

Lars Wendelius, *Bilden av Amerika i svensk prosafiktion 1890-1914*. English Summary: The Image of America in Swedish Prose Fiction 1890-1914. Publications of Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen, Uppsala Universitet, no. 16. 1982.

Any study of American influence on Swedish culture will have to take the following three works into account: Harald Elovson, *Amerika i svensk litteratur 1750-1820* (Lund, 1930); Nils Runeby, *Den nya världen och den gamla* (Uppsala, 1969); and Carl L. Anderson, *The Swedish Acceptance of American Literature* (Stockholm, 1957). As expected, Wendelius gives them all due credit in the introduction to his study. His method, however, deviates radically from the historical perspective of Elovson and Runeby. Anderson's field of study is by the nature of its material less relevant to Wendelius book.

Writing a study of cultural ideas in interaction before the age of the American novel, Elovson applied a concept of literature which included newspapers, history books, letters, etc. Essential to his study, as well as to Runeby's, is a sense of history and development of ideas, which unfortunately is missing in Wendelius' study from 1982. Elovson discussed images of democratic leaders like Franklin and Washington in Sweden over a period of time. Runeby focused on various ideas about emigration. Wendelius has focused his attention on how the American city, the American woman, the typical Yankee, and finally the immigrant are used in Swedish fiction around the turn of the century. It is a study of loosely connected topics rather than a cohesive treatment of American influences during a certain period.

There are basic problems pertaining to the kind of topical analysis applied in Wendelius' work. In his chapter on the American immigrant in Swedish fiction for instance, Wendelius states his indebtedness both to Mannsdker's *Emigrasjon og dikting* (Oslo, 1971) and to Burton Skårdal's *The Divided Heart* (Oslo, 1974). As with these two studies, the strength of Wendelius' book lies in the mass of works studied and listed, the truly impressive amount of material dug out of oblivion. The problem occurs in the way the material is handled. Whereas Skrdal on her part makes several, not always equally convincing shortcuts from fiction to the field of social history, Wendelius moves just as easily in the other direction to prove how social history is reflected in Swedish novels. He will, for instance, ask how true Swedish authors at the time were to what history books tell us about the causes and effects of immigration.

The result in Wendelius' case is that he will often offer the reader what he or she will assume to be pretty self-evident facts. When he writes that the reasons for immigration given in Swedish fiction at the time are practically

the same as historians have told us, it hardly comes as a surprise. What really is so interesting about that particular finding? What about the information he gives that most Swedish-Americans were working in "farming, industry, trading and communications" (p. 181), and that their typical occupations are reflected in the novels? To me this generalization is so obvious that it fails to catch my interest.

Throughout his study Wendelius points to parallels between images of the US in Swedish fiction and in popular travelogues, reports and commentaries at the time. Commonplace, stereotyped conceptions of the Yankee may well have crossed the lines between these and other genres of writing. This kind of search for parallelisms is interesting, but it also has its pitfalls. In his chapter devoted to the Yankee character for instance, Wendelius has systematized Swedish ideas about the typical Yankee in great detail. What he comes up with is a figure, not only known from Scandinavian travel books at the time, but a well-known character found in popular and serious fiction in America as well. The entire physical appearance of the Yankee is mapped out for us; his typical nose, his eyes, his body length, etc. Among other peculiar habits, Wendelius has discovered that the typical American in Swedish fiction at this time is liable to drink ice water and keep an unlit cigar in his mouth, characterizations which Wendelius is able to trace back to figures in Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and in Norris' *The Pit*.

Howells' and Norris' influence on Swedish fiction is hard to assess, but I am sure it is a topic that could be pursued beyond the ice water and the unlit cigar. Unfortunately this hunt for peculiarities does not lead us into the more important ideological impact which American realism and naturalism, here represented by Howells and Norris, may have exerted on Swedish literature at the time. The discovery of the stereotyped American Yankee is not very surprising either. The character is imbued with epithets we expected, and which we all know from before.

The same could be said about the chapter on American women in Swedish fiction. Here the method is definitely far less interesting than the topic itself. It is as if the key to literary scholarship is systematization: read as many novels as possible from a given period of time, extract all the American female figures you can find, do not worry much about the context, and then finally try to group together your findings into certain categories of women. Needless to say, you will end up with a mixed lot. Just how the results of such a study will differ from the character of Swedish women in fiction during the same period is not mentioned. Wendelius contends that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that "the emotionally free and daring American woman is extremely common" (p. 180). One wonders in what sense, and whether she is found to be that way by a majority of male authors. It is interesting to note that women's journals in Scandinavia at the time often pointed to the emancipated woman in America as a model, a tendency that apparently also found its way into Swedish fiction.

Surprising indeed is the sum total of American female characters in Swedish fiction at the time. A quick glance at the Norwegian bibliography of fiction for the period from 1890 to 1914 would indicate that there cannot be nearly as many in Norwegian literature. I shall not suggest possible psychological reasons for this difference, tempting though that would be.

Just why women as well as city skyscrapers have been singled out for separate treatment in a study of American images is not quite clear. Clearly the fast growing American city was a favorite topic of several authors at the time. Wendelius focuses on Henning Berger, whose novels were often set in Chicago. Yet Wendelius is more interested in how the city looks in a Berger novel than to discuss how the city as setting related to theme, character, tone, and symbolic structure. How the city is used as metaphor both for cultural pessimism (the jungle) and for boisterous optimism (the urban frontier) is unfortunately not given much attention in Wendelius' study.

When the time comes around for the important analysis of the American impact on modern Swedish prose fiction, of Sven Delblanc and Lars Gustafsson among others, I am afraid Wendelius' methodological framework will be of little help. But then Delblanc's San Francisco of 1968 in *Asnebrygga* is also altogether different from Berger's Chicago in *Ysail* of the turn of the century.

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