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Writing the Nation. On Ulf Lundell's "Öppna landskap"

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As Benedict Anderson made clear in 1991, the media are superior creators and perpetrators of nations as imagined communities. Ulf Lundell's "Öppna landskap" ("Open landscapes", 1982) is a song that was immediately appropriated as kind of new national anthem, no matter which were the artist's intentions. In line with this, my interest in the song focuses on the way it represents an update of "Swedishness" at a time when a national identity crisis is approaching. I will depart from that key feature of Romanticism which literary critic Horace Engdahl has named "the living gaze" and, to Lundell's generation, connects the Swedish *visa* tradition to rock in Swedish. Theories of the experience society, post-colonial criticism and eco criticism are used to discuss the presuppositions of Lundell's effort.

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The aim of this paper is to discuss a popular song from the early 1980s in terms of an intervention into Swedish self-understanding. Neither the song, "Öppna landskap"/"Open landscapes", nor its author Ulf Lundell, rock artist as well as writer of poems and thick novels, needs any introduction to a national audience. At home "Öppna landskap" became an instant hit, greeted as a new national anthem shortly after its release in 1982. Later its popularity has extended to the adjoining Nordic countries. Since nothing in the song lyrics explicitly relates the landscape they represent to Sweden and the melody borrows from a regional folk idiom,¹ this is perhaps no surprise. However, the immediate success at home can hardly be understood without reference to the conjuncture in which it was made public. The 1980s introduced a period of national self-questioning, a Swedish identity crisis triggered by different globalisation symptoms, to which also popular music contributed – especially in the 90s, when multicultural rap clashed with White Power acts.

So, even if "Öppna landskap" was not a conscious attempt at "writing the nation", it came out as one. This expression draws on Homi K. Bhabha's article "DissemiNation. Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation" (1994), which in its turn builds on Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991/2000), of which the nation is a prime example. The aim of nationalist discourses, says Bhabha, is to create *one* community out of several different ones. To that purpose such discourses work with two kinds of temporal representations, which contradict each other. Nationalism as *pedagogical* discourse represents the people by reference to a common origin and a continuous, accumulated history. But nationalist discourse is also and simultaneously *performative*. Bhabha thinks that "[t]he scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture" (145), which allows for reinterpretation of pedagogical discourse and so opens a space for the narratives of marginalised groups to challenge homogeneity. I find this opposition relevant to what Lundell achieved with "Öppna landskap" and will try to substantiate why in the following, focusing the lyrics of the song (see the Appendix of this article).

"The living gaze"

Lundell writes in a double tradition: that of the "authenticity rock" of Dylan or Springsteen, and that of the Swedish *visa* – an important ingredient of the national song treasure. As Lars Lilliestam shows in his standard work *Svensk rock. Musik, lyrik, historik* (1998), there are interesting links between the indigenous tradition of the *visa* and rock lyrics written in Swedish. It is no coincidence that artists like Lundell, Rolf Wikström or Joakim Thåström have celebrated their predecessors Carl Michael Bellman, Evert Taube och Nils Ferlin on record.² As an art form the *visa* has kept alive a masculine, Romantic-Bohemian view of art and the world; as social cement it has equipped several generations of Swedes with raw material for the construction of a national community.

The Romantic-Bohemian legacy is a point at which rock and *visa* readily merge. A great amount of British rockers of the 1960s were, as Simon Frith and Howard Horne point out in *Art into Pop* (1987), pop Bohemians, who acquired their expressive aesthetics in art schools. And in another work from the same year, *The Triumph of Vulgarly. Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism*, the American Robert Pattison argues that the thematics of rock mirrors that

1 Thus the opening melody phrase of "Öppna landskap" is a loan from the oldie "Hör hur västanvinden susar" ("Hear the murmur of the west wind").

2 As a matter of fact, Swedish rock artists' dependence of the *visa* tradition has become so conspicuous that a critic found it necessary to hoist a flag of warning a couple of years ago, starting out with an allusion to Allen Ginsburg's *Howl*: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by *visor*" (Strage 2004).

of the literary Romantics. Filtered through Walt Whitman ways of thinking communicated by Romantic and Symbolist writers from Blake to Rimbaud were adopted by rock musicians and gave rise to what Pattison names "a vulgar panteism", to which world and mind are one.

