Trolling Historiography
Kerstin Ekman's Rövarna i Skuleskogen *and the History from Beyond*

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Kerstin Ekman's novel *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* (1988) starts in the mist of time.[1] A tree falls on a giant working in a northern forest. In the fern, the giant spots a troll who he asks for help. That troll is Skord, the protagonist of the novel. The novel then sets out to tell the reader of how Skord over some five, maybe six hundred years integrates into 'human society', describing the roles Skord—as a hybrid figure, straddling the divides between animal, human, and mythical being—is assigned in this society, or societies. Doing so, through its nigh on immortal hero, this picaresque epic tells a history of Sweden, from the late middle-ages onwards.

Upon its publication, it was not the story that Swedish society was used to hearing. For even though it included oblique references to numerous kings and famous battles, Descartes and Linnaeus, the novel broke new ground in the depiction of the Swedish past, some scholars have argued, by focusing on peripheral geographical regions and marginal cognitive faculties (Forsås Scott 2014; Hart 2019). The novel, others suggest, contributed to a growing movement chipping away at the building blocks of postwar Sweden's modernizing ideology (Wright, 2005; Wright, 1991).[2] If the previous decade had seen the publication of a string of novels highlighting the human toll of industrial progress,[3] the scope is now widened and deepened. *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* has been seen to

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1 Ekman 1988 for the Swedish original and Ekman 1999 in English translation.

2 For a study of that modernizing ideology itself, see Wiklund 2006.

3 Such as Sara Lidman's seven novels *Jernbanan*, Per Anders Fogelström's 'Stad-serien', Sven Delblanc's novels about 'Hedeby', and of course Kerstin Ekman's own four novels *Kvinnorna och staden.*

problematize the very belief in progress itself (Jarrick 1989: 244). One scholar found the novel's recasting of intellectual history so drastic that it merited a philosophical response (Haverty Rugg, 1998).

Much less noted, however, is that the novel articulates its historiographical intervention in large parts through epistemic practices: Skord is constantly involved in esoteric pursuits.[4] In every new époque in which he finds himself, Skord gravitates to the marginal fields of learning which are often called western esotericism, such as astrology, Kabbalah, alchemy, or mesmerism.[5] His doing so is in fact one of the few constants in the novel's emplotment of the Swedish past. Where every new chapter sees Skord surrounded by a new cast of characters, his interest in esotericism remains. Alchemy alone runs throughout half of the chapters!

To understand the purpose of narrating the forgotten—some say secret—intellectual history of western esotericism[6] with the help of a troll, I will in this article situate the novel within the conventions of its genre: magical realism. More precisely, I will draw on a conversation, which has seen the political context behind the emergence of such genre conventions as one marked by defeat. I will suggest that this novel associates a liminal region to liminal practices in order to likewise narrate the Swedish past from a sense of loss. Letting a troll pursue alchemy, it takes the perspective of figures and practices which that history had condemned. By exploring marginalized cosmologies, it asks if we may one day share their fate.

The Location and the Pursuits, *Limes* and Liminality, Histories and History

Already before the publication of this novel in 1988, Kerstin Ekman had become one of the central authors in Sweden. A member of the Swedish academy since 1978, she formed an integral part of what has been seen as "an exceptionally strong generation of novelists" (Brantly 2007: 325-326) born in the mid-1930s, including the likes of Per Olov Enquist, Lars Gustafsson, Birgitta Trotzig, and PC Jersild. And with *Rövarna i Skuleskogen,* it was her time to turn to western esotericism. Many of her generational peers had already tackled the theme: Enquist had examined the concept of health and healing through a focus on mesmerism in *Magnetisörens femte vinter* (1964); Gustafsson had articulated a sense of alienation through images of alchemists and homunculi in *Den egentliga berättelsen om herr Arenander* (1966), *Herr Gustafsson själv*

[4] It should of course be noted that the fact that other Ekman novels have been immersed in esoteric lines of thinking have been explored, notably by Maria Schottenius (1992).

[5] For how these practices came to be included under one conceptual umbrella, see Hanegraaff 2012.

[6] For the secrecy, see Gabay 2004; for it being forgotten in postwar Sweden, see Thurfjell 2019: 140-151; 254-255.

(1971) and *Sigismund* (1977); and Jersild had shown an (ironic) interest in the new scholarship on the holy grail in *Den femtionde frälsaren*(1984).[7]

But, with the partial exception of Gustafsson, her peers had *not* set their novels in Sweden.[8] They had *not* been primarily concerned with Swedish history. In contrast, Ekman has stated that *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* is a novel *about* history (Haverty Rugg 1998: 431).[9] And while it starts temporally in the mist of time, the novel spatially has a precise location. The novel starts (and ends) in the Skule forest.[10]

Located in Ångermanland, halfway up the Gulf of Bothnia, the Skule forest was a so called *gränsskog*, a forest so impenetrable that it demarcated one cultural-historical region from another. "There is no forest as wild as Skule," the novel also tells us. "People have always tried to carve and burn themselves into the forest. And when that has not worked […] they have tried to bind it up with names" (Ekman 1988: 276-277).[11] Unlike Hadrian's Wall, it formed a natural *limes.* Skule once marked the end of Sweden.[12] The long arm of Stockholm could not reach it: "The forest continued to bloom. It bloomed senselessly, exhilaratingly, beyond their names […] The forest bloomed without limit, it bloomed long after they had ceased speaking, after their gaping moths were pierced by roots" (Ekman 1988: 277).[13]

This made the forest (and its northern hinterland) a refuge. As the novel's title suggests, it provided a hiding spot for brigands and their like: "North of Skule lived […] the worst people on earth: murderers, scoundrels, whores and evildoers." It was considered to be the case that "north of [the Skule forest], Satan, who lived in the underworld, had put his black thumb" (Ekman 1988: 34).[14]

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[7] And the list does not end there. If we include poetry, we should especially note Göran Sonnevi's interest in alchemy. For this, see Sandqvist, 1989.

