
Ironins skiftningar – jagets förvandlingar: Om romantisk ironi och subjektets paradox i texter av P. D. A. Atterbom
Shiftings of irony – transformations of the self: on romantic irony and the paradox of the subject in the works of Swedish romanticist P. D. A. Atterbom

By Katarina Båth

Skrifter utgivna av litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen vid Uppsala universitet 48

Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2017

328 pp., SEK 293.00

Of all the gestures, practices, ideas, and concepts of the romantic legacy, romantic irony is one of the most fascinating which more than 200 years of literary, philosophical, and scholarly engagement with it can testify to. Thus, it is an interesting and bold task which Katarina Båth has taken on in her dissertation on the Swedish romantic P. D. A. Atterbom. She aims not only to demonstrate the relevance of romantic irony for this particular poet and thinker, but also to show the continued subversive potential of romantic irony today.

Atterbom has had a mixed reception. From being the acknowledged leader of the new romantic school in Sweden, a provocateur and a renewer of Swedish poetry, his fame dropped, and he has often been regarded as a difficult, conservative, and simply less interesting poet. Although his work has attracted not a few academic researchers through the years, it cannot be compared with the attention devoted to the more modern, radical, *and* ironic works of E. J. Stagnelius and C. J. L. Almqvist.

Båth's entry into the discussion on romantic irony is a relatively swift revisiting of the main sources (contemporary and later philosophers and scholars) for understanding how the German thinkers and writers negotiated irony, humour, and satire, adding a few Swedish representatives and, of course, Atterbom's ideas. The definition that Båth extracts from this combines a deconstructive interpretation with a feminist ethics grounded in psychoanalytical and feminist theories (Julia Kristeva, Jessica Benjamin). Båth thus understands romantic irony as a dialectical search for the self in the other, and the other in the self, creating a space of in-between which allows for differences as well as understanding and communication, at the same time liberating the subject from a patriarchal linguistic position (p. 55). While this is formulated quite explicitly, it is less clearly shown to what extent Atterbom's theoretical and literary writing, or which parts of it, may be subsumed under it.

For Atterbom, romantic irony is the gap between the theatre god Dionysus and his mask, according to Båth, and this becomes a powerful image throughout the study. In chapter two, we learn that the image is derived from Atterbom's study of C. M. Bellman in *Svenska siare och skalder* VI:1 (Uppsala: Lundequist, 1852), but the presentation is so concise that it is difficult to understand the context, how the metaphor came into being and what status it had in his thinking. A look at the section from which the quote on p. 61 is taken, shows that when Atterbom used the word 'mask', he was referring to the style or poetics, which was available to Bellman as a Swedish poet at a certain time (the reign of king Gustav III). Atterbom did not use the word 'gap', but 'contrast' and imagined the mask as oscillating between opaqueness and transparency. In Bellman's case, one should not be fooled by the mask, Atterbom wrote, for his songs are in contact with the divine principles from the Dionysian festivals, and the mask 'is idealised by, or it truly becomes the god's mask, by the fact that, at the same time as it everywhere parodies itself, it is made a transparent cover for the higher being, who amuses himself by revealing himself through the very contrast between himself and his disguise' (p. 89). It is quite reasonable to link this argument to Atterbom's views on the drama, and to see in it an illustration of the workings of romantic irony, such as Båth does, but it would have been even more persuasive, had the argument been more developed. Overall, this part of the dissertation spurs curiosity: were Atterbom's views really variations on the same theme, or did they develop and change over time? In short, a closer and more detailed discussion of Atterbom's theoretical work would have been helpful.

The remaining chapters are readings of selected, but central, parts of Atterbom's literary work in an almost chronological order. In the cycle of poems from the early 1810s, *Blommorna* [The flowers] (revised and enlarged in the 1820s and 1830s), Båth sees an opening from a male poet's objectifying and eroticizing gaze on the (often female) flowers towards more equal communication and co-creation, which is partly brought about by the self-reflective meta-poetical game. Chapter four is dedicated to the satire against the 'old' school of poetry in Sweden, *Rimmarbandet* [The rhymesters' gang] (1810), which is compared to Tieck's *Der gestiefelte Kater* [Puss in boots]. Båth notices a reactionary, conservative trait in both these works, which is only countered by a self-critical ambivalence against the satirical mode by the end of the play.