To my argument it is important that both rock and *visa* propagate a Romantic-Bohemian outlook on artistry and the world. Now, the concept of Romanticism is notoriously problematic, no matter how it is defined: in terms of an epoch, a philosophy or a "family of styles". The last alternative that I will draw on here is the one that Horace Engdahl prefers in *Den romantiska texten* (1986). What keeps the Romantic family together is to Engdahl a crucial scenario that he calls "the living gaze", the igniting of the imagination that calls forth both "the most real reality" and a radically "poetic" language to capture it. As Engdahl observes,

the subject of Romantic texts is often threatened by being engulfed by passivity and paralysis, struck by the death of emotions, buried under objective nature or the mass of Time. The ego must be ignited, reborn, push forward (or back) again to a living vision. It is a Phoenix-like ego, reduced to a cycle of emptiness and liberated seeing (273, my translation).

It should be noted that the living gaze cannot be willed into existence. Its acquisition is represented as a grace or a gift. Sometimes it is reached by the mediation of love, as in Engdahl's paradigmatic text, "Den nya skapelsen" ("The new creation") by Johan Henrik Kellgren. Nevertheless, it is a fact that during the course of the 19th century lyrical subjects as well as their authors increasingly resort to various means of inducing the desired state of mind. "Intoxicate yourselves", urged Baudelaire: "With wine, with poetry, with virtue, according to taste." What takes place is a kind of instrumentalisation of life in the service of art. This instrumentalisation involves love and wraps it in a male Romantic cloak. "Make me amorous and insane again", prays Lundell. The lyrical I, bent on self-expression, needs a muse to ignite its gaze. But women are Eves: give in and you lose your freedom. This ambivalence resounds in the Swedish 20th century *visa* from Evert Taube to Cornelis Vreeswijk as well as in rock music, where it has produced a great many rolling stones, hungry hearts and mysterious women. In a song like Lundell's *Gruva/Mine* (Xavante, 1994), it is grafted on political commentary – Lundell often voices a working-class solidarity filtered through the youth revolt of the 1960s. A closed-down mine here invokes the loss of "the people's home"; what is left to the subject is the dream of taking a beautiful refugee woman that he has caught a glimpse of with him and break out of the racist-ridden ghost town: "I'll drive this Volvo/ as far as it can go/ and she will sit there beside me/ till the end of night" (my translation). It is Springsteen adapted to Swedish conditions: "a non-romantic account of social life, and a highly romantic account of human nature", as Simon Frith once summed up The Boss.³

A Pastoral for the Experience Society

While rock is urban in its lyrical settings as well as in its sound, the modern *visa* has kept nature poetry alive, most visibly in the pastoral sceneries favored by Evert Taube. When Lilliestam calls Lundell "an incurable nature romantic" (184), this quality is therefore best explained with reference to indigenous tradition. In itself *visa* landscapes have little in common with the drama and the mystique cultivated by Romanticism. But the *use* of nature is Romantic. It is neither a question of Symbolist double exposure of real scenery and a state of mind, nor of Expressionist distorted projection; rather, the landscape keeps the mimetic

3 "Towards an aesthetic of popular music", in Leppert & McClary, eds.: *Music and Society ...* (1987:147).

objectivity necessary to make it a site for the transformation of vision. This is also the case in “Öppna landskap”.⁴