[8] While *Herr Gustafsson själv* mostly speaks of Sweden, if including crucial excursions to the continent, *Sigismund* is explicitly narrated from Berlin.

[9] This was not of course the first time Ekman had explored the contingencies of Swedish history. She famously does so in her aforementioned Katrineholm series of novels, also called *Kvinnorna och staden* (*Häxringarna* (1974), *Springkällan* (1976), Änglahuset (1979), *En stad av ljus* (1983). For its meaning, see Schottenius 2012.

[10] In the 1980s, Ekman moved to the Swedish north, where she wrote this novel.

[11] All translations unless otherwise stated are mine. The original quote: "*Det finns ingen så vild skog som Skule* […] *Människor har alltid försökt hugga och bränna sig in i skogen. Och när de inte har rått på den* […] *då har de försökt binda den med namn*".

[12] For the history of Skule, see Johansson 1984.

[13] "*skogen fortsatte att blomma. Den blommade vettlöst och rusigt bortom deras namn.* […] *Skogen blommade utan gräns, den blommande länge sedan de blivit stumma, sedan deras gapande munnar blivit genomdragna med rötter.*"

[14] "*Norr om Skule bodde* […] *det värsta folket på hela jordklotet, mördare, skälmar, horkonor och illgärningsmän.*" "*Norr om [Skuleskogen] hade Satan som bodde i underjorden satt sin svarta tumme*".

Indeed, in the fictional universe of the novel, Skuleskogen did not only constitute a historical frontier.[15]

Evoking the other sense of *limes*, the forest was also cast as a threshold.[16] Situated in between two spaces whose difference was more than physical, the forest is described as a portal between distinct realms. As the home to both giants and trolls, the forest harbours beings for whom metropolitan taxonomies have no place. In the Skule forest social conventions are ignored and the laws of nature occasionally suspended: when needed, Skord, the novel's protagonist, is for example able to leave his body by taking another being's body in possession, often a bird's, and thereby gaining a new perspective.

While such abilities recede once Skord leaves the forest to more closely integrate into society, his interest in seeing things anew remains. Throughout the novel, Skord never stops learning. At first, upon emerging in the forest, he does not even have any thoughts—only a sense of fluttering behind his ears—nor does he have much of a memory. But as soon as he comes into contact with society that changes. Set in the Middle Ages, all the first chapters see him building new skill sets: story-telling and image-making with a few orphans at the edge of the forest in the first; literacy and foreign languages with a village priest in the second; and astrology with the forest brigands in the third. These chapters are followed by four chapters, stretching from the late sixteenth century to the Enlightenment, which focus mostly on alchemy, sometimes in relation to other practices, such as various branches of medicine, while the last chapter, which takes place in the nineteenth century, sees Skord turning to mesmerism. *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* has therefore by Per Wästberg been read as a "Bildungsroman of human consciousness." But it is a certain kind of learning, which, as Heidi Hart points out, does not end with what is human (Hart 2019: 11).

From the 1500s onwards, Skord's wish to see more than what is empirically at hand becomes increasingly articulated through esotericism. From the deck of Tarot cards—which he is given by a medieval brigand (101) and that he always carries with him to guide his choices—to his final position as an unorthodox doctor hypnotizing his patients, he engages ways in which to find a portal to the hidden dimensions of existence, to new kinds of perceptions. To him the world is never just what it seems. Reflecting on his life, he says that "I thought I had come to this world to find its secrets and to praise them… For I saw how the world was full of tricks and wizardry. It was an enigma or a joke. Someone

[15] The novel also notes how Sami populations, who lived around and north of Skule, were being pushed back. In the second chapter, set in the late middle ages, the narrator describes how a priest tries to prevent the local population to seek their medical help.

[16] For this sense of limes, see, eg, De Rijk 2016.

must have laid the tracks, someone or perhaps a few. And I thought I was to be the one who would make it respond" (Ekman 1988: 293).[17]

As progeny of the *limes,* Skord is interested in liminality, also in metropolitan environments. He is especially drawn to processes leading to other ontological orders or different psychological states.[18] With a fable-like tone, the third-person narrator[19] describes at length the rituals of alchemical experiments and their appeal to Skord: "Skord found the [alchemist's] activities […] pleasant […]. One lived in the solemn circle of speculation and thought. The depth of the eternal enigmas gave him an immense sense of well-being" (Ekman 1988: 158).[20]

He feels at home in alchemy. And no wonder, maybe: like him, who, born a troll, never quite becomes human, alchemy constituted a hybrid practice. It drew on different intellectual domains. Belonging at once to an old mystical tradition and a new scientific one, it combined an exploration in the physical world with a curiosity about the spiritual beyond. Such a mixture could even be said to take place in the narrative itself. High-theoretical speculation is interspersed with bodily description. At one point, during an alchemical experiment, the narrator notes how "[Skord] sat quietly a moment while a fly buzzed about, testing noses and the backs of hands. The room was getting very hot. There was a strong odour from the armpits" (Ekman 1988: 194).[21]

Because it entertains the possibility of other cosmologies and pays little heed to realistic conventions, *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* is often considered as Ekman's foray into magical realism.[22] It deploys the genre's supernatural tropes to write about history. In two insightful essays about the novel, Rochelle Wright has argued that, as such, it "is a novel about how history comes to be written […] Ekman's emphasis is not on veracity, but on the impossibility, even the irrelevance, of objectivity" (Wright 1991: 294). The fact that Skord is a troll, "a sort of *picaro*," she continues, "is a signal to the reader that the author

[17] "*Jag trodde att jag kommit in i världen för att finna hemligheterna och prisa dem* […] *För jag såg ju att världen var full av knepigheter och trollkarlstrick. Den var en gåta eller ett skämstycke. Någon måste ha lagt ut spåren, Någon eller Några. Och jag trodde att det var jag som skulle tala till den så att den svarade*".

