

KATARINA BERNHARDSSON

# *Litterära besvär*

*Skildringar av sjukdom i samtida svensk prosa*

(Literary Ills. Portrayals of Illness in Contemporary Swedish Fiction)

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## Summary

Illness is one of humanity's living conditions, and Susan Sontag once described illness as a second kingdom in which every person must, sooner or later, accept their citizenship. Illness is also a fruitful literary theme, that have produced many fascinating literary accounts. *Litterära besvär. Skildringar av sjukdom i samtida svensk prosa* (Literary Ills. Portrayals of Illness in Contemporary Swedish Fiction) investigates seven Swedish novels with illness as one of their central themes, all of them published during the first decade of the 21st century.

This study is thematically structured by the five different themes of illness into which I have chosen to divide the novels: Illness as Exile, The Sick Female Body as a Battlefield, Eating Disorder as a Problem of Boundaries, Contagion as Paradoxical Life-Giver, and, finally, Illness as a Fashioning of the Self. I explore these novels in dialogue with other texts – literary as well as historical and theoretical – and examine accounts that, taken together, offer a multifaceted picture of how illness can be experienced. The aim of my study is to present a wide-ranging discussion about illness as a contemporary literary theme. The selection of texts has been confined to a short time-span – a decade – in order to acknowledge that themes of illness are temporally and culturally situated; author and literary scholar David B. Morris refers to illness as being *biocultural*, always both biological and cultural. Inspired by the physician and ethicist Howard Brody, I define the term *illness* broadly. In this dissertation, the term primarily refers to physical illness, but is also taken to include hysteria and eating disorders – illnesses with a distinctly physical component. Neither are genre boundaries taken to be unpermeable, and the selection thus includes a work which has been referred to as “a kind of novel in poetical form”.

The introduction discusses the study's thematic method, which is predicated mainly on how the literary scholar Werner Sollor and the philosopher Menachem Brinker use the term *theme*. To me, themes are not something that unite all the separate parts of a work to whole, but they are, in Sollor's words, “middle-range textual elements that may be selected and identified by a reader because they are neither unique to only one text nor shared by much of world literature”. Illness does not have to be a novel's single unifying theme but can be one of several relevant themes. I am intrigued by how these works centre on the theme of illness in such a variety of ways and to such varying degree.

The narrow geographical and temporal limits mean that all the selected novels, their differences notwithstanding, are written in the same cultural context. In my introduction, I try to pinpoint this contemporary context, with reference to ideas about the medicalisation of society, to what the sociologist Arthur W. Frank calls “a postmodern experience of illness”, and to the contemporary interest in “personal narratives”. This interest expresses itself in, for instance, the fairly recent genre of *pathography*, that is, autobiographical or biographical accounts that describe personal experiences of illness, treatment, and sometimes death. Pathography serves as an important context for the literary accounts examined in this study, and is discussed in a separate section. In chapter VI, this discussion is then extended in relation to Anders Paulrud’s novel *Fjärilen i min hjärna* (The Butterfly in My Brain).

The first chapter of the dissertation presents the field of scholarship referred to as *Medical Humanities*, focusing in particular on that part which is called *Literature and Medicine*. The chapter outlines the aims and development of these fields, thus presenting a dynamic and comparatively new scholarly field to a Swedish audience. Possible divisions of the field are considered, with particular emphasis on the philosopher Martyn Evans’s perspective of *Medical Humanities* and how the field has developed during the past decades in response to perceived deficiencies in the medical sector. I also stress the desire for reciprocity, so medicine and the humanities may both benefit from the exchange. The focus then shifts to *Literature and Medicine* and its fundamental questions. These deal with the centrality of narrativity, expressed for example by the physician and literary scholar Rita Charon in connection to what she terms *Narrative Medicine*. They also concern how literature has the potential to convey knowledge and experiences; and how literature therefore can be used as a tool within education and professional ethics. Such “applied readings” do not fall within the scope of this study, however, even though it may provide a point of departure for critical explorations in that area. My aim as a literary scholar is rather to bring out patterns and interpret meanings which can deepen the reader’s understanding of both the novels and the themes of illness.

Chapter I provides a theoretical background for the individual literary analyses, but also functions as an introduction to the field. It can furthermore be regarded as an extensive overview of previous scholarship in the field of *Literature and Medicine*. I conclude with some examples of literary accounts of illnesses often discussed within the field, along with a presentation of the seminal work *Illness as Metaphor* (1977) by the author Susan Sontag.

