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FORME DI NARRAZIONE
AUTOBIOGRAFICA
NELLE LETTERATURE SCANDINAVE

*FORMS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
NARRATION IN
SCANDINAVIAN LITERATURE*

a cura di / edited by

Massimo Ciaravolo, Sara Culeddu,
Andrea Meregalli, Camilla Storskog

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A BILL OF CHARGE
(AND SELF-DEFENCE) AND AS A PORTRAIT OF SOCIETY:
BARBARSKOGEN BY K.G. OSSIANNILSSON

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Despite his high productivity in different genres (poetry, novel, drama, essay), Karl Gustav Ossiannilsson (1875-1970) is probably not a very well-known writer even in the Swedish context. Yet, he was very famous at the beginning of the past century: his works, as well as his political positions, caused a real outcry, and these two aspects of his activity ran parallel for a certain time. This is shown by the reactions to his novel *Barbarskogen* (The Barbarian Wood), published in 1908 and described by different newspapers as «[e]n socialistdiktarens afräkning med partivännerna», «[e]n “uppgörelse”», «K G Ossiannilssons vidräkning med socialismen» (reported in Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 5; a socialist poet's reckoning with his comrades; a “breaking off”; K.G. Ossiannilsson's attack on socialism)¹. Most reviews highlighted the political and critical features of the book, thus contributing to its great success: as many as three editions appeared in 1908 alone, and two others the following year. The period from the end of 1908 to the spring of 1909 was, as a matter of fact, a time of intense debate in newspapers of all political tendencies, and *Barbarskogen* rapidly turned into a model for writers who wished to settle accounts with the socialist party². Ossiannilsson's later works attracted less attention, as we can verify from the scant number of critics who have been interested in his literary works³.

¹ All translations are mine. The first definition was for example used in the bourgeois newspapers «Östgöten» on 21 November 1908 and «Hernösands-Posten» on 2 December 1908 (Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 187).

² We mention here Leon Larsson's *Samhällets fiende* (The Enemy of Society) and Fredrik Persson's *Parasiter* (Parasites), both published in 1909. Such works gave rise to the so-called *barbarskogs litteratur* (*Barbarskogen*-literature, i.e. works written from a similar position and with the same purpose as *Barbarskogen*; see Öhman 2001: 80).

³ Apart from the two main works to which this paper is indebted, i.e. Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982 and Öhman 2001, studies on Ossiannilsson only appear in miscellaneous volumes (Jacobson 1961, Rehn 1974, Wolf 1975, Uhlén 1978), where, moreover, they sometimes play a marginal role (Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 6-7). Whereas Lehtilä-Ohlson introduces the analysis of the works with an in-depth treatment of the social, political

1. Ossiannilsson and his commitment in the socialist party

Karl Gustav Ossian Nilsson was born in Malmö and worked as a teacher, both in state schools and in private employment, until 1901, when he chose to fully devote himself to literature. In 1900 he had debuted as a poet with the collections *Masker* (1900; Masks), followed by *Hedningar* (1901; Pagans) and *Örnar* (1902; Eagles). His poems met with great success, were often mentioned in the press, and his public readings attracted crowds of listeners in different towns of Sweden. The most significant aspect of his first years as a writer was his remarkable popularity among Swedish workers, a phenomenon that eventually led to his participation in the socialist movement and to his successful, though short, political career⁴. This fact helped build the image of Ossiannilsson (he would sign his works with this name from 1914 onwards) as «den unge svenske folk- och arbetarskalden» (Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 9; the young Swedish people's and workers' poet). We may wonder if he was a true socialist, considering that he would soon leave the movement and the party, as previously mentioned, maintaining a very critical position, which he expressed, for instance, in his memoirs in the 1940s⁵.

Here we must face the great paradox of his role and his writings as far as his commitment is concerned. If we read the poems contained in the above-mentioned collections, we realise at once that they express an extreme individualism, an uncritical worship of heroes and leaders, an antidemocratic attitude, the belief in authority, and the praise of war as a means of purification for society. In his view of the world, Ossiannilsson was a man of his time and shared some of the principal tendencies of contemporary philosophical and political thought: in this context we can place him beside both Scandinavian (in Sweden Rudolf Kjellén, Vitalis Norström, Fredrik Böök and – partly – Verner von Heidenstam, in Norway

and philosophical context of that time, also giving a complete account for the reception of *Barbarskogen* by the press, Öhman investigates (once again in a miscellaneous work) the author's different strategies for an apologetic novel. More recently, Ossiannilsson's texts have mostly been included in anthologies, but see Ahlund 2007.

