

# *On Freedom, Dreams, Wisdom, Life*

## *About Björn Larsson's Northern Sea(s)*

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In a survey of contemporary representations of the Northern seas, Björn Larsson's contribution can be relevant from several perspectives: his experience of this geographical (and cultural) area, his realistic account for human life on the sea, his literary and dramatic exploitation of the aesthetical aspect of sea landscapes, with sea playing the role of an inspiring background as well as a lively character.

### **Björn Larsson and the sea**

When investigating Björn Larsson's portrayal of the Northern Seas, some preliminary aspects are to be considered: first, Larsson (b. 1953), a Swedish writer who debuted in the 1980s and has met with success since the 1990s, is not essentially a sea-writer—or at least he does not define himself as such—even though he dedicated some of his most famous works to the sea and, above all, sea plays an important role in his writing, sometimes with the same relevance as a character, as has been acknowledged by reviewers.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the author has great confidence with sea life, as his existence has been split between the position as a professor of French literature at the University of Lund, promoting tours required by his reputation as a writer and significant periods of

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<sup>1</sup> Larsson mentions with pleasure Michel Bescat's review of *The Celtic Ring* on *Le Monde*, where it is observed that the novel is among the few where landscape, nature and sea are as relevant as its characters and its plot. See *Diario di bordo di uno scrittore*, p. 49.

his life spent sailing. Consequently, his knowledge of the sea, boats and sea life is reliable and allows him to offer a high degree of realism (and use of technical language) in the novels (or short stories) in which he writes about it, from harbour life, and images of safety, calm or anxious waiting connected with it, to the sometimes risky overcoming of a weir, and to the almost metaphysical uncertainty of being in the open sea. Thirdly, likely the most interesting aspect, his personal experience is displayed both literarily and biographically, as he sets his stories in places he has visited and where he occasionally has composed them, and this background has led him to consider the sea as much a place to get lost in as a natural bridge between different places on the opposite shores.

As expressed in my paper title, Larsson's Northern Sea actually consists of a set of seas, and, in particular, its image of the North is wide and involves Sweden, Øresund and Denmark—from Sjælland to Limsfjorden—as well as Scotland, Ireland, the English Channel, but also the Bay of Biscay and the Western French and Northern Spanish coasts. Here, in fact, we have already moved a little too southwards if compared to the usual image of the North; however, the last mentioned places, from Spain to Ireland and Scotland, are united in Larsson's narrative by their common Celtic origin and this justifies an expansion of his imaginative geography of the North Sea. In this contribution, I will make reference to *Den keltiska ringen* (1992, *The Celtic Ring*), *Drömmar vid havet* (1997, *Dreams by the Sea*), *Från Vredens Kap till Jordens Ände* (2000, *From Cape Wrath to Finisterre*) and *Diario di bordo di uno scrittore* (2014, *A writer's Logbook*, originally published in Italian)<sup>2</sup>: the first two works are novels, whereas the third one is based on personal experiences and displays a collection of memories, anecdotes, observations, and the last one reports his own view of literature as well as events related to some of his works.

In Larsson's writing, the sea is mainly a space for and a metaphor of freedom, a kind of freedom which is deeply human and therefore necessary for most people (even if many of them do not actually experience the sea), and, even more, a precise, concrete freedom, not

<sup>2</sup> *Den Keltiska Ringen*. Stockholm: Norstedts, 1992; *Drömmar vid havet*. Stockholm: Norstedts, 1997; *Från Vredens Kap till Jordens Ände*. Stockholm: Norstedts, 2000; *Diario di bordo di uno scrittore*. Milano: Iperborea, 2014 (published in Italian only). All translations into English are my own, unless otherwise stated.

a mere aspiration, but rather the acquisition of an awareness that turns into life philosophy. The important thing is not to fix a date for departure, observes Torben, one of the main characters of *Den keltiska ringen*, the important thing is that you can leave when the time has come<sup>3</sup>. Certainly, this freedom is nourished by contact with other cultures (which the sea has traditionally both divided and connected), which provide new perspectives and views, and with the occasional meeting of other sea travellers; furthermore, freedom comes from a sort of reduction to zero degree of the usual points of reference. On the sea everything is somewhat erased, water streams seem to uniformly lead one to the horizon and yet, they make themselves perceived with the impetus and the strength of the elements, which have human beings measure their own limits.

