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In the Boiler Room of S/S Alma
A poem by Harry Martinson and the *Odyssey*

At home, in my bookshelf, I have two anthologies with poems, Swedish poems, about the sea. There are something between 150 and 200 different poems in the two volumes. You might expect that, in a country like Sweden, surrounded by sea on almost all sides, with extensive archipelagos outside a long coast (according to a recent estimate¹ Sweden has 221,800 islands and islets)—you might think that most inhabitants of such a country, including the poets, should have a personal relationship to the sea and be fairly familiar with ships, with boats and other things connected with marine life. But if you read through the two anthologies with that expectation you will be disappointed. The impression you get is that the normal way among Swedish poets to relate to the sea is to stand on the shore and look out over the water. There are remarkably few among the poems that presuppose that their authors have ever been in a boat on open water or walked the deck of a ship.

But there are a number of exceptions. One of them is the poem I shall discuss in the following.

If you are a classicist, as we are, it becomes your second nature to recognize allusions to classical literature or to classical myths in practically everything you read. If you look for such allusions in the Swedish poems about the sea, you are better rewarded than if you look for traces of seamanship; there are in fact a considerable number of classical allusions. Swedish poets seem to prefer reading classical poetry, rather than going to sea themselves. The *Odyssey* is mentioned several times, the names of Odysseus, Thetis and Zephyrus appear, the song of the Sirens is referred to. But on a closer look, you discover that those allusions mostly function only as some sort of artificial embellishments of the poems. They are more like conventional ornaments attached to the surface of the texts; they are not integrated with the poems.

But there are exceptions to that rule, too, and one of them is Harry Martinson's poem *Hårda år* ('Tough years').

The poem follows here. The English translation is my own; it was made without literary ambitions, and I fear it is totally devoid of poetic qualities.

¹ *Statistisk årsbok för Sverige 2006/Statistical Yearbook of Sweden 2006*, Stockholm 2005, p. 18.

Hårda år

Bättre tjäna dräng i underjorden
än som eldare på S/S Alma.
Vi var chartrade på apnötstraden,
Salum River, känner ni den floden?
Den går fram igenom heta saltträsk
och är själv tre gånger saltare
än det hav den giftigt ond går ut i
vid en punkt strax nord om Guinea.

S/S Alma strävade den vägen
sexton gånger mellan Dieppe och Kaolack.
Sexton gånger välvde Kaolacks öknar
sina ytterugnar över floden
där vi själv vid innerugnar sletto.

Oss om misskund tiggde själva järnen
när vi motsröms i kompakta hettor
övade vårt helvete i grunden.

Men vi stödde oss på starka njurar,
starka hjärtan och vårt hat till floden.
Rakt mot strömmen tog vi S/S Alma.
Att vi lever än är knappast sanning.
Men vi har ett sätt att le mot andra
spöklikt när de nämner apnötstraden.

Tough years

Better be a servant in the Nether World
than a stoker in S/S Alma.
We were chartered on the monkey-nut trade,
Saloum River, you know that river?
It runs through burning salt-marshes,
itself three times saltier than the ocean
it falls into, poisonously evil,
at a point just north of Guinea.

S/S Alma strove that way
sixteen times between Dieppe and Kaolack.
Sixteen times did Kaolack's deserts vault
their outside-furnaces above the river
where we were toiling at our inner furnaces.

Even the irons implored us for mercy
when, upstream in compacted heats,
we thoroughly rehearsed our Hell.

But we hinged on sturdy kidneys,
sturdy hearts and our hatred of the river.
Straight against the current we took S/S Alma.
That we are still alive is barely true.
But we have a way of smiling to others,
ghostly, when they bring up
the monkey-nut trade.

As you can see from the toponyms appearing in the poem, the scene is West Africa. If you look up Kaolack, e.g. in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, you will learn that Kaolack is a town in Senegal, situated on the right bank of the Saloum River, 150 km southeast of Dakar. It is an ocean and river port with an important export trade in peanuts (which are called 'monkey-nuts' in the poem) and salt. Dieppe, which is mentioned also, is of course the harbour city in Normandy, France.

The author of the poem, Harry Martinson (1904–1978), was one of the leading poets of Sweden in the twentieth century, member of the Swedish Academy since 1949 and eventually, in 1974, rewarded with the Nobel Prize. But he had a long way to go.²

² For a short but informative presentation of Martinson's life and work, cf. the Pegasos website (<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/harrymar.htm>).

Born in a rural region of south Sweden, he had a working-class background. When he was six, his father died, and shortly afterwards his mother deserted her seven children and went to America. The children were taken care of by the public welfare system, which hardly deserved to be qualified as ‘welfare’. His childhood certainly was tough.

When he was sixteen, he escaped from all this and went to sea. For the next ten years he lived an itinerant life in different parts of the world, including the southern hemisphere, taking on temporary jobs to earn his living or simply begging his way. On one occasion, for instance, he was arrested by the police in the city of Lund, close to the university, for begging and vagrancy. But for long periods he worked on board ships, as a deck-hand, as a coal-trimmer or as a stoker, and this poem was inspired by his experiences as a stoker.

