

Isles of Felicity

Crossings of Poetry, Religion and Eroticism in Danish and Swedish Romanticism

[Lyksalighedens Øer. Møder mellem poesi, religion
og erotik i dansk og svensk romantik]

**By Gunilla Hermansson. Göteborg & Stockholm:
Makadam förlag, 2010. 352 pp. SEK ca 280**

The dream of faraway islands – exotic worlds beyond the horizon – represents within Romanticism the longing for a higher realm, whether it be religious, poetic or erotic. In her book, Hermansson explores such islands in the works of two Swedish and three Danish Romantics: C. J. L. Almqvist (1793–1866), P. D. A. Atterbom (1790–1855), B. S. Ingemann (1789–1862), J. L. Heiberg (1791–1860), and H. C. Andersen (1805–1875). At the outset, the author declares how the felicity islands function simultaneously as myth, adventure, and cliché. It is a literary motif associated with wish-fulfilment and it also deals with the problem of representation.

Although my initial response – as I skimmed through the different chapters' subheadings – was one of surprise that the word 'island' was not more predominant, it soon becomes apparent that the guiding theme behind the islands of this book is poetry itself. The seven chapters are entitled 'The Dream', 'The Vision', 'The Tragedy', 'The Repetition', 'The Comedy', 'The Fall', and 'The Dreams'

Parade', and it is obvious that Hermansson has put much thought into her outline and selection of authors and texts, the result being that they form a neat archipelago of Romantic texts. This archipelago constitutes a dialogue on Romantic poetry and its hopes, dreams, and achievements as well as its ironies and failures.

The first chapter, after the introduction, takes off in a discussion of Almqvist's theoretical views on the connection between religion and sexual desire. He was influenced by Swedenborg and Moravian thinking, and the connection to the theme of islands becomes clear when Hermansson turns to Almqvist's *Guldfogel i Paradis* (1821, 1849) and *Murnis* (1819, printed 1845, 1850). In *Guldfogel*, a monk is infatuated and captured for a thousand years by the song from a bird of paradise. His story evokes a similar longing in the hearts of two siblings, and they in turn are lured into their own 'islands'. Hermansson's interpretation of *Guldfogel* precedes a discussion of Almqvist's understanding of symbol and allegory; Almqvist

is torn between 1) a stalwart and optimistic view on the ability of literature to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, and 2) a more modern critique of language and representation. In the discussion of *Murnis* – a religious epos on couples who face death and reunite in the spirit world – Hermansson demonstrates how the tension described above takes the form of a metapoetic circle structure in the work. It is a Romantic-ironic structure, in which numinous poetry interferes in the earthly world, and inscribes the reader in its circle. Jakob Staberg's Kittler-inspired reading of Almqvist is rejected here to favour instead Almqvist's own explanations and theories. Hermansson sees Almqvist's vision of poetry as didactic. He is seen to use poetry as a means to unite separate worlds, and to dignify sexuality. But his writing is also ironic, and this leads to a schizophrenic poetics in which a critique of representation exists parallel to an optimistic faith in poetry.

The Atterbom chapter is focused on the 'tragedy of poetry', which refers to his *Lycksalighetens Ö* (1824–1827). Here Hermansson's reading has much to recommend it; I think it definitely adds something important to prior interpretations of Atterbom's work, since she moves away from other critics' way of discussing the work principally from the viewpoint of Astolf, the male protagonist. In that older reading, Astolf is the active subject, the human poet/traveller to the island of felicity, and Felicia, the 'queen of poetry', the desired object of beauty, and symbol of the lure of art. Hermansson's reading instead highlights

the uncertainty between the two, thereby recognising the hermeneutic love circle and dialectic movement their union represents, and in which it is uncertain who is active and who is passive, who is a living subject and who is an object of beautiful art. Her interpretation thus focuses on the exchange between worlds, which is commendable. It turns Atterbom's fairy play into more of a story of an eternal becoming rather than a mere tragic longing for the unattainable. To me, this also opens up ways of reading Atterbom that emphasise his more modern side. Among the existing critical interpretations of Atterbom's island, Hermansson mainly engages in dialogue with Otto Fischer's discussion of symbol and allegory in *Lycksalighetens Ö* (1998). She contends that Atterbom invokes the problem of irony in *Lycksalighetens Ö*, and obstinately tries to solve it.