## Sea people and people on (and by) the sea

This return to the essential includes (or often triggers) the solidarity shown by many characters in Larsson's works, both the invented (like in *Den keltiska ringen* and in *Drömmar vid havet*) and the real ones (as in *Från Vredens Kap till Jordens Ände*). Being far from land and towns unites them, foregrounding their choice due to the passion and curiosity for the sea. Actually, hospitality is not the same by everyone: Larsson's character Ulf in *Den keltiska ringen*, who resembles the author and, by the way, whose boat bears the same name of Larsson's, i.e. *Rustica*, likes to highlight the openness of the Scots, for example, against the suspicion and rudeness of Scandinavians. However, the Northern seas in Larsson may even become the background of a quest which is driven by an inner sense for justice or even turn into the theatre of dreams and expectations by the sailing characters who reach the mainland and those who keep waiting for them. These are the two different situations, in many ways opposite, proposed in *Den keltiska ringen* and in *Drömmar vid havet*, respectively. In the first novel, the protagonists Ulf and Torben move away from Scandinavia chasing a Finnish man hunted by a Scotsman against the backdrop of a movement for Celtic independence. They might escape such a risky situation, but they are

<sup>3</sup> "Det viktiga är inte att bestämma tidpunkten, knappt ens att resa. Det viktiga är att man kan resa när tiden är inne. Men förberedelserna skall vara genomtänkta." (*Den keltiska ringen*, p. 45).

emotionally, ethically and culturally involved (Torben is an expert in the Celtic culture). In their dangerous search for truth, the sea appears a rough friend, often present in the narration, reliable in its offering them a path to follow, but unpredictable in its mood swings, from one stop to another, westwards, but later farther north- or southwards. And its impetuosity contributes to the dramatic atmosphere of the story. Moreover, Ulf and Torben approach the waters of the North Sea in the middle of winter (as they leave in January), something that provides an aesthetically stimulating but even more peculiar perspective in their engagement as amateur investigators and explorers drawn from everyday life to be cast onto the ocean (with Torben even suffering from seasickness!).

In *Drömmar vid havet*, on the other hand, the sea carries an implicit dimension of gathering individual stories, therefore particular destinies prevail over direct descriptions of sea life: as Larsson himself reports<sup>4</sup>, the idea for this novel came to him one evening when he was in the company of two sailors from Liverpool, who had told him that, right after their arrival, a woman had come and invited them to her house, where they had found themselves at dinner with other sea travellers. The lady kept a register of all her sea guests, in which only their names appeared, no roles or titles. Larsson imagines that this woman, in his book the fictitious Madame Le Grand of Tréguier in Brittany, is not only genuinely passionate about the stories of these seamen, but wants to redeem their destinies, collecting on paper—in her files—their essential data after having asked them “each of you related a pleasant memory, what you believe in and what you wish from life” (“att var och en av er berättade ett trevligt minne, vad ni tror på och vad nu skulle önska er av livet”<sup>5</sup>). The fairness of the guest book is thus integrated and intertwined with the intimate individuality reported in the files, with which she feels she is filling a great gap, which everyone has in common: only the dates of birth and death (sometimes not even those!) are shown on the gravestone, occasionally together with a title or a motto, but most existences flow and end in nothing, whereas she wants them to be more consistent than the ephemeral wake of the sea, to use another essential metaphor in the novel.

<sup>4</sup> *Diario di bordo di uno scrittore*, p. 77-78.

<sup>5</sup> *Drömmar vid havet*, p. 24.

In *Från Vredens Kap till Jordens Ände*<sup>6</sup>, Larsson reflects on courage, tiredness, fear and all the moods and feelings that accompany sea travellers, both experts and novices. The places mentioned in the title suggest the reconstruction of a destiny, perhaps the journey of life, and this work allows the author to remember numerous encounters at sea—in a discreet and amused celebration of sea travels—and to observe human beings in their relationship with the sea. The titles of the chapters convey therefore both the features of a narrative work and of a manual for surviving<sup>7</sup>, as if Larsson was trying to order his own experience, between the pleasure of discovery and the sense of limitation and respect for the unknown (both in the sea and in human soul). This affects Larsson's considerations and perhaps contributes to the meditative rhythm of his narration. One might observe that all testimonies and thoughts in this work—which is fundamentally based on recognizing and listening to the others and on the reshaping of relationships in a peculiar and at stances misplacing environment—have a universal value; however, by referring to Larsson's personal experience, they are associated with the waters of the Northern Seas (in the broader sense we pointed out in the beginning), which rise up to the specific space of all practices.

