

PERSUASION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY SWEDISH FICTION:  
C. J. L. ALMQVIST AND THE 'RHETORICAL SITUATION'

Jon Viklund\*

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, rhetoric was losing ground as a theory of and norm for effective communication. In the fine arts especially, aesthetic theory made the rhetorical view of artistic production seem dated. An autonomous poetics was emerging, and gradually new conceptions of 'author', 'reader', and 'poetic language' were formed. From an ethical point of view, Immanuel Kant famously expelled persuasive rhetoric from the field of aesthetics, claiming that "oratory (*ars oratoria*), the art of using people's weaknesses for one's own aims (no matter how good these may be in intention or even in fact), is unworthy of any *respect* whatsoever".<sup>1</sup> According to Kant, the instrumental art of rhetoric had nothing to do with poetry: an author's business was imaginary freedom, not persuasion. Thus, although it is misleading to speak about any 'death of rhetoric' in the arts, the rhetorical

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<sup>1</sup> See Kant 1987, p. 198, n. 63.

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E-mail: [nnrh@nnrh.dk](mailto:nnrh@nnrh.dk) – Homepage: <http://www.nnrh.dk>

tradition clearly underwent a great transformation in the second half of the eighteenth century. However, while scholarly work has hitherto almost exclusively focused on the new aesthetic paradigm, little has been done to investigate the status of rhetoric in the period.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to this investigation by exemplifying how the classical rhetorical tradition, albeit influenced by new theories of art, clearly permeated nineteenth-century fiction. It is my hypothesis that the greater complexity of the relationship between writer and audience in this period – which was due to the ongoing expansion of the literary market and the reading society – corresponds to an increasing desire of the author to control the messages communicated within the framework of fictional texts. I wish to prove this by demonstrating how an author of fictional texts could use various narrative techniques in order to stage communicative situations and deliberative discourses in the fictional context.

As I shall show, one way for the author to control how a message should be understood by the reader was for him to ‘fictionalize’ the relation between a sender and a receiver *within* the text, thus creating what I would like to refer to as an ‘internal rhetorical situation’. Lloyd Bitzer notably defined the ‘rhetorical situation’ as the specific context that calls for a rhetorical response and is constituted by ‘exigence’, ‘audience’, and ‘constraints’.<sup>2</sup> In fictional texts, however, these constitutional elements can be incorporated – and a rhetorical situation accordingly created – *within* the narrative, in order for the author to establish a clearly persuasive case.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “it is the situation which calls the discourse into existence”; Bitzer 1999, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> The rhetorical situation is always staged in some way in a text, as noted by Walter Ong in “The Writer’s Audience Is Always A Fiction” (Ong 1977, pp. 53-81). Robert J. Ellrich, in his discussion of Rousseau, defined the rhetorical situation as “the rela-

My example is the Swedish writer Carl Jonas Love Almqvist (1793-1866). A radical Romantic, in the forefront of the modernization of Swedish literature, and a pioneer realist, Almqvist is best known for what may be the most voluminous book of the entire Romantic era, namely *Törnrosens bok* ('The Book of the Briar Rose'), which embraces novels, essays, drama, lyric writing, and more. Almqvist's work is particularly interesting from a rhetorical point of view since it is always informed by political, religious, or educational argument. At the same time, Almqvist regarded programmatic intentionality and persuasion as problematic issues. His critical oeuvre is marked by a certain ambivalence towards polemics and social commitment, and his fictional narratives – written in the 1830s and 1840s and often politically contentious – offer clear testimony to the status of rhetoric in the Romantic period and thereafter.

#### *Rhetoric and Romanticism*

At the dawn of the Romantic period, rhetoric was transformed from a social art into an integrated part of the culture of the printing press. Many authors, like Kant, regarded rhetoric as an obsolete and manipulative art but were nonetheless occupied by the ideas of living speech and 'true' poetry and prose. In this aesthetic context, there was a growing interest in the effects of style. Contrary to the classical treatment of the subject in Cicero's *Orator* or in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, style was, in general, not seen by the Romantics as motivated in relation to the three traditional tasks of the orator (*docere, delectare, movere*)<sup>4</sup> – that is, with regard to the effects on the audience – but in relation to what was represented in the text. More emphasis

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tionship in a given work between the writer and the reader as this relationship is embodied in the form" (Ellrich 1969, p. 14).

