Susan C. Brantly

History as Resistance

The Swedish Historical Novel and Regional Identity. Sara Lidman versus Per Anders Fogelström

A common history is a vital component in the formation of group identity. Groups tend to constitute themselves by agreeing upon a common narrative, either mythical or historical, which describes how the group came into being. Such narratives of emergence need not remain constant. Competing narratives may vie for prominence. Political speeches generally consist of an attempt to interpret the group narrative in such a way that only one course of future action seems possible. To draw on a recent example from American history, the gist of George Bush's speeches before the Gulf War can be irreverently summed up as follows: "We are historically the global good guys and, therefore, we have to save Kuwait from the bad guys." A competing narrative might have examined the United States' history of questionable interventions in the affairs of sovereign nations, and the implied future action would have been quite different. Narratives of emergence are almost unavoidably political. These processes have been characterized by David Carr in his book *Time, Narrative, and History* (1986).

In American criticism during the past decade or so, there has arisen a group generally referred to as the New Historicists. This critical movement has been recently described by Brook Thomas in his book from 1991, *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics*. The New Historicists have reacted against the ahistoricism of the deconstructionists, at the same time that they have learned a great deal from the deconstructionists with regard to the repressions of monological discourse. Much of the critical activity of the New Historicists consists of combating "official, monological histories by listening to voices that have been repressed or marginalized." (Thomas, 37). Thus, these critics tend to be interested in the stories of ethnic minorities, women, and colonized countries. Their aim is to achieve a cultural poetics, and thus, they frequently do not restrict their attentions to literature, but also examine other cultural manifestations. The following analysis focuses on historical novels, but I intend to draw upon what I have learned from the New Historicists in order to discuss marginalized versus central literature. I will use Sara Lidman's railway epic (1977-1985) as my primary example, and refer to Per Anders Fogelström's Stockholm series (1960-68) as an illuminating counter-example.

Fogelström's books have been used in Swedish school rooms to teach history, a sign that they have successfully come to represent at least a part of the master narrative of modern Sweden.[1] According to the sample of libraries examined by Sveriges Författarfond in 1990, Fogelström's books had been borrowed 178,472 times to Sara Lidman's 17,374. According to Bonniers marketing department, Lidman's five-volume series has sold a very respectable 178,000 books. (For this figure each book in the series is counted separately, both hard cover and paperback.) The comparable statistic for Fogelström's five-volume Stockholm series is an astounding 1,406,000. Although it may be dangerous to draw conclusions from these statistics, it seems that a clear majority of readers prefers Fogelström's narrative of emergence over Lidman's. I would argue that Fogelström's historical novels

lie at the center of Sweden's self-perception, whereas Lidman's novels constitute a voice from the margin.

From an American perspective, Per Anders Fogelström's Stockholm series appears, at first glance, to recover the history of a marginalized group: the urban working class. Fogelström is writing in opposition to the monological histories of Sweden which deal only with battles and kings and neglect the plight of the common man. However, the situation is indeed more complex than that. Fogelström has created a compelling narrative of emergence. The group he traces certainly begins as a repressed and marginalized group within society, but by the end of the narrative, the working class and the Social Democratic Party that represents it have become dominant cultural forces.

It is a common observation of the New Historicists that marginalized discourse tends to appropriate existing structures and concepts from dominant groups. Fogelström has chosen a narrative stance very close to that of a nineteenth-century historian. Although Fogelström uses the license of fiction to create characters and enter into their thoughts, he has insisted on rigorous historical research to confirm the details of his narrative. He once claimed to an interviewer: "Jag skriver historia, vill ha fram så mycket som möjligt av fakta, hela sanningen." (Vejde) Fogelström is known to have 120 meters of bookshelves filled with Stockholm lore. There is something of a "truth pact" between Fogelström and his readers. We are supposed to trust him. Fogelström does what he can to court the Barthean "reality effect" characteristic of both historical discourse and realist fiction.

Fogelström has appropriated the discourse of the historical school which originally participated in the repression of the urban working class. The story of the urban proletariat was generally omitted in nineteenth-century history books. Fogelström's novels become a master narrative themselves by providing the newly dominant working class with a narrative of emergence, written in the diction of recognized dominant narratives. The underdog has won and begun its own power discourse. We have a history of the victors.