[18] For a classical expression of the relation of liminality and in-between periods, see Turner 1967, especially the chapter "Betwixt and Between".

[19] Though the novel has a third-person narrator, Forsås-Scott notes that "the omniscience of this narrator is modest, with the perspectives of the liminal central character foregrounded throughout" (2014: 79).

[20] "*Skord fann [alkemistens] verksamhet* […] *angenäm* […] *Man levde i spekulationernas och tankarnas högtidliga cirkelgång. Djupet av eviga gåtor gav bottenlös trevnad*".

[21] "*[Skord] satt tyst en stund medan [en] fluga* […] *surrade omkring och prövade näsor och handryggar. Rummet började nu bli mycket varmt. Det doftade starkt ur armhålorna*".

[22] See eg Fröberg Idling 2015. As Maria Schottenius notes, "Kerstin Ekman's books are very different from each other. She keeps trying out new forms" (Schottenius 2012).

has chosen not to be bound by the limitations of any conventional definition of realism, and that she is under no implicit obligation to be 'accurate' or 'truthful' about historical people or events" (Wright 1991: 299). The novel's interest rather lies in exploring how "human beings' collective sense of who they are is determined by their perception of who they were [, how] history is a group of stories, many narrative strands woven together" (Wright 2005: 161). Ekman has herself also stated that *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* is *not* a conventional historical novel (Haverty Rugg 1998: 431).

But magical realism and the historical novel are not necessarily contradictory. Some magical realism, Perry Anderson has recently demonstrated, constitutes a re-conceptualized continuation of the historical novel. This perspective will guide my reading. For, as I will argue, by situating Ekman's magical realism in the context of the original assumptions of the historical novel, we can comprehend why a novel about the history of Sweden gives such disproportionate attention to alchemy, indeed to depicting historically real alchemists. It suggests that history cannot be reduced to stories. It rather seems to indicate that certain perspectives are more important than others when narrating society, past and present, and that they, as such, impact its future direction.[23] With the hope of complementing Wright's focus on narrative with one on dominant ideological frameworks, I will read the choice of casting a troll as protagonist as a sign pointing less to the irrelevance of objectivity than to the force of History. For, as I aim to show in the section below, the novel, besides being part of a literary wave exploring its own narrative techniques, was one of many texts, which at this juncture, trained a new gaze on the Swedish past.

500 Years of Solitude: Magical Realism as a Down-Beat Historical Novel

In his seminal work *The Historical Novel* (1937), Gyorgy Lukacs writes that a historical novel depicts a transformation in popular life. Set in a context defined by a crisis where two ways of life confront each other, the novel's protagonist makes a transitional stage in history visible. Lukacs' paradigmatic example is the nineteenth century novels by Walter Scott. For what these novels stage, according to Anderson, "is a tragic contest between declining and ascending forms of social life," "the […] collision between historically distinct times and their characteristic social forms—what [Ernst] Bloch would later call *Ungleichzeitigkeit*" (Anderson 2011). And while the novels honour the losers, they uphold the historical necessity of the winners. The historical novel gives, in short, an up-beat pre-history of the present (Lukacs 1969: 57).

[23] Forsås-Scott 2014 has already evoked as much. With reference to especially the prominence of esotericism, I will in the present article try to work out what that means.

That optimistic take on historical necessity lost its high literary lustre with WWI.[24] So when the form was reinvented in the early postwar decades, it was so with a difference. As magical realism, it was written, Anderson argues, from the "experience of defeat": "the distorted, fantastical shapes of an alternative past," which Alejo Carpentier, Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentos and others conjured up, "stem from the thwarted hopes of [their] present." History no longer meant an inevitable progress, but rather "what […] went wrong," that is, military putsches and dictatorships (Anderson 2011). And that literary genre, originally written in the face of Latin American tyranny and torture, soon spread across the Atlantic.

As exemplified by *Rövarna i Skuleskogen,* it also came to Sweden.[25] If we retain Anderson's definition of its originating moment—as a distorted historical novel written from the experience of defeat—there is no missing the paradox: Sweden had not experienced military putsches or dictatorships. But, Ekman's novel suggests, its people had experienced an imposed sense of historical necessity.

In the first chapters of *Rövarna i Skuleskogen*, such a telos of history is only hinted at as Skord goes from belonging to the outcasts of society to its elite, and back, multiple times. While his first friends are a few homeless orphans, his first employment is that of a servant to a (Catholic) priest. He then forms part of the brigands in the Skule forest before having a second brush with a representative of spiritual power, if this time with a scholar.

But as Skord winds up for a second time with the brigands in the forest, that underlying sense of historical necessity is tangible. The long arm of the State had reached Skule. The brigands had become merchants. Skord notes that "brigands used to be free men […] now you seem incorporated in the kingdom of Sweden." The brigand responds: "outside or inside […] in the kingdom we live" (Ekman 1988: 287).[26] A new, dominant way of life is now spreading also into that outcast refuge, the northern forest; Stockholm had started making its

[24] Historical novels continued to be written and reinvented. Their loss in prestige have by some been seen as a patriarchal bias in the Marxist schema of Lukacs. See for example Wallace 2004.