<sup>4</sup> See Lausberg 1973, §§257 and 1078-1079.

was placed upon the techniques of forming a discourse, congenial to certain ideas or subjective feelings, by way of perceptual or imaginary configuration.

There were many reasons for this deliberate step away from the audience, one of which was the change towards a privatization of literary experience, a change that was especially noticeable around 1800.<sup>5</sup> In the words of the American literary scholar David E. Wellbery, Romanticism was “perhaps the first major epoch in cultural history to have shaped itself within the medium of print”.<sup>6</sup> However, the period also offers many examples of how writers – along with actors, preachers, and other public figures – took special interest in the oral aspects of rhetoric. The living voice was, in general, considered the privileged medium for communicating a person’s mind or the truth of the Word.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Romantic literature can be seen as a part of a culture of printing and reading, in which – compared to earlier periods – the receiver of the message had become more distant in his relationship to the sender. Yet, at the same time greater interest was paid to oral communication and intimate rapport, that is, to – what I would like to call – a ‘rhetoric of presence’. This ambivalence led to important changes in the relationship between writer and reader, for example in the way novels could be used to influence the readership and its points of view.

#### *Almqvist’s View of Persuasion*

In 1838 Carl Johan Love Almqvist applied for the position of Chair of Aesthetics and Modern Languages at the University of Lund. In his application Almqvist enclosed a collection of *Aphorisms* written in English, on the topic

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<sup>5</sup> On the social history of reading in the late eighteenth century, see Engelsing 1973.

<sup>6</sup> See Wellbery 2000, pp. 188 (quotation) and 185-192.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of orality in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rhetoric, see e.g. Howell 1971, pp. 145-256; and Fafner 1995, pp. 340-350, 371-380, and 405-420.

of rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> Anyone wishing to discuss rhetorical issues in early nineteenth-century Sweden would turn to the Scottish rhetorician Hugh Blair and the so-called New Rhetoric of eighteenth-century Britain, according to which eloquence was the ability to express thoughts and feelings in a simple and pure way. In his *Aphorisms*, Almqvist borrowed thoughts and formulations from Blair whose criticism of over-decorated language he clearly approved of: “In the science of Rhetorick the system of Metaphors, Figures and Tropes is looked upon as a matter of great importance. It may be so. Yet we do deny that the beauty of stile or the worth of any composition essentially depends on metaphorical language.”<sup>9</sup>

Almqvist saw all embellishment of language as a hindrance to the communication of feelings and ‘ideas of the heart’. By insisting on an essential difference between mere conviction – as a result of a persuasive act – and true understanding, he touched upon a common theme among those skeptical about rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> To Almqvist, it is sincere sentiment that lends truth to a statement, and the highest degree of eloquence is accordingly that “wherein a [...] greater power is exerted over the human mind; [that, by] which we are not only convinced, but are interested, agitated and carried along with the speaker”.<sup>11</sup>

In general, Almqvist sought to distance himself from rhetorical theory. In the manner of Rousseau he sided with an ‘anti-rhetorical’ tradition in which the concept of purity in speech and writing was defined in opposition to learned or polite rhetoric; traditional rhetoric he regarded as dead eloquence.

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<sup>8</sup> The *Aphorisms*, which originally formed part of Almqvist’s doctoral dissertation on Rabelais, are reprinted in Almqvist 1921, pp. 382-383.

<sup>9</sup> Almqvist 1921, p. 382.

<sup>10</sup> On the ‘demise of rhetoric’, e.g. the opposition between persuasion and truth, see Bender & Wellbery 1990, pp. 5-22.

<sup>11</sup> Almqvist 1921, p. 427.

According to Almqvist, a major problem in classical rhetorical theory was the premeditated relationship between speaker and audience. Rhetorical notions such as *decorum* and *opinio* did not fit into his view of ideal communication. The basis for true understanding was rather for speaker and listener – or writer and reader – to share the same mental foundations, a pious mind for example, or true love of Christ. Consequently, Almqvist's notion of 'pure expression' was not primarily based on the idea of language as a vehicle for communication; language was secondary to the love and understanding that should exist between 'two open hearts'.