Chapter five provides an interesting reading of Atterbom's closet drama, *Lycksalighetens ö* [The island of felicity] (1824–1827), which – in short – elaborates on the ironic dialectics between a romantic longing for poetry-as-the-absolute and the illusory-fictive character of the same. Båth manages to bring new details to light in a work that has been the attention of much previous research, both concerning the play with gender, and the role of history. The liberation from patriarchal structures, according to Båth's reading, is inscribed in the ironic im-

perative to the reader to re-read and re-enact the story. But the patriarchal tragedy is also reproduced 'on one level', Båth states (p. 175). This argument is underdeveloped: which level, and (how) does it all add up?

In the sixth and last chapter, Båth views the different published and unpublished fragments of the fairy play *Fågel blå* [Blue bird] as a processual work. It starts out as a nostalgic, regressive idyll in the published fragments 1814, moves through a more aggressive, but also liberatingly humoristic and carnivalesque, masquerade in the 1818 prose sketch, to a more mature ability on Atterbom's behalf in the last manuscript (both posthumously published 1858), to laugh at his own as well as the world's flaws and invite the reader to not only finish the work, but also to implement love as 'something one does', as Båth puts it (p. 292). This chapter brings forth the richness of the *Fågel blå* material, and Båth's reading of the theatrical play, shape shifting, lies, misunderstandings etc. in the 1818-version is particularly intriguing.

Inspired by Susan J. Wolfson's, Cecilia Sjöholm's, and Julie Ellison's research, Båth is careful not to jump to conclusions about stereotypical masculinity and femininity in (male) romantic poetry. Instead, she seems determined to bring out (or create) the productive or even edifying (in a modern sense) sides of Atterbom's work corresponding to her vision of romantic irony. Through this, she succeeds in bringing out new sides of Atterbom's work, not least how the variety of female characters and figures creates a more open negotiation of femininity (or the female Other), than has been noticed before. Båth is an attentive reader. At the same time, there is a utopian energy in her readings, and occasionally the work slips into a more normative mode, arguing how we all should understand fantasy, identity, and love.

In the work as a whole, I sense an underlying ambivalence as to what kind of operation Båth is performing: Is it to demonstrate that romantic irony was a central aspect in Atterbom's work, or to use it as a reading strategy, or both? The study appears to start out as an experiment to see just how modern and subversive Atterbom might become in a strong reading, which would 'challenge the patriarchal, romantic structures of desire in his work' (p. 16) and 'open the text to other ways of being' (p. 19), and it ends up concluding that the modern traits were actually his.

Båth's revelations of more modern sides of Atterbom's thinking and writing practices are both convincing and important on a general level, although I do have some reservations and unresolved questions, as indicated. The reservations are more due to the vagueness of the argument than to the overall interpretation. Some of the unresolved questions are: what is the relation between the patriarchal structures of desire and the gender-transgressive, critical wrestling with the self that Båth detects in Atterbom's work? What does it actually mean, that the chosen texts move beyond unequal and patriarchal identity pat-

terns? It would have been interesting if the concluding arguments had more thoroughly and critically picked up the questions and premises Båth started from: why has Atterbom not been considered as a deeply ironic poet before, and how do these readings alter our image of him as a romantic writer and of Swedish romanticism as a whole?

To balance a historical reading with a contemporary agenda is always as precarious as it is inescapable. Katarina Båth's dissertation is a testimony of the continued attraction and relevance of romantic irony, both its mourning and its liberating playfulness. It is also a testimony to the richness of the romantic texts that enact and produce romantic irony, as they open themselves to the needs and wishes of different times.

(All translations from Båth's book into English are by the reviewer.)

Gunilla Hermansson
University of Gothenburg