[25] Ekman was not the only one responsible for this. Among the other Swedish novelists who at this time wrote magical realism, we should at least mention Göran Tunström. We should also acknowledge the importance of Selma Lagerlöf, whose novels Ekman clearly pays tribute to and which sometimes have been described as magically realist *avant la lettre.* Another qualification that maybe needs making is that this novel is in many ways closer to the magical realism of Günter Grass than that of any of the famous Latin Americans. As we saw in a quote before, it not only shares Grass's sensitivity to body odours. Skord, as the child who does not grow up, is also reminiscent of Oscar, the protagonist in *The Tin Drum.* For like him, he is a witness to historical turning points, offering a new perspective which sees through the mendacity and bigotry of "adult" life.

[26] "*förr var rövare fria män* […] *nu tycks ni inlemmade i konungariket Sverige.*" The brigand: "*utanför eller innanför* […] *I konungariket lever vi*".

presence felt. And, as Arne Jarrick has pointed out, in the novel the spread of (its) "civilization" does not betoken a humanization (as commonly defined), but rather evokes a reduced space for individual autonomy (Jarrick 1989: 240).

Ekman was not alone in shining a new light on history. In the decade before the publication of her novel, novelists, historians, and political theorists had started wondering whether the motives of the State necessarily were in conjunction with the wellbeing of society (Ljunggren 2009: 213).[27] That marked an important rupture, which in many ways went against the grain not only of historiography but also of history. For we should remember that Sweden emerged as an independent nation through a religious reform its people did not want (Frängsmyr 2000: 46). After expelling the Danes, Gustav Vasa imported Lutheranism from Germany. In what has been seen as one of the early cases of top-down revolutions, the State, absorbing the Church, first forcibly converted the entire population and then, through the new State-Church, articulated piety and civility together: in the catechism, upon whose content all adults were continuously tested, being a faithful protestant and being a good citizen coincided.[28] But unlike many later instances elsewhere of imposed reforms, this one worked: the State rarely suffered from a sense of lacking legitimacy; in spite of the fact that the Swedish State has a longer history of demanding sacrifices of its subjects for its projects than almost any other in Europe, it has at the same time overwhelmingly enjoyed the people's trust.[29] Until shortly before the novel's publication, most historians had also tended to view the deep historical roots of social engineering as crucial for the growth of a prosperous welfare state, or, if we change metaphor, as laying the foundation needed to build the famed people's home (Wittrock 2012: 90).[30] The State and society were in a seemingly symbiotic relationship.

While part of a larger trend, Ekman's novel chose an original vantage point to suggest that this relationship had, in fact, been asymmetrical. It is predominantly based on alchemy and its related practices that the novel narrates how, during half a millennium, the people endured the State's attempts at altering them, reforming their cosmologies and reshaping their environment.[31] The novel depicts Skord's immersion in the history of Swedish

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[27] For the more general case in Sweden, see Wiklund 2006: 231; 256; 263; 275-276. For how a "history from below" came about and spread in Europe, see Iggers 2004: 88.

[28] For the Reformation as the first top-down revolution, see Taylor 2018: 85-145; for the relation state and church. See Henrik Stenius, "The Good Life is a Life of Conformity"; Dag Thorkildsen, "Religious Identity and Nordic Identity," in Sørensen & Stråth, 1997: 162-163, 139.

[29] This paved the so-called Nordic *Sonderweg* to modernity (Sørensen & Stråth 1997: 7).

[30] Wiklund notes that the main narrative on the past started changing around 1975 (Wiklund 2006: 154-156).

[31] It is on this note that my reading differs from Haverty Rugg's. For while troubled by what she brings up, especially her charge of racism, I don't think that the novel places the blame on reason and writing for the brutality of history, but on a certain

alchemy through his collaborations with historically real alchemists, such as Forsius (1560-1624) and Bureaus (1568-1652) (whose names are merged into the fictionalized Bosonius), Franck/Drakenstierna (1590-1661), von Pajkull (1662-1707), Urban Hiärne (1641-1724).[32] And in this domain, the outlines of History and the experience of its necessity become increasingly clear.

When Skord first comes into contact with alchemy in sixteenth century Uppsala, the attempt to make gold, by transmuting matter, seemed secondary. "Bosonius worked and prayed" in his laboratory, the narrator tells us. "He was not a magician. That was just talk. He was an erudite man. […] It wasn't even the gold he sought, at least not the usual gold that glittered in your eyes—*aurum vulgi*. He sought *lapis invisibilitatis* [the stone of invisibility]" (Ekman 1988: 158).[33] Alchemical experimentation was primarily motivated by the hermeticist beliefs, arriving from Renaissance Italy[34], about accessing a hidden wisdom which could provide answers to questions about the origin of creation. "In the laboratory, Bosonius did not cook gold. He sought the stone of wisdom," that is, the stone which "acted as a creator or as an agent of the Creator" (Ekman 1988: 168).[35]

As he becomes an alchemist in his own right, Skord doubles down on the theoretical, mystical side: "if there was anything for which [Skord] felt a sense of reverence," the narrator notes, "then it was ruminations" (Ekman 1988: 236).[36] The same goes for von Paykull, with whom Skord "conversed about the *chymical* science." They agreed to be "turned inwards, towards the secret, starry *Gestirn* that existed within the human being" (Ekman 1988: 237).[37]

Alchemy formed part of a larger cosmology. It propounded the view that everything was connected. "Everything up there had an analogue down here.