The sea may also nurture human speculations, or even obsessions, by suggesting a suitable metaphor or providing the right condition to develop a thought, like it happens to Pekka—the Finnish man Ulf has the chance to meet and who soon in the novel has sailed westwards (towards his tragic destiny, as Ulf and Torben will later learn)—when approaching the North Sea from Denmark towards Scotland, as Ulf can read in his logbook:

From Hadsund, he sailed to Skagen, and the next morning he was out on the North Sea. *Finally on travel*, he wrote, *on a sea with an unbroken*

<sup>6</sup> The suggestive title is based on a deliberate mistake in the Swedish translation of the toponym Cape Wrath, actually "turning point" from an etymological perspective, yet literally "Vredens Kap" (sv. *vred* = en. *wrath*). This name was given by the Vikings, who were familiar with Orkney Islands and Hebrides, and identifies a place in the Highlands of Scotland that the author had never reached at that time (differently from the Southern point of this literary journey, Cabo Finisterre, on the Western coast of Galicia, Spain). See *Från Vredens Kap till Jordens Ände*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Here are a few examples: *Om rot- och rastlöshet och om att ta sig frihet(er)* (About root- and restlessness and about taking freedom(s)); *Om människor* (About human beings); *Om rädsla, oro och ängslan* (About fear, anxiety and worry); *Om trötthet, lättnad och glädje* (About fatigue, relief and joy); *Om lärdomar för livet och om mandomsprov* (About lessons for life and manhood tests).

horizon. *Sula* kept course 271°, straight to Rattray Head, and the wind was favourable, east to southeast. The notes in the logbook were concise. It was only when *Sula* approached land that Pekka became a little more talkative. He had taken note of the first seabird and wondered how far out to sea they flew, if there was any absolute limit that they did not dare to cross, and how they knew they had reached the limit. He also had a thought about our notion of boundaries as infinite lines. This image was wrong, Pekka wrote, nothing was infinite. It was always possible to go to the border, until there, turn off and follow it to finally pass there where it finished. *This also applied to History*, he had added a little further down the page. *Everything lives on and can re-emerge*.<sup>8</sup>

The sea is, furthermore, a noteworthy mentor to have one's senses refined by learning the language of nature and the elements. As MacDuff teaches Ulf, "Darkness is never thoroughly impenetrable. There is always some light."<sup>9</sup> This apprenticeship has much to do with time and the privilege of travelling at a lower path on sea, as captain Marcel observes: "The strange thing is how clearly you remember days at sea [...] Isn't it the case that you remember more days at sea than on land?' [...] 'I think', continued Marcel, 'that it is because life goes on so slowly at sea. You have time to take in the impressions.' [...] [T]hey quickly agreed on the most important thing, that travelling was a matter of flow of time."<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, sea people know how to balance calm and restlessness, even when calm turns out to be a tense wait. Being helpless in many respects (despite modern technology) or the simple observation of the inconveniences of life on a boat makes one appreciate even more the gestures of generosity that are not uncommon among sea travellers.

<sup>8</sup> "Från Hadsund seglade han till Skagen och morgonen därpå var han ute på Nordsjön. Äntligen på väg, skrev han, på ett hav med obruten horisont. *Sula* höll kurs 271°, rakt på Rattray Head, och vinden var gunstig, ost till sydost. Anteckningarna i loggboken var sparsamma. Det var först när *Sula* närmade sig land som Pekka blev lite mer talför. Han hade noterat den första sjöfågeln och undrade hur långt ut till havs de flög, om det fanns någon absolut gräns som de inte vågade överskrida, och hur de visste att de hade nått fram till gränsen. Han hade också en fundering om vår föreställning om gränser som oändliga linjer. Bilden var fel, skrev Pekka, ingenting var oändligt. Det var alltid möjligt att gå fram till gränsen, ända fram, vika av och följa den för att till slut gå förbi den där den upphörde. *Det gällde också Historien*, hade han lagt till litet längre ned på sidan. *Allting lever vidare och kan återuppträffa*." (*Den keltiska ringen*, p. 30).