To Almqvist, then, the ideal situation for communication was an intimate setting, not a public one, and he did not relate this idea to oral contexts only. A true connection was also likely to occur in the exchange of letters between two 'soul mates'. In Almqvist's view, reading was an intimate and spiritual activity in which the reader no longer experienced any distance to the text and the person behind it. Ideally, reader and writer should be united by a common sentiment or belief. The Bible he saw as an example of this. When reading the Gospel, the religious reader is not *persuaded* by anything, Almqvist claimed, he is simply taken over by the deeds of Christ who is walking inside the reader just as he walked through the Holy Land.<sup>12</sup>

Since Almqvist believed that only those of a pure heart can truly be convinced of anything, his work seems to offer no such thing as a theory of persuasion. Therefore one might infer that Almqvist is of no interest to the historian of rhetoric. However, in his work, an anti-rhetorical view of persuasion is developed along with a more traditional view of rhetoric. As a young man, Almqvist took active part in several educational societies and there

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<sup>12</sup> On Almqvist's religious view of speech acts and reading, see Viklund 2004, pp. 71-73.

instituted rhetorical training in the arts of debating and public speaking. He insisted that not only the speaker but also the listener should be trained in communication, and found that small groups of like-minded people formed the perfect – rhetorical – occasion for discussion exercises. The exercises were, on the one hand, pragmatic and orientated towards persuasion; on the other, they evidently explored the possibilities of ideal communication. In one of the societies a set of rules was made up among the members in an attempt to create a perfect model for the relationship between sender and receiver. For example, the participants in a discussion were enjoined to listen attentively, without interrupting the speaker, and to allow their minds to be governed by ‘love, faith, and good deeds’.<sup>13</sup>

Almqvist’s view of rhetoric – which is a distinctive feature of the major part of his work – was, in other words, a seemingly self-contradictory one: while proving himself pragmatically interested in the techniques of rhetoric, he was clearly a child of his time, romantically searching for the ideal way of communicating ideas. In the course of his literary career, Almqvist invented strategies for including ideal rhetorical situations in his fictional narratives. As I wish to show in what follows, in order to illustrate ideal communication, Almqvist often created scenes that included a recipient of a message, thereby instantiating an exemplary reader of the text.

#### *Arguments for Persuasion in Fiction*

As a preliminary to analysing Almqvist’s fictional techniques, it is necessary to explicate two questions that are closely related to the problem of the

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<sup>13</sup> See Viklund 2004, pp. 60-66. It should be noted that ‘love, faith, and good deeds’ (“Kärlek, Tro och god Gärning”) are the keywords in the teachings of Almqvist’s mental predecessor and great source of inspiration, the Swedish philosopher and spiritual explorer, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772).

increasing distance between author and audience in the Romantic period. As we have seen, Almqvist considered persuasion as an intimate act. How did this position influence his attitude towards the printed word as a means of mass communication? And how did Almqvist defend the creation of fictional persuasion without violating two principles that were generally held at the time, namely the autonomy of the artwork – that is, the view that the work of art exists independently of its origin – and the reader’s ‘aesthetic disinterestedness’ – that is, the idea of the reader consuming and evaluating an artwork without relating this to practical ends, interests of utility, or personal bias?<sup>14</sup>

Almqvist recognized both a decline and a rebirth of rhetoric in modern society. In an article on ‘The Art of Printing and Civic Education’ (1839),<sup>15</sup> he commented on this issue with regards to media history and characterized the art of printing as ‘the great vehicle for universal edification’.<sup>16</sup> However, he maintained that the printed word, unlike the spoken word, could not guarantee that the message fulfilled its purpose and reached the heart of the receiver. Hence, Almqvist described the spoken and the printed word as two different but equally important rhetorical modes:

It has been remarked, and for good reasons, that oral discourse, oratory, has suffered accordingly [i.e., through the art of printing, JV]: the great influence that the spoken word had before – the personally living, mimetically perfect delivery that voice and gestures made enchanting – this influence of almost electric effect when well performed, had to decline or fall in reputation as soon as a new force awakened, which communicated to an even greater number of people and from several places at once, by way of a language that through speech could reach only a comparatively smaller audience. However,

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<sup>14</sup> For an account of the origins of the notion of ‘aesthetic disinterestedness’, see Stolnitz 1961.