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kind of rationality. To show this I will situate the novel in a context questioning not the Enlightenment as such, but a sort of instrumental State-rationality whose proponents not seldom invoked the Enlightenment: as will be clearer in the last sections, I believe that the debate in which Ekman intervenes is less one on the status of Cartesian modernity in 1980s American scholarship than one on the productivist imperatives guiding policy in 1970s and 1980s Sweden.

[32] For their roles in Swedish alchemy, see Carl-Michael Edenborg, 'Alchemy in Sweden', in Bogdan & Hammer 2016: 33-42.

[33] "*Bosonius arbetade och bad* […] *Någon trollkarl var han inte. Det var bara folkprat. Han var en lärd man* […] *Det var inte ens guldet han sökte, i varje fall inte det vanliga guldet som blänkte i* ögonen—*aurum vulgi. Han sökte lapis invisibilitatis*".

[34] Henrik Bogdan and Kjell Lekeby, 'Magic in the Early Modern Period in Sweden', 249; Susanna Åkerman, 'Paracelsianism in Sweden', 425 in Bogdan & Hammer 2016: 249; 425. For the classical text on this, see Yates 1964.

[35] "*I Bosoni laboratorium kokades inte guld. Där söktes Vishetens Sten*," "[stenen som] *verkade som skapare eller som en Skaparens agent*".

[36] "*Fanns det något [Skord] kände vördnad för så var det grubbel*".

[37] "*samtalade om den chymiska vetenskapen* […] *vänd[a] inåt mot det hemliga, stjärnuppfyllda Gestirn som fanns inom människan*".

Nothing was alien," we learn. "Humans were made of the same substance as the stars." For this reason, the narrator pleads, they "must open themselves up to the light of the stars!" (Ekman 1988: 166-165).[38]

Soon the religious motivations would disappear. As Bosonius teams up with a scientist who, though once a hermeticist, now works at the court, the question of creation and salvation never comes up.[39] As Skord will learn upon its successful completion, the experiment had another purpose. What they produced was to be used in domains useful for the State: weaponry, shipping, time-keeping. Though the results turned out to be bogus, alchemy's Faustian bargain with worldly power had been sealed (Ekman 1988: 189; 218).

By the eighteenth century, the metaphysical rumination about the cosmos had given way to a new kind of practice in bureaucratized laboratories. Skord found it difficult adapting: "[Skord] could not remember ever being so bored. He ground and pulverised, sublimated, distilled, cooked." Together with the others "he was to perform the simplest operations countless times in exactly the same way and write down the result after they had weighed, measured and tested them. It seemed to Skord as if Dr Hiärne only believed in the Secret on certain days" (Ekman 1988: 318-319).[40]

Through Skord's engagement in alchemy, the novel, as per Lukacs's definition, brings out a historical transformation. The novel maps the introduction of a new knowledge paradigm where the exact measuring and controlled experimentation of the visible world comes off as more important than pondering its hidden deep structure. It narrates what goes missing once the State discovers the utility of laboratory experiments, by showing how the alchemists ceased being an intellectual milieu set apart by codes and conventions, and slowly but surely became state-employed chemists.

But unlike Lukacs' protagonists, Skord does not contribute to actually changing his moment. The dominant historical thrust of the transition rather marginalizes Skord's knowledge practice. This is magical realism as a downbeat historical novel. If we follow Anderson's definition of the latter, we should note that *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* gives an account of the Swedish past by focusing: (1) on how a kind of creeping rationalization invades domains often seen as irrational or maybe para-rational, as brigandry and alchemy; and (2) on how

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[38] "*Allt som var däruppe hade sin liknelse härnere. Ingenting var främmande*" (166). "*Människan var gjord av samma slags ämnen som stjärnorna*" (165). "*Människorna måste* öppna *sig för stjärnornas ljus*" (165).

[39] This physician, who remains without name, studied at many of the crucial sites of hermeticism in Renaissance Italy, such as Pisa, Florence, Sienna (Ekman 1988: 181); for hermeticism in Renaissance Italy, see Hanegraaff 2012: 28-73.

[40] "*[Skord] kunde inte minnas att han i sitt liv haft så tråkigt. Han malde och pulveriserade, sublimerade, destillerade, kokte* […] *Tillsammans med andra* […] *skulle [han] utföra de enfaldigaste förrättningar otaliga gånger* på *precis samma vis och skriva opp resultatet sedan de vägt, mätt och prövat det. Det föreföll Skord som om doktor Hiärne bara vissa dagar trodde på Hemligheten*".

this led to an integration of these domains into others due to a growing focus on the national economy and scientific production.[41] It shows, if you will, how histories started merging into (one) History.[42]

But why should that integration of alchemy be cast as an experience of defeat, we may ask; doesn't it rather evoke a scientific approval and thus a success? In order to answer these questions, I want to expand on what alchemy and its development were seen as signifying around the time of this novel's publication, before finally looking into what and who such developments marginalized and even victimized.

Alchemy without Mystery: Homo Faber and the Ecological Crisis

In the scholarship on alchemy available to Ekman when writing her novel, there were two important scholars who had discerned a rupture within the history of alchemy similar to that described in the novel, and they were Carl Gustav Jung and Mircea Eliade.[43] Like Ekman, they saw alchemy as once having a much larger significance than as a proto-chemistry. But they also critically outlined its importance for the emergence of modernity, to a secular perception of time and concomitant productivist imperatives. Below I first will show how they describe this shift and then look at a related, if less alchemy-centred, view on modern history, which provoked a great debate in Sweden shortly before *Rövarna i Skuleskogen*'s publication.