In chapter II, “Sjukdomen som exil” (Illness as Exile), I examine Carl-Henning Wijkmark’s *Stundande natten* (Impending Darkness, 2007) and Maria Fagerberg’s *Svart dam* (Queen of Black, 2003), two texts that treat fatal illness in realistic or realistic-symbolic novels. The analysis also establishes a foundation for the coming analyses through the fundamental illness

theme “illness as exile”, which plays an important role in several of the other novels as well. Wijkmark’s and Fagerberg’s novels function as a kind of adventure stories, and I contrast their modern and secularised depiction of illness and death with the medieval *Ars moriendi*, *The Art of Dying*. I interpret the sickroom and, even more so, the sickbed in the two novels as *chronotopes* in Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense, that is, places where time is condensed in space, “thickens”, and becomes artistically visible. This interpretation also resonates with *Ars moriendi*’s depiction of *Moriens* on his deathbed. The analysis illustrates how the process of dying and the dissolution of the self are described in a contemporary existence where religion is no longer capable of providing consolation, and where cultural expressions – literature and popular music – fail to give lasting comfort. The novels are also seen in relation to the contemporary pathography genre. Finally, the chapter turns to the symbols employed. In Wijkmark’s case, the focus is especially on the main character’s momentous encounter with a bat, which I see in connection to the eighth of Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, and how the end of the exile, that is dying, is portrayed in the two novels. Wijkmark’s novel is also discussed in connection with Erik Gustaf Geijer’s poem “Natthimmelen” (The Night Sky), to which the novel owes its title.

Chapter III is entitled “Den sjuka kvinnokroppen som slagfält” (The Sick Female Body as a Battlefield) and treats Per Olov Enquist’s *Boken om Blanche och Marie* (2004, translated as *The Book about Blanche and Marie*, 2006; also published as *The Story of Blanche and Marie*). The novel centres on Blanche Wittman, who suffers from two illnesses: first from hysteria, then from radiation-induced cancer. The latter results in her having to have extensive amputations – in the novel, both her legs and one arm are amputated, resulting in her having to move about in a small wooden box on wheels. The two illnesses are markedly different; one is related to a symbolising and physical language, the other silent but, through its ties to the earlier illness, equally laden with symbolism. Blanche Wittman was one of the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot’s most famous patients during the late 19th century, and the novel mainly concerns these two historical figures, together with Marie Curie, whose assistant Wittman becomes according to the novel’s fiction. I read Enquist’s novel both in dialogue with source material about the historical Blanche Wittman, and with culture-historical analyses of hysteria, an illness which has been interpreted and historicised to an exceptional degree.

The analysis observes how Blanche Wittman is portrayed as both object and subject, and how the textually constructed subjectivity must be called into question. I also emphasise the narrator’s open and tentative relationship to the story, a narrative technique which is typical for Enquist. The analysis takes as its point of departure the famous painting “Une leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière” (1887), where Wittman is displayed by Charcot in front of a number of men dressed in black, and the doubleness Enquist finds in the

painting. Central to the novel's portrayal of illness are the legs that Wittman loses through amputation and that are part of her paradoxical image of freedom summarised in the phrase "stand up on your legs and walk".

Chapter IV, "Ätstörningen som gränssjukdom" (Eating Disorder as a Problem of Boundaries) considers two first-person narratives, read in terms of bulimia and anorexia: Åsa Ericsson's *Kräklek* (Vomiting Game, 2002) and Sara Mannheimer's *Reglerna* (The Rules, 2008). In the novels, eating disorders are portrayed as a sort of *illness of boundaries*: how there is a focus on controlling the body's boundaries and on the transgression of those boundaries. The perspective is partly the opposite of that in Enquist's text: instead of a man writing about an illness associated with women, at a historical distance of slightly more than a century, these two women write about a quite contemporary illness, which, as was the case with hysteria a hundred years ago, has come to be seen as a symbol of something typically female. Here, I regard anorexia and bulimia as two bodily practices that emerge from the same way of thinking. The chapter begins with a detailed discussion of eating disorders, in which I employ analytical tools from anthropology, feminism, and psychoanalytical theory to explore eating disorders as an expression of boundary problems and of deeply seated, symbolical conceptions of women and the female body. The main ideas I have drawn on are developed by the feminist philosopher Susan Bordo, and by the anthropologist Jorun Solheim, who expands on the work of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva. I emphasise the notions of "the excessive woman" and the female body as a particularly "open" body. The novels are then interpreted, and related to this background.