The Ingemann chapter nicely builds on and develops the Atterbom discussion, and it is now obvious that much is gained by comparing these different Romantic works that all in their different ways circle back and forth to the 'magic island' of poetry. Ingemann's 'repetitive journey' takes both a positive and a negative turn. In his *Sphinxen*, the play between allegory and symbol becomes a play between belief and lunacy. What happens when the poet is made God of the world of art he has created? And who can say that this God-like poet is nothing but a puppet hanging in the strings of another poet? Questions such as these are evoked by Hermansson's reading of Ingemann, which brought Romantic masculinity

to mind. Though a gender perspective could perhaps have been introduced and discussed here, I still find Hermansson's metapoetic reading highly rewarding. *Sphinxen* shows how writing, just like love, is the ability to be in, and tolerate, the paradox of uncertainty. *Huldre-Gaverne*, which is discussed next, is the Romantic-ironic story of Ole Navnløs who inherits his mother's clear sight/lunacy. With this split vision he searches for his identity as a poet. Here Hermansson relates to the Fichtean Subject, and shows how the demonic is inscribed in Ingemann's literary universe in order to be conquered. Ingemann's inscription of himself as the fictitious publisher of *Huldre-Gaverne* becomes a paradoxical way to show that he is the master of his work, even though the work itself questions if one can ever trust or master the visions one is given. *Holger Danske* (1837), finally, is a story where the circle movement appears, at first glance, to be more harmonic. But, as hero and story, Holger has a double-status, and Hermansson shows how this double-status forces the narrative to repeat itself over and over in order to believe in itself.

Next up is Heiberg, the Hegelian, whose 'comedy of poetry' forms an opposite to Atterbom's tragedy. His *Fata Morgana* (1838) is a philosophical drama in a speculative-dialectic and Calderón-inspired style. The fairy Morgana here represents the destructive power to fool the sight, while the hero Clotaldo fights all the false appearances. In Clotaldo's singing, poetry and love mirror and acknowledge each other. With the beloved comes poetry (speech and song) and with

poetry comes love – not as an illusion, but as a spiritual power for self-realisation. Hermansson shows how Heiberg uses true and false circles to illustrate the double, precarious nature of the poetic image. Does it, like Morgana, merely reflect the earthly, or is it, like Clotaldo's singing, an act of love bringing the ideal back to itself? Love is made the first condition here; the poet must love nature to free it from longing, and thus Heiberg's comedy has a 'happy ending'.

Hans Christian Andersen, finally, is somewhat more torn in his view on art. In her reading of Andersen, Hermansson discusses 'The Garden of Paradise', 'Auntie Toothache', 'The Phoenix Bird', *The Improvisatore*, and 'Poetry's California'. The recurring theme here is the double-bind of poetry. In other words, can poetry establish a bridge to the divine, or will it collapse in subjective self-immersion? The analysis of 'The Garden of Paradise' focuses on the double desire after knowledge and erotic pleasure, and here Hermansson turns to Friedrich Kittler's theory about the importance of the mother's voice for the development of a poet. Andersen is at once ironic and sincere here: instead of turning the desire after the mother's voice into sublimation, the desire in earthly poetry makes sublimation impossible. A fall is unavoidable and catastrophic, and poetry's ability to soar to heaven remains a mere possibility.

What is it that captures us, when the poet sings? And how can one speak about the unspeakable? The idea of a happy island – whether as a paradise of ideal turned real here

and now, or as a mere guidepost to the true heaven – is a central and capable motif for all the five Romantic authors in Hermansson's book. They all place their islands within a circular structure that captures the Christian ideal, but also enables a more modern, fragmented view. Poetry is the main force behind this circle, and it can be compared to erotic fulfilment, religious mystery, and philosophical insight in the context of these authors. Still, the islands of poetic bliss are always somewhat hazy – are they real or just a mirage on the horizon? For Hermansson, the central question of these islands is if they express a Romantic yearning to escape reality, or if they should rather be seen as a 'more real' reality, one with the power to change life and the world as we know it? This is the question that connects these authors. And they all, in different ways, answer this question with an ambivalent 'yes-and-no', according to Hermansson. She sees the islands as places for self-critical showdowns with idealism, but also as attempts to solve the problem of poetry. There are several parodic, satiric islands, which shows how deeply seated the motif was in Romantic thinking, and also how closely intertwined pathos and parody were in the period.