Traditionally, when alchemists had tried to transmute matter, that is changing one element into another (often a base metal into gold), what they tried doing was, according to Eliade, to intervene in a natural process. They tried to speed it up. They aimed to modify nature, to perfect it, by condensing time. Such beliefs were informed by a sense of the sacrality of nature and framed within a premodern perception of time. Time was not yet seen as irreversible. Ordinary, quotidian life was shot through with rituals, which, rather than marking a new dawn, evoked a repetitious participation in the original moment of world creation. Rituals were seen to partake in the very moment which turned the original chaos into cosmos. Outside of ordinary

[41] This was not only so in the novel. As Frängsmyr has pointed out, the importance of a State-defined utility in Swedish knowledge production grew—Frängsmyr 2000: 257.

[42] For how this happened more generally, see Koselleck, 2004.

[43] Eliade 1977; Jung 1944. More recent scholarship on alchemy does not necessarily share this view. My focus is, however, not on determining what alchemy was, but what it was seen to be in the works available at the time of Ekman's writing her novel. And while Jung's work was at that point hardly new, Jung had a high profile: as bestsellers, his works continued to be published in new editions and was thus readily available. For Jung in Sweden, see Suzanne Gieser, "Jungianism in Scandinavia" in Bogdan & Hammer 2016: 207-208.

secular time, that moment constituted an instance of a higher time (Eliade 1969: 21-22).

With alchemical transmutation, this was the kind of world creation in which premodern alchemists also believed themselves to be participating. As Eliade shows, they assumed that, by finding the secrets of creation, they would ultimately discover the elixir of life (Eliade 1977: 240). Indeed, as Jung illustrates, they supposed there to be a sort of 'inner affinity' between humans and the hidden core of nature, between the micro- and macro-levels, which suggested that the two would change together (Jung 1944: 363). "*Tout comme la matière des métaux meurt et se régénère*," Agamben has summarized the Jung-Eliade view, "*de même l'âme de l'alchimiste meurt et renaît et la production de l'or coïncide avec la résurrection de l'adepte*" (Agamben 2018: 191).[44]

Premodern alchemy cannot be detached from its cosmological superstructure. It was, according to Eliade, a religious practice: the renaissance hermeticism which first attracted Skord to alchemy was, he suggests, the last great attempt at synthesizing ancient knowledge with Christianity (Eliade 1977: 248). Jung also reads alchemy in a religious light, putting its central concerns in conversation with those of Christianity. He sees alchemy as complementing Christianity, offering an alternative route to salvation (Jung 1944: 56; 416-417).

But, while the laboratory practice of alchemy continued, indeed spread, such religious beliefs would disappear. Upon the dawn of the modern world, the work of the alchemists was no longer motivated by salvation (Jung 1944: 567). Nor was it taking place in secret; it was done by society at large. Modern technology itself, Eliade suggested, was the agent of transmutation. It forcibly integrated all temporal scales—the geological, the botanical, the zoological, the human—into one. But rather than the elixir of life, that scale was the irreversible time of History. Alchemy, Eliade argues, moves from being a liminal process situated outside of secular time to being a key driving force of temporal integration; it moves from being a practice of *homo religiosus* to one of *homo faber* (Eliade 1977: 249-254).

In a Swedish-speaking public debate, a critical view on *homo faber* was shared by Georg Henrik von Wright. In a few works published around this time (*Humanismen som livshållning*, 1978; *Vetenskapen och förnuftet*, 1986; *Myten om framsteget,* 1993), he outlined how a perception of nature, marked by a kind of technical rationality, had emerged and gained primacy. But he contrasted this ideal-typical worldview with that of a *homo sapiens,* according to which nature was a model to follow. As a consequence, he also narrated alchemy's history differently. For von Wright the different worldviews dominated in different historical eras. By using Max Weber's terms, he explains that, while a kind of *Zweckrationalität* informs the modern era, a sort

[44] With alchemy cast in such light, it is surprising that few—if any?—scholars of Ekman's novel point to the parallels between Skord's longevity and his participation in alchemical experiments.

of *Wertrationalität* pervaded thought in ancient Greece (von Wright 1994: 22). And in between them we find alchemy. It forms less a break than a bridge: it is the (allegedly) predominantly Arabic alchemy which links a Hellenic world to the new European one (von Wright 1994: 38-40).

The crucial difference is, according to von Wright, based on how humans are seen to relate to their environment. In the older worldview, humans were seen as part of a greater whole, of a larger natural unity, assuming a correspondence between the cosmic order and human life. In the modern one, nature is primarily cast as a resistance to overcome. Society forms a microcosmos which is no longer dependent on the macrocosmos for its happiness or wellbeing. Nature is thought to be an object and humans the subject. More influentially than anyone else, Descartes cast science as the means with which nature would be mastered (von Wright 1994: 45; 55).

In von Wright's view, alchemy has a bit of both. Like the modern view, it aims to use the powers of nature for human ends. It constitutes a kind of technical rationality in the spiritual domain. And yet it was still framed by a holistic view of the world. The alchemists saw themselves as part of the world on which they experimented. Once that was lost, with the transition from alchemy to a proto-chemistry, however, the path was open to a kind of rationalized magic (von Wright 1994: 50-51).