<sup>15</sup> “Boktryckerikonsten och Folkuppfostran”, originally printed in 1839 in *Aftonbladet*, and reprinted in Almqvist 1989, pp. 56-63.

<sup>16</sup> “Boktryckerikonsten är det stora *medlet* för en universal uppfostran”; Almqvist 1989, pp. 57-58.

this loss is merely an illusion. The captivating gift of speech and story telling does not have to disappear at all from the world because of the existence of printing and reading. The faculty of speaking well, which used to be man's only means of education, has met a rival who does not allow it to be alone any more and even less allows it to fall into indolence. If the gift of speaking well has yielded for a time, taken aback, so to speak, by books, which, even when lying about in silence, were using a more far-reaching language and were heard much better than any human voice, this gift is but soon to recover, recuperate after the scare, regain its dignity and weight, and education will be twice as successful, now that it has in its possession two ways of improvement instead of one.<sup>17</sup>

Almqvist saw the art of speaking and writing as two equally important means of general education. What was lost in the spoken word could be regained by means of a style permeated with personal energy. He recognized that modern society needed the printed word for mass communication of messages. In his liberal view everybody should receive an education. However, like any other author in this period he was faced with the problem that his readers – the ordinary people who formed the masses – were anonymous and therefore unpredictable. As the American scholar, James L. Kastely has

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<sup>17</sup> “Man har anmärkt, och med skäl, att det *munliga föredraget, Talarekonsten*, härpå lidit [i.e., genom boktryckarkonsten, JV]: det stora inflytande, som förut utövades av talet – det personligt levande, mimiskt fullkomliga, genom röst och åtbörder hänförande framställningssättet – detta inflytande, nästan av elektrisk verkan, där det bär sig rätt åt, måste minskas eller falla i anseende, när en ny kraft vaknade, som till ännu större massor och från flere punkter på en gång förde ett språk, som genom talet endast kunde nå en jämförelsevis ringtaligare åhöraremängd. Likväl är denna förlust blott skenbar. Den hänryckande tal- och berättelsegåvan behöver alls icke bortgå ur världen för att tryck och läsning finnas. Talenten att väl tala, förut nästan människornas enda bildningsmedel, har fått en medtävlarinna, som ej längre tillåter den vara ensam, och så mycket mindre låter den försjunka i dolskhet. Om *talaregåvan* en tid dragit sig undan, liksom litet häpen för böckerna, vilka, ehuru liggande och tigande, dock förde ett vidsträcktare språk och hördes längre än någon människostämman, så skall dock denna gåva snart åter hämta sig, sansa sig ifrån förskräckelsen, intaga sin värdighet och sin vikt igen, och bildningen vinna dubbelt på att äga tvenne medel för sin utveckling, i stället för ett”; Almqvist 1989, p. 59. All English translations of the quotations from Almqvist's Swedish texts are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

noted, one problem seems to have been seminal in this period of the history of rhetoric: “How does one speak or write in the absence of an established community?”<sup>18</sup> Many authors experienced what the English literary historian Andrew Bennett has termed an ‘anxiety of audience’, which was reflected in various ways in the narratives of the Romantic period.<sup>19</sup> Almqvist’s quandary with the issue of rhetorical persuasion should be seen in this context. Indeed, some of his narrative techniques can be explained as a direct response to these questions concerning the audience.

Traditionally, the aims of the novel had been the same as those of rhetoric – to educate, to entertain, and to move. The novel was considered beneficial to society in so far as its characters were to embody common virtues. However, in the late eighteenth and in the early nineteenth centuries, the novel developed along the lines of poetry, making it problematic to use the genre for rhetorical purposes.<sup>20</sup> In the article just mentioned, Almqvist attributed the two important tasks of entertaining and educating both to the genre of the novel and to drama.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, his desire to make use of fictional literature in the public debate also reveals a wish to convince and persuade.

In a slightly later article, Almqvist considers the very possibility of ‘political literature’ (‘politisk vitterhet’), given that ‘the fine arts’ were not supposed to serve any purpose, whether the interest of the state or an individual author’s political intent.<sup>22</sup> Almqvist’s solution was to introduce a fine distinction between ‘purpose’, on the one hand, and an ‘intention’ or ‘objective’

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<sup>18</sup> See Kastely 1997, p. 140.