⁴ In 1902 Ossiannilsson was offered the honorary chairmanship of Malmö's branch of Socialdemokratiska ungdomsförbundet (The Socialdemocratic Youth Association), which had been founded in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö in 1897. In 1903 he was chosen as one of the representatives from Malmö at the first national congress of the association and was later allowed to write political articles and pamphlets for the party. In the same year Malmö's local branch broke with the national leadership and constituted an independent division of the movement (Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 10-18).

⁵ Lehtilä-Ohlson (1982: 7) warns, however, against the unreliability of these writings, in which the poet aims at reconsidering his commitment to the socialist party in a very different period from that of the events described.

above all Knut Hamsun) and European artists and thinkers (Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Sorel, Maurice Barrès, Rudyard Kipling and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti)⁶. How could his message fascinate workers and common people? As it has been pointed out, his celebration of the vitalism of certain historical figures and his appeal to the new forces that would change the world might seem to coincide with socialist-inspired movements; indeed, both parties – Ossiannilsson and the workers – were victims of a misunderstanding, the writer seeing in those movements young revolutionary forces which could upset the social order, vital enough to match his own demands, and the workers (and socialist intellectuals) finding in his poems the revolutionary spirit they needed to conduct their own social struggles for justice, freedom and dignity (Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 84-86, Öhman 2001: 80-81). In other words, Ossiannilsson became a sort of intellectual and artistic counterpart for the political organisations, one (or one of several) that could provide them with necessary, fascinating images and allegories. After all, both were opposed to the present society and its establishment, but from two rather different perspectives, or even heading in opposite directions. Yet, these fundamental differences were not perceived, at least in the first years. On the contrary, the odd alliance was formed and the socialists even took the first step.

2. The row with Lidfors

In the political movement Ossiannilsson acted mainly as a poet and man of culture, occasionally reading his own and others' writings (mainly poems) during the meetings. But from 1903 to 1907 he also had occasion to develop his thoughts in articles and pamphlets (sometimes commissioned by Malmö's socialist youth club), in which he consistently

⁶ A summary of the main tendencies of that time is offered by Aspelin 1937; cf. also Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 100-112. If Nietzsche was of course the most influential author with his reaction to pessimism and scepticism through his worship of human action and will, all the personalities mentioned contributed to a somewhat common view of the world, which saw in democratic ideals and pacifism a potential obstacle to the development and assertion of the most genuine human forces: these could be expressed in war and military life as well as in revolutionary movements. Ossiannilsson observed: «Och den tro tiden behöfver är icke tron på en idé – idéer bryta ned, idéer nivellera – utan på personer, människor, oberoende och fria [...]. Tiden behöfver *härskare* (genom öfverlägsenhet) öfver *fria människor* (genom förstående tro)» (From a letter to Ellen Key on 30 September 1903; quoted in Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 103; italics in the original; And the belief our times need is not the belief in ideas – ideas spoil, ideas level – but in persons, people, independent and free [...]. Our times need *rulers* [through superiority] over *free people* [through understanding belief]).

tried to alert the workers and raise problems. One of these, a pamphlet entitled *Är du nöjd med din ställning?* (1904; Are You Satisfied with Your Position?), caused quite a stir, being the greatest contrast to date between Ossiannilsson and the movement, on account of its demagogical features (the main claim). The influential socialist literary critic Bengt Lidforss, in his review *Agitationens ABC* (The ABC of Agitation) which appeared in the newspaper «Arbetet» (Labour) on 13 August 1904, attacked Ossiannilsson, openly questioning the authenticity of his stake in workers' values (cf. Lidforss 1908).