The moral of von Wright's story is even clearer than Eliade's. The currently dominant technological way of life was reshaping all of reality to suit human goals (von Wright 1979: 67). Given the ecological crisis to which the new perception of nature has led, he notes that humans might one day disappear from earth. He even wonders whether that day may be closer than we think (von Wright 1994: 83). To him the lesson is that modern reason is unreasonable. His book caused a great stir, which, by leading to a long public debate (Sörlin 1991: 34-35), hardly bypassed Ekman: in the novel, a dead Descartes makes a noteworthy cameo that has been read as an accusation against his foundational importance for the belief in human exceptionalism, which led the way for the exploitation of nature (Haverty Rugg 1998: 437).

So in sum, we may note that, at the time of the publication of *Rövarna i Skuleskogen,* the outgrowth of alchemy had by some come to be associated with destruction. Its loss of a cosmological superstructure was not something to celebrate. It was seen as a first attempt at or as providing the original impulse behind human mastery. According to such *Kulturpessimismus*, an unchained *homo faber* was cast as culprit of the ecological crisis. In the next and final section, I will bring together the thematic threads of my narrative—liminality, defeat, alchemy—by relating them to the novel's evocation of that crisis. To borrow both Lukacs's and Anderson's perspectives, I will show what kind of possible defeat the final, transitional stage, which we encounter, conjures up.

The End of the *Limes,* the Death of Skord, and the Future of Us

When we meet Skord for the last time, in the nineteenth century, he has dropped alchemy. He is now a renowned, if unorthodox, doctor, a mesmerist. One day he is presented with a curious case: a woman, who after having been lost and presumed dead for more than a decade, returns home.[45] But, worrying her father and brothers, who bring her to Skord, she is mostly apathetic and occasionally runs off. They ask him to hypnotize her.

During their sessions, Skord discovers their similarities. She is not only drawn to his deck of tarot cards and, like him, able to take on the shape of an animal, leaving her own body behind (Ekman 1988: 353). It also turns out that she and her family live close to the Skule forest. Skord soon follows them back to his ancestral home, striking up a close relationship with the woman. They were seemingly meant for each other. According to Haverty Rugg, "this is Skord's other, his fated intended" (Rugg 1998: 437). He falls in love. Doing so, Maria Schottenius surprisingly suggests, finally grants him "a human soul," which means that he "can eventually die" (Schottenius 2012)—which he also does on the last pages of the novel. But if we see his longevity less as a curse than as an acknowledgement of there being, what Eliade would call, different temporal regimes, Skord's death takes on a different meaning. As I will aim to show below by paying particular attention to how his death coincided with the end of Skule as a frontier, it speaks to the novel's intervention in the debate on *homo faber* and nature; it speaks to Ekman's choice of magical realism.

Like von Wright, Ekman's novel evokes a possible alternative relationship to nature. With Skord as its protagonist, the novel depicts a relationship which acknowledges different time scales. "Sometimes cracks appeared in the current time. Then [Skord] thought of other times," the novel tells us. "He was in a different wheel of time than his contemporaries. His wheel turned more slowly" (Ekman 1988: 203-204).[46] He transcends the human time frame. Skord's temporal rhythm rather resembles that of the forest from which he originally emerged. "The forest," the novel goes on, "is shot through by time […] Each ant hill brews a fermenting time […] It is a forgotten forest that blooms there, in a saved time." Skule is "a forest that aged as slowly as [Skord] himself did […] so slowly that it seemed to take place in another time, one that breathed

[45] If further evidence was needed to demonstrate Ekman's knowledge of contemporary historiographical trends, it is arguably to be found here: with *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), Natalie Zemon Davis had just published a famous account of someone, presumed dead, who returned home.

[46] "*Ibland blev det revor i den tid som var. Då tänkte [Skord] på andra tider*" (203). "*Själv var han i en annan [tids]krans* än *de som han levde samman med. Den vred sig långsammare*" (204).

more slowly" (Ekman 1988: 276; 278).[47] (For my interpretation, the novel has a more apt title in its English translation—the forest of hours—than in Swedish.)

Through Skord and others, the novel gives voice to the forest. It features characters who had "turned their gaze downwards, towards the grass, to the stream and wet moss," where they heard new voices whispering "we have no power and no names." But "we are here […] We sigh in the top of spruces, we murmur among the pebbles on the shore, and we rattle under the rushing stream […] The only thing we ask of you is caution." The novel brings out the forest's role as life giver and—dare I say?—as saviour: "We will reward you with the best this green earth can give: you will be here." (Ekman 1988: 309-310)[48]

In doing so, *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* not only depicts how Skord engages in esoteric pursuits; the narrative also draws on esoteric perspectives. In it we find Jung's view that in Europe an esoteric worldview persisted beneath the Christian veneer, that if you scratch the surface, its perceptions emerge (Jung 1944: 24-25). Already in the second chapter, the novel depicts how dragons are cut off Church buildings and Sami healing techniques are sanctioned, and yet notes how Skord knows that "spiritual folk beliefs were *not* untrue" (Ekman 1988: 69).[49] It did not end there. In fact, this is part of what premodern alchemy has been seen to express: "*Die Alchemie*," Jung argued, "*bildet etwas wie eine Unterströmung zu dem die Oberfläche beherrschenden Christentum*" (Jung 1944: 41). Like the unconscious to consciousness, it compensated for Christianity's gaps. As such it also displaced its foci. It sought salvation in nature. Through transmutation, it does not try to save humanity, as Christianity. It wants to save matter, that is the "***Erlösung der Substanzen***," for "*in ihrem Stoff liegt die göttliche Seele gebunden*" (Jung 1944: 425).[50]

If read as intellectual history, the novel can with Skord be said to demonstrate how the esoteric tradition continued after alchemy's (techno-scientific) profanation. Through a plot which links various moments from the Swedish past through Skord, the novel connects what has been seen as esotericism's various branches. For by living for so long, Skord engages many of them. Stretching from gnosis to Romanticism and Mesmerism, this was a tradition which, according to Jung, entertained a vision of the world which—unlike what Reformation theology considered 'true faith' or the Enlightenment

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[47] "*Skogen* är *genomdragen av tid* […] *varje myrvråk brygger jäsande tid* […] *Det* är *glömd skog som blommar där, i en sparad tid*" (276). "*[Skule är en] skog som* åldrades *lika långsamt som [Skord] själv* […] *så långsamt att det tycktes ske i en annan tid, en som andades långsammare*" (278).

