

Literature and Diversity

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In this article I describe how contemporary Swedish literature which thematizes cultural diversity is understood within a powerful discourse about the so-called multicultural society, centred on an opposition between a culturally homogenous past and a culturally diverse present, and emphasizing the phenomena *ethnicity* and *identity*. I also try to suggest an alternative way of relating literature to a society characterized by diversity. This suggestion is based on Walter Benn Michaels’ and Nancy Fraser’s analyses of the epoch of “posthistoricism” and “the postsocialist condition” respectively, and my argument is that the study of the relationship between literature and diversity should be undertaken from a transformative/deconstructive perspective.

Literature and Diversity¹

In her essay “Makten över prefixen”, the Swedish author Astrid Trotzig argues that the contemporary discussion in Sweden about “immigrant literature” is highly problematic. Trotzig takes her point of departure in her own experience, and claims that she receives attention in the public sphere first and foremost because of her ethnicity (she was adopted from Korea), which is perceived as “exotic” (Trotzig 2005, p. 106). Furthermore she argues that this is part of a more general tendency in discussions about literature and the so called multicultural society. Ethnicity, she claims, has become a lens, through which Swedish writers of foreign descent are viewed (Trotzig 2005, p. 126).

Trotzig brings to the fore several problems with this lens. First of all it doesn't really focus on ethnicity as such, but on certain ethnicities. Not all writers who are immigrants are labeled “immigrant writers”, which shows that the ethnic lens is *discriminating* (Trotzig 2005, pp. 107-108). Secondly, the lens is *homogenizing*, in that it eradicates important differences between the so-called immigrant writers (Trotzig 2005, pp. 109-110). This goes hand in hand with a third problem, namely that the ethnic lens establishes similarities between “immigrant writers” by way of *creating stereotypical fictions* about their biographies.

I want to argue that Trotzig in her essay identifies a powerful discourse about “immigrant writers”. This is in turn part of a more general discourse about the so called multicultural society, which has become hegemonic in the public sphere in Sweden during recent decades. Trotzig brings two aspects of this larger discourse to the fore. The first is explicitly pointed out, namely the strong *focus on ethnicity*, or, to use a concept from Fredric Jameson, the appointment of ethnicity to “master code” for understanding literature in a multicultural society (Jameson 1996, p. 22). The second aspect of the discourse about “the multicultural society” that Trotzig makes visible is a tendency to highlight questions about identity. She does so when she argues that criticism of “immigrant literature” eradicates the distance between the writer's biography – or, at least, a fiction about the writer's biography, based on ethnic stereotypes – and his or her work (Trotzig, p. 110). This indicates that “immigrant literature” is interesting to critics primarily as a manifestation of ethnic identity, and thus as an exponent of identity politics.

This focus on identity is part of a more general ideological tendency in post cold-war capitalism. In *The Shape of the Signifier*, Walter Benn Michaels describes this tendency as symptomatic of a “moment in history”, which he calls “posthistoricism” (Michaels 2004, p. 12). The defining characteristic of this epoch is an increased interest in cultural difference at the expense of ideological difference, and the consequence of this is that “all politics become identity politics” (Michaels 2004, pp. 16, 24). A similar claim is made by Nancy Fraser in *Justice Interruptus*. She argues that “the ‘postsocialist’ condition” is characterized by “a shift in the grammar of political claims-making” which has resulted in claims for “the recognition of group difference” eclipsing claims for social equality, and, as a consequence of this, “the rise of ‘identity politics’” (Fraser 1997, p. 2).

The hegemonic Swedish discourse about the so-called multicultural society has yet another important feature, namely that it is based on the modernist idea that the historicity of the present is constituted by a transition from a state of stability to a state of flux. This idea is captured in Marshall Berman's use of the expression “all that is solid melts into air” as a metaphor for the modern experience (Berman 1982). During the modern epoch in Sweden, this structure of feeling has used different aspects of modernization – such as the rise and decline of both industrial capitalism and the social democratic welfare state – as its raw

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material, and currently its basis is the notion of the advent of a “multicultural society”, defined primarily in ethnic terms.

The Swedish criticism of literature which thematizes cultural diversity has to a very high extent been produced within the discourse presented above. Lars Wendelius gives testimony of this in *Den dubbla identiteten: Immigrant och minoritetslitteratur på svenska 1970-2000*, where he argues that the critical interest in “immigrant literature” is based on the idea that “immigrant writers” are “reporters” from milieus unknown to “ethnic Swedes” (Wendelius 2002, p. 41). Another testimony is given by the linguist Roger Källström, who has investigated how critics interpret the literary style of “immigrant writers” such as Jonas Hassen Khemiri and Alexandro Leiva Wenger. Källström found that their style is often described as a realistic representation of multiethnic youth-language, even if a proper analysis shows that it is actually highly idiosyncratic (Källström 2005; Källström 2006). These examples demonstrate that “immigrant literature” is seen as a textual manifestation of ethnic identity.

The academic criticism of “immigrant” and “minority literature” is also produced within this discourse. A good example of this can be found in the anthology *Litteraturens gränsland*, edited by Satu Gröndahl. In her foreword Gröndahl compares the emergence of contemporary “ethnic literatures” to the rise of national literatures in the Nordic countries in the 19th century. She also establishes an opposition between on the one hand “immigrant” and “minority literatures”, and on the other hand the literary culture of the majority. Thus Gröndahl takes her point of departure in a conception of the historicity of the present which is based on the idea that a culturally homogenous past is giving way to a condition marked by cultural – or, rather, *ethnic* – heterogeneity. She also brings the issues of identity and identity politics to the fore when she justifies academic interest in “immigrant” and “minority literature” with reference to the role of these kinds of literature for the formation of collective identities (Gröndahl 2002, p. 7).

