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**“Barbaric Yawp” in Swedish**

I am aware of three Swedish translations of Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” In 1935, Karl Afred Svensson (1891-1978), a journalist, author, and translator, published a substantial volume of translations from *Leaves of Grass* with a biographical introduction to Whitman and an afterword about Emerson and Whitman. The shadows cast by the contemporary political situation in Europe are obvious in Svensson’s afterword—Svensson’s sympathies lie with traditional Western humanism and he deeply deplores the surge of antidemocratic forces. Svensson actually expresses an ambivalent view of Whitman in his afterword: Svensson’s heroes are rather Emerson and Goethe, and Whitman’s boundlessness and assertiveness seem to make Svensson uneasy. Svensson’s translations of Whitman are a bit cumbersome and written in a conservative, in places even old-fashioned, Swedish. The volume contains a complete translation of the “Song of Myself” (“Sång om mig själv”).

The next Swedish translation dates to 1946. The translator, Erik Lindegren (1910-1968), one of the most brilliant Swedish poets of the twentieth century, had just made himself known as a leading exponent of the new indigenous modernism: he had published, a few years earlier, an extensive cycle of “exploded sonnets” consisting of a flow of dramatic metaphors, untranslatable but evocative, presented in free verse and expressing loss of direction and intense despair; a diffuse war was being made visible in the background. Lindegren’s translation of the “Song of Myself” (“Ur Sängen om mig själv”; “From The Song of Myself”) is extensive but not complete. The translation was published as one

in a large collection of self-portraits in words, edited by a well-known Swedish novelist, Sigfrid Siwertz, for Sweden's leading publishing house, Bonniers. The chronologically arranged series of self-portraits begins with Socrates, Cicero, and Marcus Aurelius and ends with Paul Valéry, Eric Linklater, and Richard Hillary (a young British fighter pilot who authored an autobiographical book, *The Last Enemy*, before losing his life). The sympathy for the Western humanistic tradition and the Western democracies is obvious already in the choice of authors, and Goethe is the only German included in the anthology. Whitman has a natural place in the group. The link between Whitman and Lindegren, in its turn, must no doubt be sought in the free verse. Lindegren's translation of Whitman may in fact have been commissioned by the editor. Lindegren's comparatively free translation uses a poetic register and is a fine piece of literature in its own right but, considered as a translation of Whitman's cycle, is a bit abstract and faintly sacral; the poetic voice that Lindegren was to develop in the late 1940s and the 1950s can be sensed in the text.

Finally, Whitman's "Song of Myself" was translated in its entirety in 1983 by the poet and translator Rolf Aggestam (born 1941). Aggestam's translation was published, together with an afterword by the translator, in a separate volume under the title *Sången om mig själv* ("The Song of Myself"—Lindegren and Aggestam, but not Svensson, "normalize" Whitman's title by adding a definite article). Unlike Svensson and Lindegren, Aggestam translates from the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, distancing himself from the Whitman of the late editions who seems to Aggestam too much to act the role of a father of his people (Aggestam 74). Apparently, Aggestam has had a long-standing relationship with Whitman's poetry—Dylan Thomas and Walt Whitman are mentioned as early, deeply important, sources of poetic inspiration for him—but his attitude to Whitman may also have been influenced to some extent by the prevalent left-wing political atmosphere in Swedish literature from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. Without being colloquial, the style of Aggestam's translation is less elevated, and no doubt more Whitmanesque, than the diction employed by Svensson and Lindegren.

All the three Swedish translators take certain liberties with the passage in which the yawp occurs. Surprisingly, Svensson turns the spotted hawk into a falcon (*Den fläckiga falken*), and Lindegren follows him in this. Aggestam,

however, reinstates the hawk (*Den spräckliga höken*). The Swedish translators also choose different adjectives to characterize the bird, which is less important but not wholly insignificant. "Spotted" can mean both "stained" and "as if marked with spots"; in this context, the latter sense is no doubt the primary one. The Swedish word *fläckig*—Svensson's and Lindegren's choice—preserves the discreet ambiguity, which is probably a good thing, while Aggestam's *spräcklig* only reflects the meaning "as if marked with spots."

Whitman's hawk "swoops by," meaning that he passes by probably also via a downward plunge. The expression "swoops by" is difficult to render in Swedish, and Svensson simply lets the bird swoop (Svensson's falcon *slår ner*). Lindegren and Aggestam, however, make the bird dive towards the speaker as if swooping on *him* (*störtar ner mot mig; stört dyker mot mig*). These details are of some interest for the impression of the yawp, since the yawping speaker is being compared to the bird: not tamed, untranslatable.

