

I dialog med muntliga och skriftliga berättartraditioner

En undersökning av svenska sjömäns levnadsberättelser

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Akademisk avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i etnologi vid Stockholms universitet som offentligen kommer att försvaras fredagen den 8 juni 2012 kl. 10.00 i hörsal 4, hus B, Universitetsvägen 10 B.

Abstract

A dialogue with oral and written traditions. A study of Swedish sailors' life narratives

This is a study of autobiographical letters written in the early 1950s by seven Swedish sailors. The letters were contributions to a project at the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm aiming to collect and publicize workers' autobiographical narratives. The aim of this thesis is to analyze how the sailors composed their narratives in dialogue not only with heroic epics and other oral and written literary traditions but also with folklore studies and with contemporary public conversations about Sweden. According to Bachtin, any given text must be understood as a dialogue with the entire history of literature and the analysis in this study shows that the sailors' narratives are composed according to the pattern of the returning Homeric hero: the hero by destiny, the hero by action, and the hero by tradition. In terms of contents the letters are centered on two major themes: the two world wars and the transformation of Sweden from a poor rural society into a modern well-fare state. These themes are dramatized in plots, test-conflicts, motifs, and motif-complexes (functions, motifs, well-known from oral traditions and classical drama. An experiment in which two of the letters are subjected to "ethnopoetic transcription" shows the nature and extent of the oral idiom used by the writers. Two other writers display their literary ambitions through an abundance of paraphrases and hidden quotations. For the museum staff, the sailors' contributions were problematic. The verbal artistry of the writers challenged assumptions that workers' life narratives should be "simple and ingenious descriptions" and transparent sources of ethnological data. Furthermore, the sailors' frankness about Sweden's and their own part in the world wars challenged the myth of the neutrality and peacefulness of the Swedish *folkhem*.

Keywords: *life narrative, dialogue, ethnopoetics, letter-writing, motif-complex, test-conflict, Homeric epic, world wars, the Swedish folkhem.*

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