<sup>9</sup> "Mörkret är aldrig helt ogenomträngligt. Det finns alltid något ljus." *Ibid.*, p. 15. This consideration evidently acquire a metaphorical meaning in the dramatic context of the protagonists' investigation and, from a narrative perspective, can be set in parallel with Pekka's speculations.

<sup>10</sup> "Det egendomliga är hur tydligt man minns dagar till sjöss [...] Är det inte så att man kommer ihåg fler dagar till sjöss än i land?' [...] 'Jag tror', fortsatte Marcel, 'att det beror på att det går så långsamt till sjöss. Man har tid att ta intrycken till sig [...]' [D]e blev fort rörande eniga om det viktigaste, att resa var en fråga om tidens gång." (*Drömmar vid havet*, p. 46-47).

## Image and representations of the sea

The sea described by Larsson is at times a discreet friend which transmits a certain way of life and which, in its irreducible otherness, allows human beings to observe themselves from the outside; nonetheless, it also reveals an inhuman, even violent aspect, linked to the force of the elements: this is of course due to Larsson's realism, yet, we might perceive in it a mirror (and a metaphor) of the human attitude in its collaborative as well as destructive tendencies. After all, Ulf in *Den keltiska ringen* yearns to enter the "true sea," the North Sea, which he can smell more and more as he moves around Denmark, but then he himself speaks of the North Sea as "the largest graveyard for ships in the world"<sup>11</sup>. Elsewhere, more than once, Larsson's characters outline the heroism connected with sea life and work on the sea, not only and not so much in the celebrated enterprises of professional sailors who may enter the Guinness world records or take part in the literary adventures of a novel, but rather in the daily work on marine platforms or on cargos, where labours are not seen nor admired by readers or spectators; a similar heroism can be even seen in the foolish courage of those who decide to cross the ocean in the least appropriate season, just like Ulf and Torben do.

In *Den keltiska ringen*, the topographical indications are abundant and accompany the protagonists' efforts of organization and orientation. It is possible to follow their journey from docking to docking, and even peek into their nautical chart. Here is a selection of places which are mentioned in the novel: Limhamn, Dragør, Anholt, Hals Barre, Limfjorden, Ålborg, Thyborøn, Monkey Bank, Rattray Head, Fraserburgh, Pentland Firth, Lossiemouth, Burchhead, Findhorn, Nairn, Inverness Firth, Kessock Bridge, Loch Ness, Corrywreckan, Loch Oich, Invergarry Castle; and many others might follow. From this outlook, we clearly see the gradual sliding from a Germanic to a Celtic world, a movement that is, obviously, deeply connected with the quest (the adventure or investigation) proposed by this novel, but that somehow accounts for (or hints at) ancient relationship between those

<sup>11</sup> "Nordsjön, 'världens största skeppskyrkogård'" (*Den keltiska ringen*, p. 76). The image of a churchyard had been previously used to describe a harbour without boats (p. 59) and this parallelism effectively illustrates, in my view, the dramatic polarity between danger and absence of emotions which marks sea experiences.

cultural areas. The story focuses on individual (mis-)interpretation of historical processes and violence for private reasons, however, a collective atmosphere is suggested by the approach to these harbours, weirs, channels, following ancient routes with moderns equipments.