Despite the rather considerable differences in style and literary preferences among the three translators, their translations of precisely the two words "barbaric yawp" are very similar. Svensson offers *barbariska rovfågelskri*, meaning "barbaric cry of a bird of prey." Lindegren differs only in orthography, translating *barbariska rovfågelskri*. (Lindegren's spelling is considered to be the more correct one.) Aggestam, for his part, gives the formulation *barbariska rovfågelsjut*, "barbaric howl of a bird of prey." The noun *skri*, pronounced approximately "scree," means "cry" or "scream." The word *skri* is not archaic or strange, but it has a poetic tinge. The everyday word would be *skrik* ("scream"), but *skrik* probably has slightly stronger associations with humans than *skri*. Aggestam's *tjut* (pronounced, very approximately, "choot") is neutral with respect to higher and lower styles, but the word is somewhat surprising in connection with a bird. A *tjut* would be a high-pitched, monotone, penetrating sound of some duration. A person in acute pain could emit the right kind of sound, or a siren, or a wolf, but hardly a bird of prey or any other bird. Aggestam may or may not have consciously intended to achieve a special effect by introducing an incongruous word, but, either way, I believe it is fair to say that *rovfågelsjut* is unremarkable in its context in Aggestam's translation. Only those people studying this particular line in his translation, or people with a strong interest in birds, would be likely to notice the unusual nature of his lexical choice.

The three translations of the “yawp” are thus nearly identical: “cry/howl of a bird of prey.” Since that alternative is far from necessary, I strongly suspect that Svensson’s translation has influenced both Lindegren and Aggestam (and Svensson himself may possibly have been inspired by the analogous German translations by Schölermann and Reisiger; cf. below p. 272). Aggestam, who is conscious of both his predecessors (Aggestam 75), has kept the explicit reference to a bird of prey but changed a more high-register expression to a neutral one—a shift which, in itself, must be said to be altogether motivated.

The translation “cry/howl of a bird of prey” fulfills some of the reasonable expectations on a good translation of “yawp,” but certainly not all of them. The translation refers to a vocalization, one of a kind ascribable not only to humans but also to other animals, and one that is not readily comprehensible. In addition, both *skri* and *tjut* have something of an onomatopoeic touch, just like “yawp.” To my mind, however, the explanation of the nature of the cry removes its brutal immediacy and the explicit mention of a bird of prey gives too much emphasis to the predatory nature of the vocalizer. There are also a number of reasonable expectations that remain unfulfilled. We know from Ed Folsom’s analysis that the word “yawp” is colloquial and that it has an etymological association, perhaps still felt, with the mouth of a human or an animal. Last but not least, “yawp” is a short word (one syllable), while the Swedish translations are importantly longer (four syllables). The translations do have a certain compactness, for Swedish has the capacity of forming quite complex words with ease and relative naturalness, so my circumstantial translation back into English, “cry/howl of a bird of prey,” gives a slightly wrong impression in that respect. But the translations must still be said to be on the long side.

Other possible translations into Swedish are not difficult to find. First of all, I would prefer to get rid of the explicit reference to a bird of prey and every other explicitness of that kind. It is true that Whitman mentions a “spotted hawk” who “swoops by” and then draws an analogy between the hawk and himself, but Whitman cannot be said to picture himself specifically as a bird of prey. If you leave the explicit reference to a bird of prey out of the picture, an English-Swedish dictionary offers various options for the translation of “yawp” by a single word. The words *skri* and *skrik* are among these, but two other possible translations strike me as more felicitous.

It seems to me that "yawp" could very well be rendered as *skrän* (pronounced, very approximately, "screin"): *mitt barbariska skrän*. The noun *skrän*—an ordinary word, not high, not low—stands for a kind of scream, and it can be used, for example, about the sound made by seagulls. The noun *skrän* is derived from the verb *skräna*. The most comprehensive Swedish dictionary, the *Ordbok över svenska språket* (Dictionary of the Swedish Language) describes the main meaning of the verb as "to cry or scream or sing loudly and in an unlovely manner and often more or less inarticulately (particularly as an expression of excitement or discontent or suchlike)" and supposes that the word *skräna* has an onomatopoeic background (*Ordbok*, s.v. *skräna*). *Skrän* is what you produce by acting in this fashion. I would prefer *skrän* to *skrik* or *tjut* because I believe that *skrän*, in this context, sounds more assertive and aggressive (rather than plagued, which *skrik* and *tjut* might more easily do).

There is also a Swedish noun *gap*, pronounced approximately "gaap," and closely etymologically connected with the English noun "gap" (*Ordbok*, s.v. *gap*). *Gap* is used, among other things, about the open mouth of an animal (and more colloquially about the open mouth of a human). The corresponding verb *gapa*, meaning to open one's mouth or to open it widely, can be used quite normally and straightforwardly about humans and animals alike. In a transferred, slightly vulgar sense, the verb *gapa* may mean to speak loudly and insubstantially and a bit aggressively. (Used in that sense, *gapa* is more or less synonymous with *skräna*, but I believe that *gapa* makes you more conscious of the fact that the sound has a semantic content, while *skräna* draws more attention to the sound itself.) The expression "my barbaric yawp" could conceivably be translated into Swedish as *mitt barbariska gapande* (*gapande* pronounced something like "gaapande," with the stress on the first syllable, is the present participle of *gapa*). That would preserve the provocative character of Whitman's "yawp" (and, less importantly perhaps, its direct etymological connection with the mouth). It would even preserve some of the noun/verb ambiguity that Folsom points out in "yawp," for *gapande* may also be taken in its basic sense of keeping one's mouth (wide) open. As one might expect, however, *gapande* also has drawbacks as a translation of "yawp." Unlike the other words considered, *gapande* is not onomatopoeic, and therefore does not suggest the sound of

the yawp. Furthermore, *gapande* in the vulgar sense cannot be performed by animals, since it implies speaking.