Lidforss, trained as a scientist before becoming a humanist, had previously reviewed Ossiannilsson's poetry collections for «Arbetet», pointing out their limits, but also acknowledging their qualities. We may observe that from the very beginning he had expressed great suspicions about the poet, whom he considered overrated, and it is also noteworthy that he reacted with blunt criticism to an explicit political speech in the aforementioned quarrel. This led to a point of no return in his relationship with Ossiannilsson. In 1905 his review of the poet's fourth collection, *Svart och vitt* (Black and White), contained a very harsh final accusation of opportunism, which probably contributed to Ossiannilsson's moving to Gothenburg, where he started collaborating with the newspaper «Ny Tid» (New Time). This fact seemed, however, to establish a temporary peace between the two (for further details on these reviews, see Öhman 2001: 81-85).

But in 1907 Lidforss published *Socialistisk journalistik* (Socialist Journalism), an anthology of his writings, which included the harsh criticism of Ossiannilsson's pamphlet⁷. This reignited the row, since Ossiannilsson perceived it as a personal attack and now chose to use the cutting weapon of narrative in the form of his novel *Barbarskogen*. He would later describe this event not only as an inner need but also as a social necessity, thus taking on the role of spokesman for the entire category of freethinkers⁸. The preconditions of the birth of this work

⁷ This was not, however, the last act of the quarrel, which actually developed into a lively exchange of positions in «Ny Tid» (Ossiannilsson) and «Arbetet» (Lidforss). See Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 95-99. Not surprisingly, Lidforss published a very negative review of the novel, in which he stressed the excessive conditioning of its ideological features and its nature as *roman à clef*, which gave the novel a low aesthetic value (in «Arbetet» on 30 November 1908, see Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 119).

⁸ «Jag hade i själva verket alltsedan hösten 1904 haft klart för mig, att jag och socialdemokraterna måste komma till en uppgörelse. Den uppskötts på grund av Ingemar Lindblads vänlighet och förtroende. Den skulle kanske uppskjutits i ganska många år, om ej den oförsonlige Lidforss upprepat sitt anfall genom boken *Socialistisk journalistik*. Massangreppen på mig, när jag vågade försvara mig, öppnade mina ögon. Här dugde inte att tveka. Här gällde det min frihet som människa och diktare. Med ens

show, however, that Ossiannilsson's abandonment of the party was due, on the one hand, to his initial distance from socialist positions, and on the other to the personal contrast with Lidforss: these are the two planes on which the novel would be constructed, an aspect that would give his detractors further reason for complaint.

3. *Barbarskogen* as a portrait of society and an autobiographical novel

In the preface to the novel the author denies any direct reference to his own vicissitudes. Nevertheless, although all the characters bear fictitious names, and neither the time nor place of the setting is specified, there are several clues which hint at the real life in Malmö at that time; moreover, some letters by Ossiannilsson show his purpose of defending himself through this novel⁹. On the whole, the autobiographical features are not explicit, but easily recognisable if one knows the Swedish history of those years and, of course, is acquainted with the writer's life. This is further proved by the fact that all his reviewers interpreted the work in this way, thus rekindling the debate instead of quenching it.

If most of the novel, as the author's letters testify (see Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 113-118), was written in 1908 and therefore highly conditioned by his quarrel with Lidforss, we must not forget that he had begun it earlier as a precise project: the representation of Swedish society, above all the living

fattade jag, att mitt öde inte var endast mitt. Samma öde måste drabba alla självständiga människor, om en massrörelse segrade. / Så föddes tanken på romanen *Barbarskogen* eller som jag ursprungligen kallade den: I klasskampens tecken». (Ossiannilsson 1946: 47-48; Already in the autumn of 1904 it was actually clear to me that I should break with the Social Democrats. This breakup was delayed because of Lindblad's friendliness and trust. It might have been delayed for many years if the hostile Lidforss had not repeated his attack through the book *Socialistisk journalistik*. The mass attack on me, when I dared to defend myself, opened my eyes. Here it was useless to hesitate. Here my freedom as a man and a poet was at stake. I realised at once that my destiny was not mine only. The same destiny would come to concern all free human beings if a mass movement won. / This is how the project of the novel *Barbarskogen* was born, or as I initially called it: *I klasskampens tecken* [In the Sign of the Class Struggle]). Furthermore, the writer was disappointed by Hjalmar Branting's siding with Lidforss, Branting being the leader of the party and a future Swedish prime minister.