Since most of us have no more experience of seamanship than the average Swedish poet, it is appropriate to explain what a stoker does in a ship. A stoker works in the boiler room of a coal-fired steamship. He is the one who feeds coal into the fire that is burning in the furnace. The furnace heats the water in the boiler and produces steam, and the steam keeps the engine running, so that the propeller turns and the ship moves forward.

In a ship there exists a hierarchy. The stokers were on one of the lowest levels in that scale. They were above the coal-trimmers and the kitchen-hands, but definitely below the engineers and the deck-hands, not to mention the cook. The Swedish word for ‘stoker’ (*eldare*) would be an insult, if used by a deck-hand about an engineer.

The stoker’s work was hard work. A coal-fired boiler consumes large amounts of coal, and coal is heavy stuff. Coal dust settled everywhere in the boiler room and contaminated the air. Many stokers contracted tuberculosis, as Martinson did himself, or other pulmonary diseases. The boiler room was also a hot working-place. The heat from the furnace could be quite pleasant in December, of course, if the ship was sailing in the Baltic or the North Atlantic, but if you are bringing the ship upstream in an African river with 40 centigrade outside, then the boiler room will inevitably assume a striking similarity to a *chambre séparée* in Hell.

And Hell, that is what Martinson compares it to. It is here the classical allusion comes in. I guess you have already identified it, in the first two lines of the poem. Martinson’s source of inspiration is the *Odyssey*, book 11, the visit of Odysseus to the Nether World, the realm of the Dead. Odysseus asks his former comrade Achilles about his situation, and Achilles answers (*Odyssey* 11.489–491):

βουλοίμην κ’ ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλω,
ἀνδρὶ παρ’ ἀκλήρῳ, ᾧ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἴη,
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.

I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another,
of some portionless man whose livelihood was but small,

rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished.

Translation: A.T. Murray (1919)

Hellre jag ute på landet som dräng ville slita för daglön
under en främling, som ingenting ärft, och som hade det fattigt,
än gå härnere som drott öfver hädansomnade alla.

Swedish translation: Erland Lagerlöf (1908)

Out of this Martinson makes:

Bättre tjäna dräng i underjorden
än som eldare på S/S Alma.

I quote these verses in Swedish so that it becomes clear that the substantive *dräng*, ‘farm-hand’, ‘servant’, occurs both in the *Odyssey* translation that Martinson is likely to have read and in his own poem. The Greek original has no substantive at all but a verb in the infinitive.

The parallelism is obvious. The rest of the poem makes it even more obvious. The travels of S/S Alma to Senegal are ranked equal with visits to the realm of the dead and, like Odysseus, Martinson’s stoker has returned alive from there.

But Martinson gives the comparison between life and death a new twist. Better a servant on earth than king in the kingdom of the dead, says Achilles. Martinson says: Better a servant among the dead than a stoker in S/S Alma. He prefers Hell to the boiler room of a steamer.

Other literary products of the period often paint quite a different image of the life at sea. In Swedish popular literature and popular songs the seaman’s life was often depicted in romantic colours. Many young Swedes were influenced by such descriptions and were, just like Martinson, encouraged to leave home and to try their luck at sea. Martinson knew that sort of literature, too, and had even tried his own hand in the genre. But in this poem he is not a romantic. The salt marshes around the Saloum River have no affinity with the exotic harbour towns that the sailors of the popular songs visited, the prospect of shovelling coal into the infernal fire of the boiler room was not what encouraged Martinson and other young Swedes to become sailors.

Martinson’s poem can be interpreted as a protest against the romanticizing tendencies in contemporary popular culture, when seamen and their life at sea and in the harbours were described. Possibly he had one particular song in mind. It is specifically known under the title *Eldarevalsens*, ‘Stoker’s Waltz’. Both text and music were composed by another great poet, Evert Taube (1890–1976), who was also a performing artist. Just like Martinson, he had personal experience as a seaman, but his poem is definitely a romantic transformation of the realities of the stoker’s life. It became immensely popular. In 1936 it appeared in print³ and was at the same time recorded with

³ Evert Taube, *Ultra marin*, Stockholm 1936. An earlier publication (in *Flickan i Havanna och ett par visor till*, Stockholm 1922) seems to have attracted little attention.

the composer himself as singer. In a few months two more recordings were put on the market, with other artists, and it retained its popularity for decades to come.⁴

Possibly, Martinson's poem was triggered by this 'Stoker's Waltz'. He published the poem in a book with the title *Nomad*, but it is included only in the second edition of the book, in 1943,⁵ not in the first edition of 1931. Between those years Taube's song had appeared and gained its popularity.

Seen in this context, Martinson's poem 'Tough Years' could be interpreted as a protest against current misrepresentations of the seamen's life in contemporary popular literature, and also as a protest against the miserable conditions under which seamen had to work—a piece of social realism counterbalancing the prevailing romanticism.

