploogs framgång* (1916; The Success of the House of Jerneploog) which, she argues, is characterised by an overall tone that 'snarare är resonerande än bevekande, snarare sökande än fastställande' (foregrounds discussion rather than persuasion, exploration rather than confirmation, p. 143). Contrasting Wägner's journalism with her prose fiction, Qvarnström argues that the more specific messages of the former differ from the testing of alternatives and investigating of new possibilities taking place in the spaces provided by the latter. I certainly think she is right about the prose fiction and have argued as much in my *Re-Writing the Script: Gender and Community in Elin Wägner* (2009); indeed, I am also convinced that more open-ended and constructionist readings of Wägner's journalism and other types of non-fiction are not merely justified but rewarding.

Qvarnström's approach to the majority of her texts, then, is somewhat more simplistic as they tend to 'reflect' reality or 'express the author's intentions'. But her comparisons between the works of Wägner, Elgström and Stiernstedt highlight a number of significant differences, including the contrast between the focus on women as citizens in Wägner's texts and on women as mothers and educators of the next generation in Elgström's; the latter's 1917 collection of short stories, *Mödrar* (Mothers), provides the parallel to Wägner's novel. While the texts of Wägner, according to Qvarnström, are always addressed to women, the pacifism formulated in those of Elgström is either oriented towards women or gender neutral; the texts of Stiernstedt, on the other hand, consistently avoid the gendering of pacifism. Stiernstedt is represented by *En officershistoria och andra berättelser* (1917; The Tale of an Officer and Other Stories) but also by lectures, pamphlets and travelogues, including accounts of the War from a closely-observed French perspective. Stiernstedt's upbringing and education had been strongly French-oriented, and as Qvarnström points

out this sometimes resulted in notions in her texts about the French nation and national character which were nothing but romantic. However, while Qvarnström demonstrates the extent to which issues of lawlessness and justice are central to the investigations of war and peace in Stiernstedt's texts, it seems to me that the strong emphasis on justice in Wägner's texts is underplayed in this context.

The notes and bibliography in Qvarnström's thesis are meticulous, and so, with very few exceptions, is the editing of her book (but *nit*, p. 318, should be gendered neuter in order to mean 'diligence').

Together Bohlin and Qvarnström have provided a very useful mapping of a considerable number of Swedish texts from the 1910s and 1920s, including some previously neglected ones; and the analyses, from their different theoretical and methodological starting-points, both add to and modify our understanding of the relationships between texts and society in Sweden at the time. While Qvarnström is the scholarly heavyweight here, both dissertations, it seems to me, would have benefited from more open-ended and radical readings of the kind that surface intermittently. Both, however, illustrate the importance of comparative studies across genres, including those previously regarded as quite separate from literary ones. Given our postmodern perspectives on textual genres, we should be able to look forward to more and even bolder studies of this type.