As “Gruva” indicates, another Romantic motif that Lundell dwells on is national identity, which was never a problem to the cosmopolitan Taube. The Sweden of Lundell’s dreams is the outcome of successful negotiations between the need for community and the need for Bohemian freedom, but the social reality he experiences often calls for criticism and awakens feelings of nostalgia, historical romanticism, revolt, and idealization of “the people”. In “Öppna landskap” the lyrics are sprinkled with signifiers, fit to trigger stereotypical images of “Swedishness”. These signifiers refer part to nature (the sea, the wind, the light, the open space, larks and gulls), part to culture (sparse population, moonshine snaps, home-baked bread, herring, St. John’s wort, a wreath of leaves, rune-stones). They also include a few abstract concepts (peace, freedom, clarity and simplicity of life), whose function it seems to be to interpret the sensuous impressions. However, rather than the argumentation one might expect, the discursive model is a catalogue, held together by frequent use of anaphor. The lyrics have no distinct forward motion towards some peak, and it is hard to find a system in the distribution of statements. This observation dovetails with others that are to do with musical structure. Each verse follows a familiar AA1BA2 pattern with 8 bar units, except in the last, A2 section, which holds only 4 bars. Within this frame, verbal repetition plays a major structural part. Thus the first and the last two lines of each verse are identical, which creates an effect of closure. The same strategy is used in the lyrics as a whole: they end the same way as they started out.

Looked at more closely, sensuous impressions are introduced by means of time and place shifters (“when”, “where”, “then”), from where they may develop into small events or scenes: having a meal in the first verse, overhearing a party in the second, laying down a wreath in the third. In other words causality is transposed into temporal and spatial relations. What appears is a chronotope in Bakhtin’s sense: a modern *idyll*.

According to Bakhtin (1991:136-137), the idyll has three general characteristics: it roots life in a specific place, the home of ancestors as well as expected children; it emphasizes primal, existential aspects of everyday life such as birth, work, love, death; and it adjoins the rhythm of man’s life to that of nature. However, as modernity makes these things increasingly problematic to realize, the idyll is all but expatriated from representations of contemporary life and its elements reinterpreted according to the demands of individualisation. By the end of the 18th century, for instance, notions of nature as a therapeutic asset were widespread, and sublime nature (especially waterfalls) had become the target of a budding tourist industry, as Orvar Löfgren notes in *On Holiday*.

This development is highly relevant to “Öppna landskap”. In a culturalist reading of the song the third and fourth lines, introduced almost in passing, offer a key by stating that the “I” wants to live in an open landscape only “for a few months every year/ so that the soul can get some rest”. What the lyrics celebrate, then, is a *holiday* landscape, a pause from the complexities of modern life. The idyll has become an exception, a ritual, negotiated return to pre-modern life forms that each and everybody is familiar with. I think the appeal of Lundell’s landscape derives to a large extent from this open recognition of the conditions for its beneficial services.

In an article from 2003 art critic Lars O Ericsson points out that “landscape” originally referred to a genre in painting. The landscape appears, according to Ericsson, when, during the 17th and 18th centuries, nature is transformed from stage props to an object in itself worthy of visual representation. “Therefore it is paradoxical that the concept of landscape to many people seems so closely adjoined to notions of untouched, virgin nature, originality,

4 Lilliestam (1997:186) offers a similar list.

authenticity and truth.” Indeed, it is not difficult to see a dependence on representational conventions in Lundell’s open landscape. As noted by Anders Öhman (1999), an endeavour to occupy and personalise places that have been transformed into clichés is a recurring motif in Lundell’s oeuvre. Their character of *topoi* is the very condition for the interest he invests in them. This perspective is easily adjoined to that cultivated by Engdahl: a place is dead until it encounters the unique “living gaze”.

The topicality of the representation includes some details that connote the sublime, for instance the surging sea. But wild nature is tempered by the presence of human beings, so that the landscape also offers pastoral impressions. Terry Gifford’s book *Pastoral* (1999) presents several different uses of the term. Most frequently the pastoral is regarded as a fairly well demarcated literary genre with a history that harks back to antiquity. But according to Gifford “pastoral” may also refer to any literature that represents the country in – usually positive – contrast to the city. Furthermore, there is an anti-pastoral tradition that takes a critical stance to the idyllic. Finally, Gifford suggests there is a “post-pastoral” tradition with predecessors such as Wordsworth, which cultivates ecological aspects on man’s relationship to nature. Clearly “Öppna landskap” qualifies as a pastoral at least in the second of these categories.