⁹ Just ten days after sending the manuscript, he wrote to his editor Bonnier: «*Skulle allmänheten, kritiken o.s.v. tala om hämnd, så förminskar det inte bokens köpvärde eller litterära värde (Dante hämnades också) [...]. Hällre än hämnd säger jag dock självförvar*». (Letter written on 17 September 1908, quoted in Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 116, italics in the original; *Should the public, the critics and others talk about revenge, this would not reduce the commercial or the literary value of the book (Dante took his revenge, too) [...]. Yet, rather than revenge I would say self-defence*).

conditions of workers. As he explained more than once, he was working on two novels on this subject and did not know until 1908 which one he would finish first (Ossiannilsson 1946: 48-49; Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 113-114). This novel represents the real situation of that time, even though most events alluded to transpire in a six-month span and take place in a town that resembles Malmö, although they actually took place over a longer period, from about 1890 to 1908, and in various places in Sweden (Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 137-151). Despite this historically inaccurate concentration of events, the work offers in this way a convincing setting of early twentieth-century Sweden. Undoubtedly, Ossiannilsson's initial project was to write a kind of social novel that could suit the demands of the socialist party, as it was based on chronicle. The author combined chronicle and invention, but in a way that did not compromise the historical and documentary value of the work. We can, however, observe that, if in the beginning the fictitious elements had been intended to make the characters more interesting – as writers of social or historical novels usually do – later on, the chief purpose of the author's revision became one of conveying a message that would condition the reader's attitude towards the characters (and the milieu they represent). The work therefore acquired stronger allegorical elements, so that it is often possible to identify a precise correspondence between several characters and real persons¹⁰.

The novel tells the story of a young teacher who is invited to join the editorial staff of the socialist newspaper «Framåt» (Forward) after having been dismissed from his school because of an article of harsh denunciation that he had sent to the same newspaper. Hall, this is his name, witnesses

¹⁰ This is particularly true for the editorial staff the protagonist Hall is invited to join and for other journalists he meets or hears of: for instance, the fictitious Nylén, Lunde («Framåt») and Antonsson (the founder of the same newspaper) stand for August Nilsson, Bengt Lidfors and Axel Danielsson, while Hällvik at the newspaper «Morgondagen» stands for Lindblad at «Ny Tid»; «Framåt» itself is a clear representation of «Arbetet» (Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 132-136). Ossiannilsson, however, later tried to put the significance of such a tempting correspondence into proportion: «Barbarskogen fick ibland heta nyckelroman. Beteckningen är knappast träffande. En nyckelroman är en roman, som ej kan förstås utan personlig bekantskap med modellerna. Men ingen sådan personlig nyckel är behöblig för att få ett begrepp om innehållet eller handlingen i Barbarskogen. [Romanen] har [...] ännu 1937, då hittills senaste upplagan utkom, fått betyget att vara lika frisk, som då den först utgavs, och snarare mera aktuell än 1908» (Ossiannilsson 1946: 54-55; *Barbarskogen* was sometimes called *roman à clef*. This definition is hardly correct. A *roman à clef* is a novel which cannot be understood without a personal knowledge of its models. But such a personal key of interpretation is not necessary for understanding the content or the plot of *Barbarskogen*. [The novel], [...] even in 1937, when the latest edition was published, revealed itself to be as fresh as it was in the first edition, and even more relevant than in 1908).

an accident at the harbour of his town during a strike and later becomes acquainted with the squalid conditions in which workers live. He appeals to the authorities, in the person of consul Ström, whose daughter was once a student of his, but does not find any help. His concern for the workers makes his popularity grow among them and, once on the editorial staff, he is sure that he will be free to express his opinions without censorship, thus contributing to social improvement. His initial enthusiasm clashes day after day with his colleagues' indolence, incompetence and arrogance. On some occasions he is even humiliated and cannot get his writings published. He soon realises that the newspaper is just an instrument for the party, not for the workers, and a place where journalists daily try to increase or at the very least defend their personal power. Because of internal struggles, Hall is paradoxically chosen as editor-in-chief, and in his new position he thinks he will be able to fight some important battles, but his uncompromising intellectual freedom leads him to adopt unorthodox, complex positions, in particular against a major controversial strike. Hostility towards him grows and eventually turns into outright ostracism, as is represented in one of the final scenes, in which the workers' annual meeting takes on the features of a trial, after which Hall decides to leave the editorial staff, abandon the party and devote himself again to his studies.