<sup>19</sup> See Bennett 1994, p. 23, who cites Harold Bloom’s theory of ‘anxiety of influence’.

<sup>20</sup> Gustafsson 2002 shows how the novel was gradually recognized as a poetic genre.

<sup>21</sup> See Almqvist 1989, p. 61 (“roa”; “undervisning”). The article was first published in *Aftonbladet* in 1839.

<sup>22</sup> See Almqvist 1997, p. 81. The article was first published in *Dagligt Allehanda* in 1839.

internal to the work, on the other: ‘Poetry should not serve a purpose, which is not to say that it should be devoid of [political, JV] intention, just that the objective must be situated not outside but within the work.’<sup>23</sup> Surely, so Almqvist continues, a writer can freely choose the topics best fitted for his purpose – and preferably topics concerning contemporary society – but the ‘depiction’, as Almqvist called it (“skilderiet”), should be ‘pure and without purpose’ (“afsigtslöst och rent”) in order to be true.<sup>24</sup>

The sophistic nature of Almqvist’s argument clearly demonstrates the ambivalent stance toward expressions of political intent in Romantic literature. To be sure, Almqvist acknowledges that his narrative fictions may well be political. However, the political content should by no means be conveyed as a message from the author but rather be embodied in the fictional situation. In theory, the rhetorical purpose of this narrative device resembles that of the classical rhetorical figure of *prosopopoeia*, that is, the use of impersonation in order to imitate the ethos of another person.<sup>25</sup> By locating the political message within the milieu and the characters in his text, and by reproducing the *ethos* of ‘real’ people and places, Almqvist wanted to make his arguments credible.

Almqvist’s narrative techniques have been thoroughly discussed by other scholars.<sup>26</sup> However, there is a far-reaching rhetorical aspect of this literary method that has not been dealt with in previous studies. In his works of fiction, Almqvist pretended only to depict, or to *show* something, while, in

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<sup>23</sup> “En poesi måste följaktligen vara afsigtslös, icke i den meningen, att den bör sakna tendens, utan så, att målet icke ligger utom, men inom verket”; Almqvist 1997, p. 80. For a discussion of Almqvist’s article, see Romberg 1967, pp. 95-97.

<sup>24</sup> See Almqvist 1997, p. 80.

<sup>25</sup> On *prosopopoeia* and related figures, see Lausberg 1973, §§820-829.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Aspelin 1980, pp. 65-72.

fact, he also argues or *tells* something through his characters.<sup>27</sup> This literary strategy is, as I would like to argue, of a rhetorically deliberative nature. Almqvist describes his characters and the situations they are in, in order not only to address an argument, but also to resolve it in the staged context of the narrative. In this way Almqvist created ‘meta-rhetorical’ situations that made it possible for him to indirectly address a political argument to the reader of the work.

### *Framing the Political Message*

Almqvist used the technique of staging communicative situations both in his novels and in his critical prose, which often employed fiction. In this and the following section I shall focus on two examples of the use of such ‘internal rhetorical situations’, the first involving Almqvist’s journalism, the second his literary work.

Around 1830 the Swedish press experienced a great expansion, with the liberal newspaper *Aftonbladet* appearing as the first fully professional daily newspaper and appealing to a broad circle of readers. At the time the relationship between the writer and the reader of newspapers was complex. The readership was in no way a homogeneous entity, and the writer was often anonymous, either signing his work on behalf of the newspaper’s editorial office or hiding behind some more or less covert signature. Furthermore, in those unsettled times, the Swedish liberals were fighting for political reforms and the conservatives refused to give in, while political and polemical writers tended towards demagoguery, using harsh language and personal attacks.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Showing’ and ‘telling’ are, of course, two essential features of the ‘rhetoric of fiction’ in general; cf. Booth 1973, pp. 3-20.

<sup>28</sup> Johannesson 1987, pp. 9-79, and Viklund 2004, pp. 231-288, discuss, from a rhetorical perspective, the period’s public life, and the role played by the printing press.