All these islands are metapoetic stories that stress their own limitations as stories; they can only speak about eternity from an ironic standpoint, through the circularity of their own narrative. In her final chapter, 'The Dreams' Parade', Hermansson summarises and compares her five authors. The comparisons highlight and develop the discussion. For in-

stance, Hermansson elaborates on how Almqvist and Atterbom differed in terms of their irony, and on how Almqvist and Ingemann are related in their religious, uncompromising mode; the latter similarity is a product of their shared insistence that a real transcendence between the numinous and the human can take place. This is the case also for Heiberg, although his mode is more comic. Atterbom and Andersen then stand as the two more discouraged Romantics, since theirs are stories of antiheroes failing to create a poetic-erotic heaven of synthesis. Finally, Almqvist and Andersen are the two most obviously modern Romantics.

Even though all these authors are holding on to the dream about poetry as a bridge to the ideal, they still in various ways react to the different tendencies and trends of their time. With the societal changes in the 1830s and '40s, new requirements of a more political, realistic literature were raised. From this perspective the Romantic islands are self-critical re-evaluations of the relation between the ideal and the real. Hermansson argues that the Romantic islands from the mid- to later phases of Romanticism are more than just 'reverberation'-literature. Rather, they are examples of a literature that repeats the Romantic dream over and over in relation to the changes in society around them. Some of these islands therefore are also utterances in the political debate between conservative Romanticism and liberalism.

By exploring the line of 'felicity islands' in the first half of the nineteenth century, Hermansson thus

traces a Romanticism that has a longer, more sustained history than the traditional understanding of the period. Hers is a more self-critical Romanticism and one that questions its own ideals. The connection is here made to earlier attempts (both Danish and Swedish) to rewrite the period of Romanticism. Asbjorn Aarseth's and Horace Engdahl's enlarged and renewed notions of Romanticism from the 1980s are mentioned, as well as Wallheim's view from 2007 that the important break of the period is the political one between conservatism and liberalism. My impression is that Hermansson synthesises a newer, more text-focused way of reading Romantic literature, with the Romantic self-understanding built into the texts. By choosing to study a Romantic literary motif – the island – as both a textual structure and a romantic idea, Hermansson bridges the gap between the focus on Romanticism as text dominant in the 1980s, and the Romantic authors' own self-critical attempts to define the limitations of their poetry.

While her readings, as I have tried to summarise above, are concerned with the ability of poetry to bridge the gap between the real and ideal, Hermansson takes her point of departure in the historical prerequisites for a Romantic movement in Sweden and Denmark, and ends with a contemporary discussion of Romanticism as a concept of literary history. Thus she creates her own circle from the real, historical conditions for these authors, to their ideal, poetical worlds and back to our contemporary reality of writing literary history about

them. Except for the brief dialogue with the media theorist Friedrich Kittler, Hermansson's tendency is generally to turn to the thinking and world-views of the authors themselves when she discusses their literary texts. This keeps the works she analyses within a paradigm of Romantic self-understanding. Her examinations are accomplished and persuasive, but they also show how these Romantic texts point beyond their own time and towards later notions of literary subjectivity. The lack of a discussion of this I find somewhat regrettable. When Hermansson writes, in her English summary, '[t]he "isles of felicity" are not mere echoes of something past, they insist, each in their own manner on the continual relevance of a Romantic notion of poetry's sacred realm and high potential'. I can't help wishing she would have elaborated more on this 'continual relevance'. The parallels between Romantic and postmodern understandings of literature and subjectivity are well-known, and I would have liked the inclusion of a dialogue with the critical tradition that links Romanticism with contemporary (language-oriented) psychoanalytical and gender theory. But Hermansson's work is impressive, despite what can be said against it, in its scope and ability to oscillate between driven, in-depth analyses and a general view where central tendencies are outlined.

To sum up, this is definitely a great comparative study of a motif that is at the heart of Romanticism. Hermansson has put together literary texts that really start resonating in each other (and in you, as reader) as

the analyses unfold. She has an eye for details in the various works, and taken together these details evoke a clear image of the ironic and self-critical feature of Scandinavian Romanticism. Her archipelago of analyses will certainly serve as an important source of knowledge and inspiration for current and future scholars and students of Romanticism. I also find Hermansson's way of engaging in dialogue with earlier criticism responsible and proficient. She manages to balance a desirable respect for former research with a driven discernment that keeps the focus on her problem.

Much is also gained from Hermansson's choice to write literary history that moves between and beyond our national islands and language borders. Although Atterbom is often unfairly treated in Swedish literary history, Hermansson's study shows how *Lycksalighetens Ö* still towers over other works as the most 'important and influential monument of poetry about poetry in Nordic romanticism'.

Katarina Båth
Uppsala University