As is clear from the plot, Hall is consistently engaged in the improvement of society, but his sincere ideals come into conflict with petty personal interests and grudges throughout the novel. We can easily point out the features of a *Bildungsroman*: at the beginning Hall, a teacher and a committed intellectual, is disillusioned by the upper middle class and joins the working class; gradually, he distances himself from the other intellectuals (in the form of his fellow journalists) he happens to mingle with. While Hall still trusts the workers, whom his colleagues have sworn to represent and defend, these are on the contrary deceived by their own party. Hall eventually perceives the masses themselves as a stupid, violent, easily influenced, hardly innocent force, representing a kind of pure barbarism, whether embodied by the workers or by the so-called intellectuals, whose existence and actions limit individual freedom. This series of disillusionments does not lead Hall to any sort of victory, but it does help him to understand his personal place and purpose in society, and this awareness finds proud affirmation in the very last lines of the novel.

The analysis of the plot highlights the thesis sustained in the novel, which in turn provides the work with its necessary unity. Yet, the book is characterised by a somewhat fragmentary style, which is due partly to the brief period of its composition (and to the author's 'haste'), partly to the development of his project of self-defence. The first two chapters (in their almost definitive form) appeared in the newspaper «Svenska Dagbladet» in the summer of 1906, whereas he probably worked on most

of the novel (certainly from chapter five, where the main action begins, and onwards; Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 117) from the end of 1907, publishing the book in November 1908: the writing therefore took place right after the quarrel with Lidforss had rekindled. As is clear in the final version, the apologetic feature of the novel becomes evident only from chapter four, where the (at least seemingly) neutral characterisation of the protagonist, the detailed descriptions of the settings and the slow narrative rhythm turn into a tendentious representation, a more essential style and a marked and passionate rhythm. As far as tendentiousness and social satire are concerned, the author found a model in August Strindberg's writings, especially the novels *Röda Rummet* (1879; *The Red Room*, trans. by Schleussner 1913) and *Svarta fanor* (1907; *Black Banners*, trans. by Weaver 2010), on which he wrote essays in those years (Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 122-125). These features, however, seem to affect this novel much more profoundly than other works of that time, as if the author had found the proper instrument to express his strong social disappointment in *Barbarskogen* before dealing with other subjects in a plainer style or, at least, from a different perspective and attitude if compared with that of his first novel¹¹.

4. *Barbarskogen* as an apologetic novel: rhetoric and trial

From chapter four onwards, Ossiannilsson displays subtle strategies of work on the language (Öhman 2001: 87-94) in order to wage an explicit attack against Hall's enemies, that is to say on the institutional and intellectual organisation which aims at conditioning the masses by exploiting their instincts and need to conform. The author's purpose lies in his desire to reveal the decisions of a political group in its different forms, in order to demonstrate how he (Hall as well as Ossiannilsson himself) was forced to leave the workers' movement. This kind of defence therefore concerns the author's public life, as a poet and a politician, not his private one. The rhetorical strategy is however deeply linked with the autobiographical features of the novel: Ossiannilsson is involved in the issue; in particular he is the plaintiff who tries to defend himself by discrediting the opposing party.¹²

¹¹ See his comments on his following novels, in particular *Slätten* (1909; *The Plain*), *Havet* (1909; *The Sea*) and *Ödets man* (1912; *The Man of Destiny*), in Ossiannilsson 1946: 58-61.

¹² This fundamental condition affects the structure of the novel and its overall rhythm: in particular, the plot is marked by four main meetings between Hall and the masses, by which he is initially both attracted and intimidated, later on perceiving his own role to be that of antagonist to the workers. We may observe that the average length of the chapters (25 on the whole) increases after the first short ones, up to chapter 12, the longest one in

To achieve his purpose he actually represents himself as two distinct characters: the young idealist teacher and journalist Hall, and the experienced socialist poet Wide, who knows the movement (the party, the editorial staff, the workers) very well and has suffered from their cruel attacks and their perverse logic. This expedient makes the novel yet again a *Bildungsroman*, but in a different way from the one previously mentioned, since here the main character is observed from the outside: Wide expresses Ossiannilsson's opinions after he has left the movement, while Hall is the person Wide was many years before. Wide was once appreciated by everyone and has now become a sort of guide for Hall. Not accidentally, and as a further autobiographical feature, Wide looks like Ossiannilsson (Öhman 2001: 86). Hall apparently lacks any kind of prejudice and is, moreover, marked by a strong humanity, which naturally allows him to understand and even sympathise with some of his enemies.