Ericsson's title, *Kräklek*, is a pun which contains or alludes to the words for vomit ("kräk", "kräkning"), game or play ("lek"), love ("kärlek") as well as to the words for wretch ("kräk") and, possibly, for violation ("kränkning"). Ericsson's account of bulimia portrays a boundary invasion where food and sexuality play similar roles, and in which the concepts of flowing and running are relevant to both theme and linguistic form. Mannheimer's novel can, to an even greater extent than Ericsson's, be seen to borrow traits from the *Bildungsroman*. The first-person narrator must, according to her own rules, only eat "One wedge of the right kind of apple, wound in the right direction with the right kind of fibrous alga, and powdered with dried and powder-grated seeds". The novel depicts a strict, anorectic system of boundaries and regulations, where the self is claustrophobically restrictive and with a disciplinary language closely tied to the theme. *Reglerna* – which are introduced with a motto from the *Torab*: "You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk" – connects anorexia with various philosophical, religious, and pop-cultural contexts. The novel thus becomes a portrayal of how eating disorders are shaped by our culture, in the form of contemporary cultural ideas as well as of traditional thoughts from the past two millennia.

Chapter V, “Smittan som paradoxal livgivare” (Contagion as Paradoxical Life-Giver), analyses Torgny Lindgren’s novel *Pölsan* (2002, translated as *Hash*, 2004). *Pölsan* is not a realistic story but rather a kind of ambiguous allegory, the manner of writing which has previously been called Lindgren’s “poetics of ambiguity”. Instead of portraying illness as deviation, Lindgren inverts the duality of immunity and contagion. Contagion is thus depicted as something positive that brings life, a sort of connectedness, whereas deviation can be referred to as *an extreme sense of health* – untouchability and isolation described in terms of immunity. The immunity/health duality, as well as Lindgren’s tendency to use those concepts figuratively, are discussed in detail, but I engage only briefly with the Biblical themes that recur in Lindgren’s novel. Pulmonary tuberculosis and lung hash are fundamental to how the novel is constructed; in Swedish, the two concepts have very similar synonyms (“lungсот” and “lungmos”), and as symbols, they are closely interconnected in the novel. The ambiguity of tuberculosis offers a key to interpreting this superficially simple but in fact quite complex account of two men who arrive in the province of Västerbotten, Sweden, and become fascinated by the local hash varieties. The chapter also discusses how the novel relates to the myths about tuberculosis that have arisen in literary and cultural history, and *Pölsan* is read in connection to both the myths of tuberculosis and to sanatorium narratives. The character Ellen in Lillsjöliden emerges as a key figure. In her is combined, in one character, the antithesis to the romanticising myths of tuberculosis, a classic figure of illness, and a Biblical image of kenosis. I investigate the sick role and how illness may turn into a new identity, and also touch upon the novel’s tendency to self-reference and metafiction.

Chapter VI, finally, is called “Sjukdom som självframställning” (Illness as a Fashioning of the Self). This theme means that the analysis of Anders Paulrud’s *Fjärilen i min hjärna* (The Butterfly in My Brain, 2008) mainly focuses on the narrator’s specific situation. The novel, which makes a distinct claim to be autobiographical, was written during the end of the author’s life and published less than two weeks after his death. It thematises two experiences of illness: first the brain-tumour that the protagonist Anders survives; and then the lung cancer that, a few years later, results in his death. In the novel, illness is thematically portrayed in terms of a journey or exile. Even more prominent, though, is the illness narrative as a fashioning of the self, as Paulrud accentuates the continuity between his life and his death. He conducts a dialogue with numerous other works and authors, which come to work as a kind of “community of letters”, through which the author can make his death more universal and less lonely. This dialogue is maintained in particular with Laurence Sterne, his novel *A Sentimental Journey*, and its main character Yorick; but also with Italo Svevo’s *A Short Sentimental Journey* and Jean-Dominique Bauby’s *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*.

The analysis discusses the autobiographical and fictive features of the novel, and how it relates to the genres autobiography, autofiction, and pathography. The analysis also considers the special medial attention that the novel received when the author passed away as the book was published. Finally, Paulrud's use of symbols is investigated, with the butterfly emerging not only as a traditional symbol for the soul but also as a highly physical symbol. This becomes evident from the X-ray picture of Anders's brain, shown to the protagonist as well as used for the novel's cover. Both symbolism and intertextual relations are given their special meaning through the novel's explicit fashioning of the self, and the butterfly may be interpreted as representing the novel itself.

The conclusion of this study brings the various novels and thematic analyses together, and outlines a future for the field of *Medical Humanities* and *Literature and Medicine*, as well as a possible development of scholarship about illness as literary theme. The aim is to persuade the reader that "literary ills" are rewarding and important to explore – both because of what they can tell us about the experience of illness and because of what they can tell us about literature.

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