Through the windows on the street level, you could see straight into the home comfort. Now it felt rather spooky and strange. The candle flames that fluttered here and there fought an unfair battle against the compact darkness. / I passed nearby *Rustica* [Ulf's boat] and continued to the far end of the pier. It was still blowing hard, white foam peaks were torn off the waves like silver strips. But the gusts of wind seemed to have lost some of their power. Out on the Öresund, the flashes from lighthouses and light buoys were seen—Drogden, Nordre Röse, Flinten and Oskarsgrundet. An airplane that went in for landing at Kastrup had lit its headlights, they threw a streak of light all the way to the pier where I was standing. In the middle of the strip, a cargo ship passed on its way northwards. That was one of the reasons why I had chosen Dragør as a winter port. Whenever I saw a ship pass or a plane take off, I was reminded of the world.<sup>12</sup>

Dragør, between Sweden and Copenhagen, at the margin of Denmark, is a small centre in a huge traffic area, with cargos and planes reaching this important passage to the Baltic Sea: here the protagonist Ulf can experience sea loneliness in a not too isolated spot, tracing back to human lights, noise and transportation whenever he needs a stronger link to daily real life. From this perspective, sea displays its nature of an expansion of land business which is also a privileged space to observe reality laterally, maybe in a sort of lateral thinking or more probably to find an inner balance, though temporarily.

In their journey, Ulf and Torben rely on Pekka's logbook, which generally provides details and technical data, but occasionally even short descriptions of sea landscape, like the following:

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<sup>12</sup> "Genom fönstren i gatuplanet kunde man se rakt in i hemtrivseln. Nu kändes det snarast spöklikt och främmande. Stearinljusen som fladdrade här och där kämpade en ojämn kamp mot det kompakta mörkret. / Jag gick förbi *Rustica* och fortsatte längst ut på piren. Det blåste fortfarande hårt, vita skumtoppar slets av vågorna som silverstrimlor. Men vindbyarna tycktes ha förlorat en del av sin kraft. Ute på Öresund syntes blinken från fyrar och ljusbojar—Drogden, Nordre Röse, Flinten och Oskarsgrundet. Ett flygplan som gick in för landning på Kastrup hade tänt sina strålkastare, de kastade en ljusstrimma ända in till piren där jag stod. Mitt på strimman passerade ett lastfartyg på väg norrut. Det var ett av skälen till varför jag hade valt Dragør som vinterhamn. Varje gång jag såg ett fartyg passera eller ett plan lyfta blev jag påmind om världen." (*Ibid.*, p. 17).



At 07.00 the next day, Pekka set out from Gilleleje with a course of 275° towards the entrance to Mariager fjord in Jutland. He had watched Hässelö in the sun and commented that it looked like it was “shrouded in mystery”. From Hässelö, *Sula* had benefited from a fresh southerly wind and kept good speed. Mariager fjord was reached at dusk and Pekka had written some lyrical words about the entrance to the fjord, with the setting sun and cows mooing on both sides of the winding channel. At 10.30 pm he moored in Hadsund’s fishing port.<sup>13</sup>

Pekka’s indications and comments, though necessarily short, provide a further human element in their approach to the sea, and his experience both accompanies their journey and expresses, even in a naïve manner, all the inextricable tangle of rough, cold data, mystery and idyll that alternate in a sailor’s mind.

Torben’s approach to life and knowledge, i.e. that of the cautious, rational and still curious explorer in a sort of alter-ego of Ulf, is once expressed by his consideration that faith is the best way to kill the mystery: one has to go to the ground of things, the rest remains a mystery and it is better not to get one’s hands on it without a reason.<sup>14</sup> This position might be applied, in my opinion, to the experience of sea as one of the main modalities in Larsson’s accounts, whose relevance often lies in a detailed representation led by the awareness that reality is ready to display beauty to the attentive viewer, and that an objective description can even turn to be charming or lyrical. While Ulf and Torben converse about the Celts, towards whose lands they are headed and who have never left important writings, relying only on oral tradition and therefore on accessible and living knowledge, a snowy storm surrounds their boat, in a somehow surreal atmosphere that both exalts their mission like a soundtrack and recalls them to

<sup>13</sup> “Klockan 07.00 nästa dag la Pekka ut från Gilleleje med kurs 275° mot inseglingen till Mariager fjord på Jylland. Han hade siktat Hässelö i soldiset och kommenterade att den såg ut att vara ‘inhöljd i mystik’. Från Hesselö hade *Sula* fått frisk sydlig vind och gjort god fart. Mariager fjord angjordes i skymningen och Pekka hade skrivit några lyriska ord om inseglingen på fjorden, med den nedåtgående solen och kor som råmade på båda sidor om den slingrande rännen. Klockan 22.30 förtöjde han i Hadsunds fiskehamn.” (*Ibid.*, p. 29).