The fact that Gröndahl and other scholars are working within the hegemonic discourse about “the multicultural society” means that their research can be subjected to the criticism formulated by Trotzig. First of all one can notice a discriminating tendency in Gröndahl’s definition of “ethnic groups” as “immigrant groups and (territorial or historical) minority groups respectively”, since this implies that Swedes aren’t ethnic (Gröndahl 2002, p. 13). Secondly the construction of “immigrant” and “minority literature” as an object of study is homogenizing in that it presupposes some sort of family resemblance between very different kinds of literatures. One example of this is Gröndahl’s claim that “immigrant literature” often deals with “themes that expresses the condition of being an immigrant or the process of assimilation” (Gröndahl 2002, p. 21). This formulation could also be read as an expression of a tendency to create a stereotypical fiction about the biographies of the “immigrant writers”, since migration in reality is a highly complex and heterogenous phenomenon.

According to Trotzig, Swedish literary critics’ treatment of “immigrant literature” is racist (Trotzig 2005, p. 111). Could (and, to ask a somewhat more interesting question, should) one say the same of the academic criticism of “immigrant” and “minority literature”? My answer to this question is no. Although I do agree with Trotzig when she identifies a racializing, or even racist, tendency in the criticism of “immigrant literature”, I do object to what could be called her “politics of blame”. Fredric Jameson has argued that if postmodernism is a historical phenomenon, then “the attempt to conceptualize it in terms of moral or moralizing judgments must finally be identified as a category mistake”, and requested a more dialectical approach (Jameson 1994, pp. 46-47). The hegemonic Swedish discourse about literature and “the multicultural society” is symptomatic of that moment in the history of capitalism which Michaels calls “posthistoricism” and Fraser “the ‘postsocialist’ condition”. Thus it is ideological. At the same time, however, it also expresses a “moment of truth” about this

epoch. Furthermore, it gives voice to a progressive political vision, in that it addresses questions about representational oppression that are specific to this historical period. This insight gives rise to a question that has been elegantly formulated by Fraser: “[W]hat constitutes a critical stance in this context? How can we distinguish those postures that critically interrogate the ‘postsocialist’ condition from those that reflect it symptomatically?” (Fraser 1997, p. 3).

Fraser’s first step toward answering this question is to establish a distinction between two political attitudes toward identities, namely “affirmation” and “transformation”. An affirmative approach aims at “correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them”, whereas a transformative approach aims at “correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the generative framework” (Fraser 1997, p. 23). The problem with the version of identity politics associated with “mainstream multiculturalism” is that it is affirmative. It tries to change ideas about collective identities without questioning “the contents of those identities” or “the group differentiations that underlie them” (Fraser 1997, p. 24). A transformative politics, on the other hand, deconstructs identities. It redresses disrespect by “transforming the underlying cultural-valuational structure”, thereby not only raising the self-esteem of members of currently disrespected groups, but changing “*everyone’s* sense of self” (Fraser 1997, p. 24).

What I want to argue in this article is that the study of the relationship between literature and cultural diversity should be undertaken from a transformative/deconstructive perspective. Such a perspective would make it possible to avoid the pitfalls identified by Trotzig. First and foremost a deconstruction of the concept ethnicity would challenge its status as “master code” for understanding the contemporary “multicultural society”, and make visible the multiplicity of differences, including class difference, gender difference and difference of sexuality, that characterize our epoch. This, in turn, would make it possible to challenge the very structure of feeling on which the discourse of “the multicultural society” is based. When other forms of difference receive as much attention as ethnic difference it will be impossible to uphold the view of pre mass-migration Sweden as a culturally homogenous society. The shift of focus away from ethnicity would also allow a challenging of the priority given to the phenomena identity, and identity politics within the hegemonic discourse about the “multicultural society”. For, as Benn Michaels argues in the essay “Plots Against America”, whereas ethnicity is an identity, other markers of difference, such as class, are not (Michaels 2006, p. 292-294).

As a matter of fact, the perspective described above is far from absent in the Swedish public sphere. Interestingly enough it can be found in several of the so called “immigrant novels” and other works of fiction that describe the so called multicultural society. In *Kalla det vad fan du vill* Marjaneh Bakhtiari gives a satiric portrayal of affirmative ideas about ethnic identities and argues for a liberal humanist individualism which transgresses stereotypical ideas about ethnicity (Bakhtiari 2005). In *Ett öga rött* Jonas Hassen Khemiri goes further and tells the story of how a young immigrant overcomes a self-image based on an affirmative approach to ethnic identity and instead adopts a more transformative attitude, which includes the challenging of the assumption that there is a productive correspondence between on the one hand ethnicity and on the other hand collective or individual identity (Khemiri 2003). And in *Var det bra så?* Lena Andersson tries to demonstrate how the hegemonic focus on ethnicity obscures questions about class, something that results in questions about identity eclipsing issues about injustice and ideology (Andersson 1999). This perspective deserves critical attention. But it only becomes visible when the novels in question are no longer read as exponents of identity politics, but as novels thematizing societal diversities that are much more complex than those of the so-called multicultural society.

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