As we soon realise when reading the novel, Hall has not given up his role as educator, though he is no longer a teacher: his new work as a journalist suits his desire to raise the consciousness of his readers (no longer his students); and, all the more so, he adopts this attitude as a daily duty and is convinced that the masses can be improved through intellectual activities, such as reading newspaper articles. These will be, in his opinion, his real weapons for waging his social battles. But Wide explains drastically that the masses cannot be changed and that their popular support may even conceal a danger for individual freedom:

Massan låter inte förvandla sig [...]. Dess lösen klingar i alla länder: proletärer, förenen eder, förenen eder till massan! [...] Den ler åt våra uppfostrings-, våra försoningsplaner, ler ett brett, illmarigt massleende, och leendet skall en gång äta upp oss, likt en leende boa constrictor, en leende Leviathan, en leende Midgårdssorm. Solidariteten skyddar oftast stillaständet och barbariet [...]. Solidaritet förutsätter svag individualitet, böjlig vilja, grova instinkter [...]. (Ossiannilsson 1927: 276-277, 305)

The masses do not let themselves be changed [...]. Their slogan echoes in all countries: proletarians, unite, unite to a mass! [...] They laugh at our plans for education and reconciliation, make a broad, sly, mass smile, and that smile will one day eat us up, like a smiling *boa constrictor*, a smiling Leviathan, a smiling Midgard Serpent. Solidarity usually protects inactivity and barbarism [...]. Solidarity presupposes a weak personality, bent will, rough instincts [...].

the first half, where Hall gets acquainted with his working environment, his colleagues' taste for anecdotes and their view of life, and is, besides, involved in a discussion about strikebreakers. Afterwards the plot is split into shorter chapters, which become even shorter towards the end, with the very significant exception of chapter 24, as long as chapter 12, which reports the 'trial' against Hall during the annual meeting. This provides a sort of symmetry in the novel, but above all it reveals its apologetic character.

Statements like this are also meaningful as examples of Wide's strongly aristocratic use of language. On several other occasions in the novel he passionately talks about the vitality of ancient cultures in opposition to modern decadence. Here the fundamental ideas of education and reconciliation are opposed to social hatred, a feeling (and its subsequent attitude) encouraged by the party and the socialist-inspired movement Wide has directly experienced. Hall and Wide are marked not only by a student-teacher relationship, but also by a real dialectic: Hall's reasoning is based on the opposition between nature and culture and on the saving power of the latter; Wide objects that the masses act to destroy civilisation and cannot be redeemed: if they ever represent nature, as in Hall's view, then it is a terrible, frightening, and not at all fascinating expression of human nature. This idea inspires several metaphors in Wide's speech and eventually leads to the main image of the barbarian wood¹³.

This fundamental difference between Ossiannilsson's two alter egos displays the difficulties met by intellectuals in their relationship with the masses, but it still lacks the necessary degree of formalisation, i.e. the superior value which guides Hall and which is the decisive proof of his freedom, causing his defeat within the party and at the same time expressing his spiritual superiority. In other words, the young protagonist has had many occasions to show his own sensibility and sensitivity toward all forms of social hypocrisy, but after several disillusionments he needs – in the author's view – a further reference to save himself (and his ideas) despite the moral misery around him. This higher value is «mänsklighet» (humanity), which gives rise to Hall's unquenchable desire to remain an educator of the masses and denotes his moral superiority (Öhman 2001: 87-90). This most noble value can be defined as sensitivity, comprehension, intellectual honesty, freedom of thought, all genuine human qualities which are threatened by powerful forces (the forest of institutions) and by the general stupidity and aggressiveness of people (the barbarians). Hall actually perceives this state of things already in his first meetings with the workers, but it fully dawns on him only with Wide's help. This is the 'philosophical' theory sustaining the novel, and this message is conveyed through a series of metaphors. We can observe that, in a novel written in a straightforward, concrete style, nearly all the figurative speech comes from Wide, who here replies to Hall:

¹³ An element clearly showing the tendentious aspect of the novel is evident in the incident of Wide's harangue before some members of the editorial staff, who however make no serious reply (Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 156).