So how should the words “barbaric yawp” best be rendered in Swedish? Before giving my preferred answer, I would like to take a small step back and look at the whole line containing the yawp. In Whitman’s text, the line reads:

I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

Svensson translates:

Jag skriar mitt barbariska rovfågelskri över världens tak.

The closest Swedish correspondence to the verb “sound” is *ljuda*. *Ljuda*, however, is an intransitive verb and cannot take an object, so the word “sound” represents a minor problem for the Swedish translator. Svensson’s solution is to let the speaker *cry* his *cry* (*skriar* mitt . . . *skrik*). One could in fact see this move as part of Svensson’s translation of the “yawp”: Svensson achieves an intensification of the cry by letting it be cried. In my view, it would be easy and natural to use the Swedish word *ljuda* instead, building it into a transitive construction: *låta ljuda* (“let sound”). That would represent the speaker as *letting his yawp sound* instead of *sounding his yawp*, but would still depart less from the original. Lindegren takes Svensson’s strategy one step further, letting the speaker *cry out* his *cry*:

Jag skriar ut mitt barbariska rovfågelsskri över världens tak.

Aggestam follows Svensson with respect to the crying of the cry, but in addition he changes Whitman’s text slightly in two other respects. Aggestam alters Whitman’s syntax, binding the line closer to the preceding one by beginning with an *Och* (“And”) instead of Whitman’s “I.” Aggestam also transforms the roofs of the world to the roofs of all the world, “all världens tak”:

Och skriar mitt barbariska rovfågelstjut över all världens tak.

Several of the changes introduced by the various Swedish translators—the bird’s swooping on the speaker, the crying of the cry, the roofs of *all* the

world—appear calculated to make the text even more dynamic and intensify the impression of it.

If I were to translate this specific line, I would avoid the crying of the cry and the explicit reference to a bird of prey. My suggestion would be:

Jag låter mitt barbariska skrån ljuda över världens tak.

The word *gapande* could no doubt be used: *mitt barbariska gapande* instead of *mitt barbariska skrån*. The impression would probably be more vulgar, but that might not necessarily be a bad thing. One could also consider the present participle of the verb *skråna*: *mitt barbariska skrånande*. To me, that expression sounds slightly unnatural, but I cannot explain why.

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### Summary

The article discusses the pros and cons of the three Swedish translations of the “yawp” and comments on their historical context and general character. The three Swedish versions differ in background and tone but are very similar in their treatment of the yawp itself. In his complete Swedish version of the poem (“Sång om mig själv”) 1935, Karl Afred Svensson translated “barbaric yawp” as *barbariska rovfågelskri*; “barbaric cry of a bird of prey.” Erik Lindegren followed Svensson except in spelling in his partial translation (“Ur Sängen om mig själv”) from 1946, while Rolf Aggestam merely changed the cry to a howl—*barbariska rovfågelsjut*—when he offered a complete translation of Whitman’s first edition of the poem in 1983 (“Sängen om mig själv”).

**Key words:** comparative literature, translation studies, Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” Swedish literature

### „Barbarzyńskie yawp” po szwedzku

#### Streszczenie

Autor artykułu przedstawia wady i zalety trzech szwedzkich tłumaczeń „yawp” oraz komentuje ich historyczny kontekst i ogólny charakter. Trzy szwedzkie wersje różnią się tłem i tonem, ale są bardzo zbliżone w tłumaczeniu samego „yawp”. W swojej kompletnej wersji „Song of Myself” (“Sång om mig själv”, 1935) Karl Afred Svensson przetłumaczył „barbaric yawp” jako *barbariska rovfågelskri* – „barbarzyński krzyk drapieżnego ptaka”. Erik Lindegren podążył za Svenssonem, zmieniając jedynie pisownię w swoim częściowym tłumaczeniu pieśni (“Ur Sängen om mig själv”) z 1946 roku; natomiast Rolf Aggestam, w kompletnym przekładzie pierwszego wydania poematu Whitmana opublikowanym w 1983 roku, zamienił tylko „krzyk” na „skowyt” – *barbariska rovfågelsjut*.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komparatystyka literacka, studia przekładoznawcze, Walt Whitman, „Pieśń o mnie”, literatura szwedzka