[48] "*vänt blicken till gräset, ner i bäckvattnet och den våta mossan*" (309). "*Vi har ingen makt och inga namn. Vi* är *här* […] *Vi suckar i granarnas kronor, vi sorlar bland strandstenarna och vi rasslar under det ilande bäckvattnet* […] *Det enda vi ber dig om* är *varsamhet* […] *Vi ska löna dig med det bästa den här gröna jorden kan ge: du ska vara här*" (310).

[49] *"knutarna aldrig talade osant".*

[50] original emphasis.

'rational science'—included the unknown forces of nature and the night-side of consciousness (Hanegraaff 2012: 288). It was a vision which, while especially marginalized in Protestant Europe, allegedly had never disappeared. Like Skord, it tended to find new domains.

Until one day, in the novel's narrative, it no longer did; it no longer could. If traditional alchemy was part of a millennia-old spiritual tradition, its modern progeny had created Sweden as an industrial nation. And the integration of all temporal scales into a techno-powered human history to which that led had, the novel seems to imply, fatal consequences. It marks the end of the kind of co-existence between nature and culture which is visible in Skord's name. As Wright has pointed out, Sko-rd amalgamtes Sko[g] and [o]rd, forest and word (Wright 1991: 300). Like much esotericism has claimed to do, he embodies both reason and nature.

But by the mid nineteenth century that co-existence constituted, to speak like Perry Anderson, a declining form of social life. Nature and rationality were increasingly cast as dichotomous. It was becoming harder, like Skord and his beloved, to straddle the divide. "They lived by the border and seem ready at any moment to go into the forest and disappear." As her name Xenia suggests, they were foreigners in the emergent world defined by *Zweckrationalität*: "they became very absent-minded when it came to direction and aims" (Ekman 1988: 421).[51]

Unlike Walter Scott's characters upon whom Lukacs based his depiction of the historical novel, Skord cannot choose the emergent modern way of life; it excludes him. Painfully, it does so in his northern refuge. As the Swedish government decided to connect its regions through railways, Skord's biological clock starts ticking. If Ekman's previous series of novels, *Kvinnorna och staden,* began with the railroads, *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* ends with them. For the railways were not only supposed to integrate the country spatially; they were what finally pushed Sweden into adopting one unified time—here, symbolically, the temporal regime of industry.

And that time was hardly kind to a figure like Skord. The construction of railways required the partial felling of forests, such as Skule. Within the fictional universe of the novel, what makes it possibly even worse, it was a project masterminded by his adopted family: one of Xenia's brothers, a Stockholm government official, was behind the plans. In light of such developments, the other brother wonders what the point is, like Skord and Zenia, "to pose questions about heaven and the underworld when capable and far-sighted people are building a society […] Indeed, what was the point of people like Xenia and [Skord]? Human debris. Elderly children. Had they ever caught a

[51] "*De levde vid gränsen och tycktes beredda att när som helst gå in i skogen och försvinna. De blev mycket förströdda när det vara fråga om riktning och* mål".

glimpse of anything with their hunches? He doubted it. They had renounced a sense of will and intention—and of responsibility" (Ekman 1988: 416).[52]

While Xenia's politician brother was stopped in his tracks, the reader is well aware that there is no stopping History: the railway was to come and the North was to change. This was a period when, as historians have shown, Sweden's northern half was promoted as the land of the future (Sörlin 1988). Underlined by its use of magical realism, a genre born of defeat and disillusion, the novel, in contrast, narrates how, for some, that meant no future: at the end of *Rövarna i Skuleskogen*, Skord wanders off to die. While the direct impetuous for his doing so is, as Schottenius notes, Xenia's passing, it is to Skule he goes. And that is noteworthy. It suggests that, as the forest increasingly became thought of as a source of energy, as an economic resource, its status as *limes*, as cosmological threshold, disappeared. The laws of nature could no longer be suspended. In the new world of industry and progress, no one lived forever.

With Skord dying, the novel poses the question of our own longevity. Mobilizing esotericism's unitary thinking to ecological ends, it expresses the insight—which at the time was relatively new (Sörlin 1991: 33)—that the health of nature dictates our health as individuals, that it provides the conditions of possibility for our entire culture. Like Skord, we all ultimately depend on it. Through esotericism *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* thus connects a people's history to environmental history, existential questions to cosmological frameworks. It is history seen from beyond.

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[52] "*ställa sig frågor om himmelen och underjorden när dugliga och framsynta människor håller* på att bygga ett *samhälle* […] *Ja, vad var det för värde med den sortens människor som Xenia och [Skord]? Skräpmänniskor. Åldriga barn. Hade de någonsin fångat något med sina aningar? Det tvivlade han på. Vilja och avsikt hade de avsvurit sig—och ansvaret*".

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