Another truism of the New Historicism is that any creation of a new history involves an act of repression. No history can ever be comprehensive, so some things must be left out, therefore repressed. In Fogelström's case, the repression is achieved through synecdoche, the part is taken for the whole. The history of the urban working class in Stockholm becomes the history of Sweden. Although Fogelström is quite specific that he is merely writing a chronicle of Stockholm, the overwhelming impression the series creates is that we are reading a history of Sweden as a nation. It is perhaps because of the urban bias of our modern age that the history of the capital city can become conflated with the history of a country. In any case, Fogelström's Stockholm series provides a story which supports Social-Democratic politics and reinforces the idea that Stockholm is Sweden.

By contrast, Sara Lidman's railway epic is a voice from the margin which can serve to shake our perception of the dominant narratives of Sweden. New Historicism draws much of its energy from the collective guilt of the colonizing countries. At first glance, Sweden would appear to have escaped such guilt. Its days as an empire are long since over, and it is internationally renowned for its solicitous concern for countries that have been victims of colonization. It is Sara Lidman's provocative insight in her railway novels that the behavior of "the real Sweden" towards Norrland has greatly resembled the behavior of the industrial countries currently exploiting the Third World's resources. The inhabitants of Norrland became dependent on luxury items, so they had to sell their resources to afford them. The money made from the resources of Norrland was not and has not been reinvested there.

Lidman's railway epic is not a traditional narrative of emergence. It accounts for why conditions are they way they are, but it is not a history of the victors. Lidman's story is one of progressive exploitation. Lidman's own interest in colonized populations and marginalized groups far predates the New Historicism. In 1971, Lars Bäckström described Lidman's recent literary activity with words that might have been taken from a New His-

toricist essay: "As an act of resistance she attempts to save and interpret the suppressed language of those without influence." (250) At that time, Lidman had abandoned fiction for documentary works, since in her eyes, political realities had far outstripped fiction. Sara Lidman's choice to return to fiction and write a historical suite about Norrland is no less politically motivated. Not only is she giving voice to a marginalized population, but she is also writing a history in opposition to the master narratives of Sweden which suggest steady positive progress. History becomes resistance.

In her novels, Lidman sets up a clear contrast between Norrland and "the real Sweden". They do not share the same culture, language, or history. Lidman makes this point amusingly in *Din tjänare hör* when she tells the story of how Gossen Östen stole his horse back from the enemy:

> *Det hette att Schwarje led nederlag i det där kriget. Att hela Finland gick förlorat. Men så vitt Gamnoret fattade var Fienden besegrad och överlistad för tid och evighet av Hembygdens Sån, den oförvägne Gåssen Östen.* (45)

The historical loss of Finland meant nothing to the inhabitants of this village, but the loss of their horses would have been a resounding defeat. The laws that are made in Stockholm seem absurd in Norrland. In that harsh climate, the residents are not legally entitled to hunt and to fish in the so-called "endless" forests. The irrepressible Nicke views the laws of Sweden as a joke and is something of a local hero for it. The railway that slowly encroaches upon the area is actually a long iron shackle that will enslave the region. In the end, even Didrik is ensnared by the laws of Sweden, shackled in iron mined from the region, and transported away by the train. (*Jernkronan*, 32)

Unlike Fogelström, Lidman does not adopt the discourse of the power center she opposes. This applies to both narrative structure and language. Whereas Fogelström uses a straightforward realistic prose purged of dialect, Lidman chooses to write predominantly in dialect. Lidman allows her characters the dignity of speaking in their own voices, and she thoughtfully provides glossaries for those of us who might have some trouble with the vocabulary. Lidman's use of dialect is not a device of exclusion, rather, it is an act of resistance against a power center which has deemed a certain sort of language to be literary. Lidman coaxes forth the poetry of dialect and everyday speech, as when she sets off in her text an advertisement for a lost horse, which has all the force of a love poem.

> *en grå fläck hafver min häst*
> *på högra käkbenet*
> *som om fyra kronor av selver*
> *vore lagda där*
> *huvom ruvom.*
>
> (*Din tjänare hör*, 63-4)

Language is a major theme in the books themselves. Didrik's road to power in his own community is paved with power words he learns from Holmgren, who speaks like this:

> *Om jag händelsevis skulle sova middag, utarbetad av ålliganden som jag är, gå bara in i salen och fördriv tiden med att läsa. Och lär dig stava. Ditt svenska modersmål. Något som du kommer att få använding för.*
> (*Vredens barn*, 12)

Here Holmgren implies directly that Didrik's language is imperfect Swedish, and that mastery of that language will be a useful tool for him. Didrik's acquisition of this power language runs parallel to his gradual corruption by the power center he comes to represent, and is, in turn, betrayed by.