To Gifford the pastoral is characterized by an inherent ambivalence:

Pastoral is essentially a discourse of retreat which may [...] either simply *escape* from the complexities of the city, the court, the present, ‘our manners’, or *explore* them [...] It is because retreat is a device for reflecting upon the present that the pastoral is able to ‘glance at great matters’, as George Puttenham, writing in 1859, put it (46).

Other commentators have also ascribed to the pastoral an ability of “glancing at great matters”, as Raymond Williams notes, with some reserve, in *The Country and the City* (1975). In contemporary criticism, writes Williams, the pastoral is taken to represent “the simple matter in which general truths are embodied or implied”.⁵ The sublime and the pastoral thus do not exclude each other; on the contrary, in the pastoral the high may appear via what Lundell calls “clear and simple things” (“det klara och det enkla”). To the understanding of “Öppna landskap” it is also of interest that the design of the pastoral implies the necessity of a return to some other kind of life that, in Gifford’s words, “always leads to a qualification of the idyllic retreat” (10). Staying in the country a few months a year is then entirely compatible with the frames of the pastoral, while the problems of returning only appear in oppositions such as that between “clear and simple things” vs. “doubt” in the third verse of the song.

Ontologically, it is not easy to ascertain the status of Lundell’s landscape. The representation seems to vacillate between the real and the ideal, the experienced and the imagined. This is not a Romantic vacillation. Engdahl suggests that a vital characteristic of the Romantic text is that it tries to avoid the choice of a particular mode, to escape from an either-or (265), which is effected through excessive troping. This is not the case with Lundell, whose language is simplicity itself, whose voice is moderately passionate, and whose landscape remains through and through recognizable – as a *space* if not as a *place*. Here the crucial device seems to be grammatical. It is the use of an undecided, iterative present tense that neither refers to a now, a past or a future, but tells of *typical* acts and so turns “Öppna landskap” into a collage of repeatable moments.

What joins these moments into a statement is the presence of a lyrical “I” saying “Jag trivs bäst” – “I feel best...”. This collage is really a *declaration of taste*. We are confronting a subject that introduces itself by means of its preferences; in this sense the landscape is pure, objectified subjectivity. At a first glance, it seems we are to do with another Romantic subject

5 Quoted in Gifford (1999:9). Gifford suggests that Williams has Empsons *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) in mind.

that appropriates nature and history for its expressive needs and takes good care, in the second verse, to demarcate the space between the individual and the communal. However, I would like to argue that on a closer look Lundell's lyrics stretch Romanticism to comply with a more contemporary sensibility, fostered by the late modern "experience society".

This concept, which connects to others such as the "experience industry", was introduced by the German sociologist Gerhard Schulze in his extensive 1992 study *Die Erlebnis-Gesellschaft. Kulturosoziologie der Gegenwart*. Schulze argues that the ties between taste, lifestyle and social class that Bourdieu penetrated in the 1970s have slackened under the assault of individualisation. In the experience society, the task is to *live* one's life; it is no longer enough merely to survive or do one's duty. Guided by his taste, self-reflexive, experience-oriented man strives to manipulate life in such a way that he "feels good". According to Schulze, this is a case of "inner modernisation". The project is essentially realized through choices, made easier by the fact that reality to a large extent offers itself already half-digested, schematized, worked through by the media.

Experience orientation means that something becomes real to the subject insofar as it conforms to its expectations. Thus the runes that trigger the semi-religious laying down of a wreath in "Öppna landskap" seem deprived of objective value. They are there, it says, not for somebody else's sake, but for ours – as objects of consumption. The reason for the gesture seems to be that it is "in style with" the semi-sublime landscape, that it "feels right". It is an entirely aesthetic gesture.

In Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (2000) there is a Heidegger-inspired discussion of what it means to inhabit a place (in this case planet Earth) and the ability of poetry to "bething" man so as to understand inhabiting from within. "An eco poet", comments Håkan Sandgren in an introductory article on eco- or green criticism, is to Bate "someone who creates a home, a residence" (2002:16, not 24). Of course, in a way this is exactly what Lundell does in "Öppna landskap", though hardly in Bate's sense. On the contrary: the lyrical subject is a symbolic colonialist, who can only breathe life into the topos/landscape by incorporating it. Lundell's landscape leaves no space for otherness of the kind that one encounters with Swedish poets like Harry Martinsson, Gunnar Ekelöf or Tomas Tranströmer. All there is is there "for our sake", for the sake of his majesty the ego. Lundell's open landscape is a logical fulfilment of the tradition of the Romantic "living gaze" and the symbolic violence that it legitimates.

Conclusions

It is time to sum up: to reconnect to Bhabha's distinction between pedagogical and performative nationalist discourse. In Lundell's way of writing the nation in "Öppna landskap", intentionally or not (I have avoided that kind of discussion), it is the pedagogical discourse that is most conspicuous. This discourse reminds "the people"/the audience of their national affinity by means of signifiants for "Swedishness" that are dug up from the soil of Romanticism and the agrarian society to serve the needs of a self-sufficient subject. Between now and the past, so it seems, there is a rather unproblematic continuity. However, on a closer look the pastoral idyll is revised by a performative effort that represents this idyll as contingent – momentary, eligible – and thus makes it contemporary. A paradox of this update is that as a representation of Swedishness it celebrates a reckless Bohemian individualism, which may be the stuff that dreams are made of, but hardly societies.

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Appendix: The lyrics of "Öppna landskap"⁶

Jag trivs bäst i öppna landskap
nära havet vill jag bo
några månader om året
så att själen kan få ro
Jag trivs bäst i öppna landskap
där vindarna får fart
Där lärkorna står högt i skyn
och sjunger underbart
Där bränner jag mitt brännvin själv
och kryddar med Johannesört
och dricker det med välbehag
till sill och hembakt vört
Jag trivs bäst i öppna landskap
nära havet vill jag bo

Jag trivs bäst i fred och frihet
för både kropp och själ
Ingen kommer i min närhet
som stänger in och stjälar
Jag trivs bäst när dagen bräcker
när fälten fylls av ljus

6 Swedish lyrics are reproduced as printed on the record sleeve. The English translation is my own.

När tuppar gal på avstånd
när det är långt till närmsta hus
Men ändå så pass nära
att en tyst och stilla natt
när man sitter under stjärnorna
kan höra festens skratt
Jag trivs bäst i fred och frihet
för både kropp och själ

Jag trivs bäst när havet svallar
och måsarna ger skri
När stranden fylls av snäckskal
med havsmusik uti
När det klara och det enkla
får råda som det vill
När ja är ja och nej är nej
och tvivlet tiger still
Då binder jag en krans av löv
och lägger den vid närmsta sten
där runor ristats för vår skull
en gång för länge sen
Jag trivs bäst när havet svallar
och måsarna ger skri

Jag trivs bäst i öppna landskap
nära havet vill jag bo

*

I feel best in open landscapes
By the sea I want to live
For a few months every year
So that my soul can get some rest
I feel best in open landscapes
Where winds are gaining speed
Where larks stand still high in the sky
And warble marvellously
There I distil snaps on my own
And spice it with St. John's wort bloom
And drink it with utmost delight
To herring and home-baked bread
I feel best in open landscapes
By the sea I want to live

I feel best when peace and freedom
Reign both in body and soul
There is no one living close to me
Who fences in and steals
I feel best when dawn's approaching
When fields are filled with light
When cocks are crowing somewhere

When it's far to the nearest house
But still no farther than you can
Hear laughter from some party
As you're sitting there under the stars
On a still and quiet night
I feel best when peace and freedom
Reign both in body and soul

I feel best when seas are surging
And the gulls are crying out
When the shore is filled by shells
That sound the music of the sea
When clear and simple things are let
Alone to do their job
When yes is yes and no is no
And doubt stays out of sight
Then I go make a wreath of leaves
And lay it down by the next stone
Where runes were cut for our sake
Once back in history
I feel best when seas are surging
And gulls are crying out

I feel best in open landscapes
By the sea I want to live