Trädet, sade ni, redaktör, ja, var och en av dessa organismer, arbetarkommuner, är ett träd, varje Folkets Hus är ett växande, skuggande träd, och alla tillsammans äro en väldig, erövrande storskog, sammanbunden med småskogar av fattighus och fattigkvarter, med snår av eländets nässlor och törne. Den stora klasshatsrörelsen är en väldig barbariets urskog, och i dess skugga tälta hunnerhorderna, civilisationens förödare, den anryckande, million-hövdade massan. (Ossiannilsson 1927: 274)

The tree, you said, editor, yes, each one of these organisms, workers' unions, are a tree, every People's House is a growing and shadowing tree, and all together they are an enormous and dominating forest, connected with little woods of poor houses and poor quarters, with thorns of misery nettles and wild roses. The great movement of class hatred is an enormous forest of barbarism, and hordes of Huns camp in its shadows: destroyers of civilisation, the mobbing mass of a million people.

This last harsh accusation against the party and any social organisation presents not only Wide's straightforward view of the world, but, maybe ironically though certainly on purpose, it also represents the stages of Hall's progress throughout the novel, from his encounter with the party (due to his acquaintance with social poverty) to his direct experience of the masses. Wide's declaration highlights the perverse relationship between people and political institutions, thus implicitly suggesting that its nature is that of an unsolvable mess. We can easily take «mänsklighet», humanity, as the fundamental metaphor, which both provides the novel with a consistent theme – present from the beginning, but nearly always beneath the surface – and this theme (the philosophical characteristic of the novel after the political one) with a proper and suitable language. The novel follows a strategy of short, conditioning, tendentious descriptions, which later acquire their apt linguistic formulation. The awareness of the strategy casts a new light on Hall's attitude towards the other characters: from the beginning he has examined the workers during their meetings and pointed out their uniformity, their mass-like being (as opposed to «mänsklighet»), their merely gregarious existence, which becomes crystal clear by contrast whenever someone (like Hall) takes his distance from them (Öhman 2001: 88). Eventually, Hall perceives unequivocally the danger of such a levelling power.

He remembers Wide's words during the workers' annual meeting, when his positions about the strike are strongly criticised, and he undergoes a real trial, which eventually leads him to quit his newspaper job, after having understood that his enemy was not his own class (the bourgeoisie) or the socialist machinery, but the masses themselves¹⁴.

¹⁴ «Som två antagonister hade de två, han och massan, vägt varandra under dessa sex månader. Han med sin kulturs frihet och fördomar, massan med sin stelnade halvkultur. Han med sin individualism, som betraktade socialismen som medel att

However, he maintains all his ideals despite his defeat on the social plane (he is considered an academic, thus a bourgeois, to be rejected by the proletarians) and the professional level (he is dismissed by the direction of the newspaper).

5. Conclusions

Ossiannilsson's writings and political action express in a paradoxical but meaningful way most of the contradictions of the political and philosophical thought of his time, showing a typical early twentieth-century intellectual, open to many suggestions from different parts of Europe, a victim of radical ideals and rapid social changes, but also skilful in using his position, contacts and talents to improve his favour among workers.

His novel *Barbarskogen*, developed as a reaction to a personal (political and literary) attack by an influential critic, adopts and integrates different literary genres, thus showing the potentialities of autobiographical works, and possesses the features of a social novel, a *Bildungsroman*, and of a detective novel in its trial sub-plot¹⁵. However, despite its heterogeneous traits, the work finds its unity in the rhetorical strategy adopted by the author, who moulds each aspect of the novel according to the purpose of his attack against the socialist party, in particular on certain individuals (and characters) who are hostile to him, and of his self-defence. This strategy is carried forward with subtleness and affects both the shaping of the characters and the construction of most of the events presented in the novel.