Lidman also rejects other hallmarks of historical discourse. R.G. Collingwood insists that histories must be fixed in terms of time and place. (Gossman, 30) With regard to

place, the proximity of Lillvattnet to Skellefteå gives us an idea of its location, even though Lillvattnet does not occur on any map. In terms of time, the dates in Lidman's railway epic occur only sporadically, but the reader knows that events take place during the final decades of the 1800s. Such features represent more than the imprecision of literary discourse. The people about whom the saga is written treat time differently. Time is reckoned in seasons and events. For example, the time of Anna-Stavas encounter with the beggar in the baking hut is fixed as: "En vårnatt under andra hungeråret." (*Din tjänare hör*, 129) The measuring of mechanical time seems foreign to the locals. Even Didrik once exclaims: "Som om alla fem-minuters-sträckor vore jämnlånga!" (*Nabots sten*, 44) Spadar-Abdon's inability to cope with time as it is measured out in "the real Sweden" results in forgery and ruin: "Abdon Karlssons förhållande till tiden är ett kapitel för sig. Hans lånande av sina grannars namn var ett försök att låna tid hellre än penningar." (*Den underbare mannen*, 199). Lidman's history of these people attempts to capture their own sense of time and history, which is different from the time and history of "the real Sweden."

Lidman has not composed a linear chronicle. The local history of the region is largely anecdotal, and Lidman's narrative pauses and lingers over the anecdotes. Many of these anecdotes then become a part of living speech. In honor of the woman who fell off a plank, that plank is forevermore called KalOlaMoraFlättarSpången, and everyone who passes over it tells a story about her. (*Din tjänare hör*, 74) Similarly, the story of the woman who spent the winter under the ice and floated back up again becomes the source of husbandly admonishments: "Du må då se dig för s'att du inte vaal sittande under isen som den där queijna!" (*Den underbare mannen*, 15) History and folklore are one in this community. The local history is imbedded in place names and figures of speech, which would have lost their context and flavor in a traditional history.

Lidman's narrative stance is not that of the omniscient historian who floats somewhere above her subject. The narrator of Lidman's novels limits herself to the temporal horizons of her characters. She can read into their thoughts and can analyze their actions better than they can, but she does not abandon their point of view. When Didrik visits Skellefteå in *Vredens barn*, the city seems strange to the reader because it is seen through Didrik's eyes. He compares everything to what he knows: the carved railing in the store reminds him of the minister's pulpit; the glass carafes are like women he knows at home; none of the row-boat women, he notes, are smaller than Ida, one of Anna-Stava's sisters (94-7). Lidman seeks to achieve maximum identification between her readers and her characters and relies on the reader's empathy with her characters, rather than insisting on her own authority as historian.

As Roland Barthes has pointed out in his famous essay, traditional historical discourse excludes any references to the author. (Barthes, 148). In *Din tjänare hör*, Lidman writes herself into the narrative as the author Sara, who self-reflectively responds to a critical voice suggesting she is getting away from her main point. Sara cannot resist telling the story of Gossen Östen: "Men bara den här lilla rövarhistorien om Dikriks farfar. Östen? Så ska jag ge Didrik lösa tyglar!" (43) It is interesting to note that Lidman does not repeat this intrusion after the first volume. In subsequent volumes, the resulting effect is the same as in traditional historical discourse: events take center stage, not the narrator.

Stories of emergence create a group identity. Lidman's railway epic gives Norrland an identity as a historical entity, without subsuming it into the master narratives of Sweden. She has broken with the conventions of historical writing in order to preserve the uniqueness of discourse from the margin. Her tale shakes the ruling perception that Stockholm represents all of the geographical area we know as Sweden. It challenges the image of Sweden as being, relatively speaking, morally and politically superior to other industrialized nations. Her history serves as a corrective against Swedish complacency. In Lidman's hands, history is resistance.

Notes

1. For a detailed study of Per Anders Fogelström's Stockholm series, see this author's article, "Testing the Boundary between History and Literature: Per Anders Fogelström's Stockholm Series", forthcoming in *Scandinavian Studies*.

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