Almqvist was engaged by *Aftonbladet* in 1839 and immediately found himself in the middle of the public debate. He soon became one of the leading liberals in the press, but the role as a political journalist was not always an easy one for him to play, as appears from his letters to friends and colleagues. This fact is also revealed by the rhetorical strategies he used in order to meet the challenges of the public debate.

One of these strategies was the creation of fictional situations that served as frameworks to his articles and were supposed to provide the perfect basis for understanding. Since Almqvist thought of ideal communication as a ‘conversation between two open hearts’, he rejected the idea that truth needed to, or could be, forced on anybody. This theoretical position clearly influenced the composition of at least some of his articles.<sup>29</sup> By making up rhetorical situations within the narratives to serve as a framework for these articles, Almqvist hoped that he could anticipate the reactions of his readers and bring about a ‘true’ understanding of the subject at hand. Thus, the narratives were often formulated as dialogues that directed the readers’ understanding through a substitute recipient – an exemplary reader – in the text.

The newspaper article “Qvincy Parriot”, published in *Aftonbladet* (1841), is an example of Almqvist’s use of this kind of fictional framework. The subject of the article was the alarming poverty that had spread all over Europe and that Almqvist had just witnessed on a journey to Paris and London. As an introduction to this issue, Almqvist in the beginning of the article recounts how his fictive narrator came into possession of a treatise on the problem of poverty. While walking in the streets of London, the narrator meets a man who at first looks like a beggar but upon closer acquaintance turns out to be a

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<sup>29</sup> It should be noted, however, that the greater part of Almqvist’s critical articles did not differ in style and tone from those published by other journalists of the period.

philanthropist and a political activist by the name of Qvincy Parriot. Through the narrator, Almqvist demonstrates a significant change of view as Qvincy Parriot reveals his true self, so different from how he may appear to the eyes of society. Almqvist shows how a communicative situation is created and how one person is convinced by another. Or as Almqvist would have seen it: the change of opinion is driven by necessity, brought about by the situation, not by someone forcing his opinions on somebody else.

Qvincy Parriot is described as the ideal truth-teller as regards the particular issue of poverty and social misery. He easily moves around in all social strata, even in poor neighborhoods, and therefore has first-hand knowledge of what he is talking about. Moreover, he is a good-hearted man and a lover of all mankind. This use of *ethos* argumentation is vital for the legitimacy of Almqvist's persuasive enterprise and clearly reflects his notion of an ideal case in which the reader is convinced by the very benevolence and compassion of the speaker.

In Almqvist's view, the veracity of the message is closely associated with the rhetorical performances of the characters involved. The narrator therefore repeatedly calls attention to Qvincy Parriot's honest and straightforward way of communicating, describing him as a man who expresses himself with 'logic' and 'eloquence'.<sup>30</sup> Parriot's way of speaking is said to display 'unction' mixed with 'enthusiasm'.<sup>31</sup> His style is pure and simple, free of rhetorical embellishments. The fictional narrator, carried away by the discussion, compares poverty with a freak of nature that 'like the Minotaur is going to devour us and all of society, given that all the paths of the labyrinth direct us

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<sup>30</sup> See Almqvist 1989, pp. 173-174.

<sup>31</sup> Qvincy Parriot "vann genom den stigande värmen en välalighet, en unction blandad av entusiasm och ändock ljus i framställningen"; Almqvist 1989, p. 175.

to and not away from him'.<sup>32</sup> In response Qvincy Parriot begs the narrator not to speak hyperbolically about this 'poor subject matter'. He is well aware – and so indirectly tells the reader – that the truth of the message is linked with the form of this message.

The narrative framework ends with Qvincy Parriot presenting from his pocket a manuscript he has written on the subject of poverty – and the following section of the article allegedly reproduces this text.

### *Depicting True Understanding*

Almqvist's novel *Det går an* ('Why Not!') is a major work of nineteenth-century Swedish literature. It was published in 1839 and gave rise to one of the country's greatest literary debates, challenging public opinion with its open criticism of matrimony and clear argumentation in favor of free relationships based not on any state or church convention, but on love only.<sup>33</sup>

The narrative centers around two characters and their weeklong journey from the Swedish capital, Stockholm, to the small town of Lidköping. The protagonists, Sara and Albert, meet on a steamship. They soon take an interest in each other, and as their love grows they decide to travel together to Sara's hometown, Lidköping. There the story ends, depicting the beginning of an ideal marriage characterized by no formal attachments.