nå friheten. Massan med sin socialism, som bemötte individen som en fara, vilken stod i vägen för målet, som inte var frihet, utan makt. Han med sin hänsynslösa tankeanarkism. Massan med sin hänsynslösa sifferdogmatism. Han överklassen, massan underklassen. Han, som trots sig kämpa mot samhället, medan han blott fört striden mot massan. Han, som trots klasskampen stå mellan redaktör Hall och konsul Ström» (Ossiannilsson 1927: 338-339; Like two opponents, he and the mass had sized each other up during the last six months. He with his cultural freedom and prejudices, the mass with its petrified half-culture. He with his individualism, which looked at socialism as a means to achieve freedom, the mass with its socialism that perceived the individual as a danger, interfering with the way to the goal, which was not freedom but power. He with his unscrupulous anarchy of thought, the mass with its unscrupulous dogmatism of numbers. He the upper class, the mass the lower class. He, who had believed he was fighting against society, whereas he was just conducting his struggle against the mass. He, who had believed that the class struggle was between editor Hall and consul Ström).

¹⁵ Öhman's study convincingly shows how trial features are skilfully and deviously interwoven into the warp of the whole novel, so as to constitute lines of defence and charge long before this aspect of Hall's case becomes evident.

Ossiannilsson's book is not without flaws: these can be traced, in particular, in the excessive use of caricatural features, in the evident imbalance between the exponents of the different positions (pros and cons Hall/Ossiannilsson) and in some longwinded digressions (Öhman 2001: 99-101). As has been noted, the author makes use of different kinds of material without being able to integrate them all (Lehtilä-Ohlson 1982: 118-119). A further defect may be his taste for anecdotes, which, however, he uses to depict the indolence of certain characters on the editorial staff.

Initially conceived as a portrait of society, Ossiannilsson's project step by step acquired a philosophical and existential dimension by representing modern human beings as victims of stupid, perverse social mechanisms. Society is presented as the primary enemy of freedom of thought and expression: paradoxically, while making this criticism, Ossiannilsson also reveals his antidemocratic tendencies, thus becoming a full-fledged member of the society he criticises, instead of just an acute observer of it. As we understand from the plot, Hall is defeated, abandoned by the party and most of the workers; but he is eventually represented as the moral victor and, most likely, as a man of the future, if we consider his conclusive (but still controversial) thoughts in the last lines of the novel:

Hall vinkade. Ett led öppnade sig beredvilligt och de båda överklassbarnen försvunno i den breda, böljande kolonnen. Musiken rungade, fanorna lyste, röda, blåa och vita, likt brokiga, nyutsplagna blommor – det fläktade och vajade, människoträdet bredde sig över dem, det oerhörda stamträdet, som vuxit i millioner och växer i millioner år. Och de två voro blott två knoppar, som nyss sprungit ut i en vårens stund och nu växte tätt bredvid varandra, syskon till varandra och syskon till alla, alla, alla människor. (Ossiannilsson 1927: 353-354)¹⁶

Hall beckoned. A way opened up quickly and the two children of the upper class disappeared under the broad, billowing column. The music rumbled, the banners sparkled, red, blue and white, like colourful, newly blossomed flowers – everything moved and swayed, the human tree grew over them, the unprecedented family tree, which had been growing for millions of years and would continue to grow for millions of years. And the two of them were nothing but two buds, which had just bloomed in a spring moment and now were growing very close to each other, siblings to each other and siblings to all, all, all human beings.

The controversial features lie in the ambiguity about the paternity of these last considerations: are they Hall's or the narrator's? Do they express Hall's paternalism in his attempt to point out a superior reconciliation or,

¹⁶ Hall is here at the Labour Day march with consul Ström's daughter, Elsebet, who turns out to be his touchstone and saviour when he risks falling into despair because of the others' hostility. About the role of some female characters in Hall's development, see Öhman 2001: 105-108.

on the contrary, the social hypocrisy according to which everyone wants to be everyone else's brother, in a general trend toward uniformity¹⁷. The protagonist has, however, offered the reader a twofold perspective through his personal experience: an inner perspective, and, later, an external social perspective, if society can be considered as the complicated network of relationships, which are promoted by (political) institutions. Ossiannilsson's language, the original purpose of which was to paint a detailed portrait of the life of the working class in the Sweden of his days, developed into a more lively but also more tendentious and rhetorical language of a struggle between ideologies (the socialist and the bourgeois) which, eventually, expresses the (no less tendentious) desire for freedom from perverse political and social conditionings.

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¹⁷ Öhman (2001: 107-108) suggests that this last passage was meant to find a way out of the polemic with his detractors and the party, an aim which, as we know, was not achieved.

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