However, I do not think that 'social realism' is the proper label to be put on this poem if we want to give it a fair characterization; it does not tell the whole truth. And I think that precisely the reference to the *Odyssey* in the first lines provides an indication that should guide the readers to a different understanding of the poem. In this context it is appropriate to remind you that in the important document *Le venti tesi*, which was produced by Carlo Santini and his team at Perugia University as a summing up of the *raison d'être* of the ULISSE project, one of the entries states:

Spetta anche ai classicisti individuare e valutare l'ampiezza dei riferimenti alla classicità, anche impliciti, presenti nei prodotti culturali della letteratura, della saggistica, del teatro e del cinema.

It is also the responsibility of the classicists to identify and to evaluate the extent of references, also implicit, to classical antiquity, which are present in the cultural products of literature, non-fiction writings, theatre and cinema.

What I am trying to do here is to evaluate the relevance of a reference to an ancient literary work for the understanding of a contemporary piece of poetry.

In the 1950's the old Swedish translation of the *Odyssey*, the one that Martinson had read, was to be revised and modernized, and Martinson was contracted to write a short preface.⁶ In that preface he highlights two features of the *Odyssey*, which he evidently regards as crucial for assessing the true nature of the poem. One is the humour that pervades the whole poem. The other is the poem's character of a sailor's yarn; Martinson uses the Swedish word *skepparsaga* and speaks about a "skipper's exuberant imagination".

In his own poem, the opening reference to Homer—and the peculiar twist given there to Achilles' words—should be regarded as a warning to the reader: What follows

⁴ Recordings of the poem are listed in the discography *Svensk populärmusik: visor, barnvisor, schlager, underhållningsmusik, jazz*. Sammanställt av SKAP, Föreningen Svenska populärauktörer, Stockholm 1968, p. 137.

⁵ Harry Martinson, *Nomad*. Illustrerad av Torsten Billman, Stockholm 1943.

⁶ *Homeros' Odysseé*. Med företal av Harry Martinson; från grekiskan av Erland Lagerlöf; reviderad av Gerhard Bendz, Lund 1957.

is not to be taken entirely at face value, there is humour in it, and some of it may be the product of a stoker's exuberant imagination, possibly a fictional stoker's at that.

By the travesty of Achilles and the exaggeration it involves, the poet distances himself ironically from that macho-world in which the most exciting sea adventures take place and to which the skipper's tales belong. There are more details in the poem that point in the same direction and justify the classification of it as a skipper's tale. The devices of a subtle narrative technique that lends credibility to the improbable are exemplified by exotic geographical names that catch the imagination of the audience and by the deceptively precise indications of numbers and locations. Picturesque extravagancies also belong to the repertoire of a skilful storyteller, here exemplified by the iron tools that become articulate and beg the humans for mercy and by S/S Alma's sixteen-fold visit to the Nether World (Odysseus (or Aeneas, or Dante, for that matter) was there only once).

In the midst of all this the word for 'truth' (*sanning*) suddenly shows up, qualified—possibly ironically—by the adverb 'barely'.

But they get out of this, the stoker and his comrades, as boastful sailors always do, in this case thanks to their excellent interior organs,⁷ plus a justified hatred of their hard work and the environment that necessitated it.

And if you have been through sixteen visits to Hell, you will of course have a particular way of smiling at those who *never* visited the place, those who were *not* initiated, the other ones, those who unwittingly, in *your* presence, start talking about this monkey business.

When we listen to this stoker's tale, we should imagine ourselves in the position of King Alkinoos and his court on the island of Scheria. Just as the Phaeacians listened that night when Odysseus told them of his visit to the Nether World, we should listen to this sailor. He is broad-shouldered from shovelling innumerable tons of coal into his blazing furnace, just as Odysseus was broad-shouldered.⁸ But no Athena has poured grace and beauty over him.⁹ His emaciated face bears the signs of tuberculosis, his hands are callous and every line on them is marked in black with ingrained coal-dust. But he knows how to tell a tale, and we know that we should not believe every word of it.

⁷ Carlo Santini points out to me a possible parallel in Archilochus, who describes a reliable comrade as 'full of heart' (frg. 114.4 West καρδίας πλέως). The combination 'kidneys (or 'reins', as older translations have it) and hearts' to denote the essence of a person occurs in the Bible, e.g., *Revelation* 2.23 ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἐραυνῶν νεφροῦς καὶ καρδίας, from where Swedish has the idiom *rannsaka hjärtan och njurar* 'to examine hearts and kidneys', which was certainly known to Martinson. Cf. also *Psalms* 7.10, 26.2, *Jeremiah* 11.20, 17.10, 20.12).

⁸ *Iliad* 3.194 εὐρύτερος δ' ὤμοισιν ἰδὲ στέρνοισιν ἰδέσθαι.

⁹ As she did for Odysseus before he met with the Phaeacians: *Odyssey* 6.229–235.