The novel is obviously structured in accordance with the literary topos of 'the journey of life'. Traveling through Sweden, the current problems of

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<sup>32</sup> "Och skall detta missfoster, fattigdomen, likt Minotaurus, sluka oss och hela vårt samhälle, emedan labyrintens alla vägar och gångar alltid leda dit, men ingen enda därifrån"; Almqvist 1989, p. 175.

<sup>33</sup> *Det går an* has been studied by many Swedish literary scholars, for example Warburg 1908 and Svedner 1973. Svedjedal 1985 offers a rhetorical reading of *Det går an*, focusing on Almqvist's use of realistic techniques as well as of narrative techniques such as 'suspense' and 'curiosity'.

society form the realistic background for the author's depiction of the two lovers' carefully weighed decision to part with the old ways of matrimony and to set out on new ones. However, I would like to point to another structuring principle of the story, namely its description of 'the road to true understanding'. In fact, the story line can be seen as the various stages in the performance of a persuasive act.

Throughout *Det går an*, Almqvist makes his case through the *persona* of Sara, whereas Albert is the party who has to be convinced.<sup>34</sup> The main argument put forward by Sara is that marriage as an institution is corrupted. It is not founded on true and holy love, but rather on the husband's economic wealth. This results in unhappy and unholy unions, despite their being sanctioned by the church. Sara's mother, we learn, had a bad marriage, and Sara promises never to make the same mistake. She therefore insists that she and Albert should base their future life together on the principle of equality.

Albert is at first characterized as a man of quite a few misconceptions, but thanks to the discussion with Sara he is gradually convinced of such ideas as the true nature of marriage, the importance of hard work, and the right of women to earn their own living. Sara's argumentation and Albert's cautious objections form the two sides of a deliberative discourse that first specifies the issue, then outlines the possible paths to be followed, and finally suggests a goal to strive for. The various stages of Albert's growing understanding can be seen as the 'persuasive movement' of the text, culminating with Sara's final success in persuading him to join her in the radical enterprise. In the

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<sup>34</sup> Apart from the features of deliberative discourse displayed in *Det går an* – that is, Sara's argumentation and the fictitious rhetorical situation – the metaphors, similes, and allegorical descriptions form an implicit argument in support of the political ideas presented in the text. See Viklund 2005 for a detailed description of the line of argumentation in the novel.

novel's last sentence Albert's answer is revealed in a speechless manner characteristic of many Romantic writers: "He still didn't say anything – but his answer could be read in the entire expression on his face: 'Why not!'"<sup>35</sup>

In order to avoid being accused of communicating 'explicit political intent',<sup>36</sup> Almqvist in the fictive setting of *Det går an* constructed an ideal situation in which he could condition the discussion and the means of understanding. The result is not only the creation of a substitute *reader*, namely Albert, but also of a substitute *reading* within the text. Albert is described as fairly passive, and he certainly does not argue like Sara, but his progressive comprehension of her speech is constantly registered in the narrative.

All through the novel the author repeatedly points out the failures of communication in order to give emphasis to the mutual understanding with which the story closes. "Her speech was pure Greek to the sergeant", the narrator notes in a typical description of Albert, "and the puzzled look he gave the girl was enough to tell her that her words had been incomprehensible. She pulled her hand away from his."<sup>37</sup> At first Albert has a hard time grasping Sara's liberal ideas, but at least he tries – as should all educated readers, according to Almqvist – to understand what appears obscure: "[...] out of respect for the expression in the girl's face, which was very pensive, he restrained

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<sup>35</sup> "Han sade ändå intet. Men i hela uttrycket af hans ansigte låg detta svar: Det går an!"; Almqvist 1839, p. 168. The English translation is quoted from Almqvist 1994, p. 115.

<sup>36</sup> The wording 'explicit political intent' is my rendering of the term 'tendenslitteratur', often used in nineteenth-century Sweden to designate political literature that was supposed to be of no aesthetic value. For a nineteenth-century discussion, see Flygare 1851.

<sup>37</sup> "Detta tal var ren arabiska för sergeanten, och den undrande blick, han gaf flickan, sade henne tillräckligt, att hon pratat obegripligheter. Hon drog sin hand tillbaka ur hans"; Almqvist 1839, p. 106. The English translation is quoted from Almqvist 1994, p. 72.

himself and tried to understand her train of thought.”<sup>38</sup> With continuous remarks like these, guiding the reader through the progress of understanding, Almqvist is able to establish a hermeneutical meta-level, a reading-of-the-reading, in the text.

In order to convince the reader of the truth of the novel’s radical message, Almqvist created the ideal *ethos* for each character and authorized the two main characters as ‘truth-teller’ and interpreter, respectively. The truth-telling Sara is depicted as unaffected by conventional morals, her actions guided only by the virtues of hard work, love, and purity of feeling. By letting her speak from this ideal standpoint, Almqvist ensured that her arguments could not be morally contested.

In this allegory of reading and ideal understanding, the performative act of convincing is played out by way of an opposition between ‘ordinary language’ and ideal discourse. Since Almqvist, like other anti-rhetorical writers of the romantic period, saw language as an obstacle to true – non-linguistic – understanding, he constantly reminds the reader of Sara’s simple and straightforward discourse and of the true nature of the two lovers’ dialogue in general. Sara, we learn, can hear the ‘silent whisperings’ of Albert’s soul, or as Almqvist has her explain this gift of hers: “I’m made in a way that I can hear.”<sup>39</sup> True love is involved in the interaction and forms the genuine basis for understanding.

This stands in sharp contrast to the lack of meaningful communication between mere ‘babblers’ (“pratmakare”), exemplified in the novel by a group

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<sup>38</sup> “Men af vördnad för uttrycket i flickans ansigte, som såg ganska tankfullt ut, höll han sig tillbaka och försökte att inkomma i hennes egna tankegångar”; Almqvist 1839, p. 107. The English translation is quoted from Almqvist 1994, p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> “dina allra tystaste hviskningar”; ”ty jag är så, att jag hör”; Almqvist 1839, p. 150. The English translation is quoted from Almqvist 1994, p. 103.

of empty-speaking army officers.<sup>40</sup> In the beginning of the journey, Albert is presented as a would-be officer and talks like one himself, but as his character develops, his language gradually changes. The last sentence of the novel shows Albert's transformation into an ideal speaker and listener who is able to express his consent in a wordless manner. Almqvist obviously hoped that this description of Albert's moral development would serve its purpose by influencing a transformation in the actual reader as well.

### *A Utopian's Rhetoric*

In his early writings, Almqvist favored an ideal 'rhetoric of presence', based on oral communication and an intimate rapport between author and reader. However, in the 1830s, Almqvist started reaching out to a greater – anonymous and unpredictable – audience. In order to preserve the ideal of an intimate setting for communication, in his novels and other literary works, Almqvist constructed rhetorical situations within the fictional framework. In this way he was able to exemplify the intimate relationship between sender and receiver of a message as an integral part of the narrative.

The creation of fictional rhetorical situations in Almqvist's texts is illustrative of the Romantic writers' stance towards rhetoric. Almqvist clearly rejected the idea of rhetorical persuasion, but constructed his narratives in accordance with a carefully crafted rhetorical strategy, based on his idealistic view of communication. In that way he was unmistakably a part of what was still a dynamic rhetorical tradition.

Moreover, Almqvist 'fictionalized' the communication of his political message in such a way that the reader would find it hard not to accept the proposition put forward. However, whereas it is possible to represent in a

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<sup>40</sup> See Almqvist 1839, p. 109.

work of fiction a perfect act of understanding, this evidently does not guarantee anything in terms of reader response. Almqvist's use of the 'ethos argument' was based on the assumption that his readers would accept the fictional characters as 'truth-tellers'. This presupposed a sympathetic reader who would accept the characters' features as realistic and buy into their fictional arguments.

Yet, the severe criticism that Almqvist received in response to the publication of *Det går an* made it clear that many readers refused to go along with the staged 'reading' in the text. In his attempt at creating fictional rhetorical situations in order to overcome the increasing distance between writer and public, Almqvist truly proved himself a utopian.

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