<sup>14</sup> “Tvärtom menade han att tron var det bästa sättet att ta död på all mystik. Det gällde hela tiden att gå rakt på sak. Det som blev över, det var mystiken. Och den skulle man inte tumma på i onödan.” (*Ibid.*, p. 44). Torben’s observations are not related to the sea, on this circumstance, but to unfounded ideas or theories and to people’s credulousness. Yet, I assume that they are pertinent to the intellectual experience of the sea by Larsson (although not his only approach): a humble but effective representation instead of an easy praise or celebration of sea life.

concrete dangers.<sup>15</sup> To this regard, sea descriptions often lead to rapidly changing landscapes, a peculiar way to observe Northern areas in their fascinating and tricky aspect, like in the following passage:

The following morning, when we woke up, I realised how changeable the weather could be in winter. We set out from Anholt in crystal-clear air, a light easterly wind and a pair of degrees below zero. The sea had a sharp sheen that hurt the eyes. It was like sailing on shards of glass. The view seemed endless, as if you saw through what you were looking at.<sup>16</sup>

Similar descriptions of the sea in Larsson's works stage a displacement, which in turn hints at a suggestive mixture of fear of being swallowed by an unearthly landscape and desire to lose oneself in such a liberating endlessness. In so nearly a supernatural condition, however usual on the sea, another dimension is paradoxically reinforced, i.e. the privilege of sailors as well as snails, the maximum safety at the top of uncertainty:

In the commotion of the past few days, I had forgotten that *Rustica* was my home. Under normal circumstances, on summer sailings for example, I was constantly reminded that I was actually *living* on board. On deck and in the cockpit, close to the sea and to the waves, everything was as before when the boat had only been a temporary holiday home. But as soon as I had arrived in port and stepped into the cabin I had the peculiar feeling of being at home *wherever I was*. It was a feeling I had never quite come to terms with, one moment being away as you can only be when sailing, and the next moment being more at home than you might be anywhere else.<sup>17</sup>

In this voyage, however, Larsson does not intend to create an epic of the North Sea, but rather to bring out the grandeur of the marine experience in its complexity and in its profound humanity; therefore, faithful to his realism, he does not skip his characters' occasional

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<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 53-57.

<sup>16</sup> "Nästa morgon när vi vaknade gick det upp för mig hur ombytligt vädret kunde vara på vintern. Vi la ut från Anholt i kristallklar luft, lätt ostlig vind och ett par minusgrader. Havet hade en vass glans som smärtade i ögonen. Det var som att segla på glasskärvor. Sikten tycktes oändlig, som om man såg igenom det man tittade på." (*Ibid.*, p. 71).

<sup>17</sup> "Under de senaste dagarnas uppståndelse hade jag glömt bort att *Rustica* var mitt hem. Under normala omständigheter, på sommarens seglatser exempelvis, blev jag hela tiden påmind om att jag faktiskt *bodde* ombord. På däck och i sittbrunnen, nära havet och vågorna, var allt som förr när båten bara hade varit en tillfällig semesterbostad. Men så snart jag hade kommit i hamn och trädde ner i kajutan fick jag den egendomliga känslan av att vara hemma *var jag än befann mig*. Det var en känsla som jag aldrig riktigt hade förlikat mig med, att ena ögonblicket vara borta som man bara kan vara när man seglar och i nästa ögonblick vara mer hemma än man kanske kan vara någon annanstans." (*Ibid.*, p. 73).

disenchantment: "After mooring, rigging the sails and lighting the stove, we walked across the small sandy beach west of the harbour and onto the giant breakwaters to watch the North Sea make its way out. The inspection told us nothing of value; in an offshore wind it was like any other water."<sup>18</sup>

*Från Vredens Kap till Jordens Ände* essentially originated from the same ambition, with the choice, however, of relying on the biographical account (mixed with existential considerations) rather than on fiction and narrative rhythm. The introductory chapter, where Larsson exposes his aims, is significant: to trigger the courage to change one's life, to stimulate one's sensitivity towards the freedom of the sea, to appreciate Harry Martinson, mentor of his experience.<sup>19</sup> This last aspect is particularly enlightening: Larsson reports that, in an advanced state of his writing, he realized that Martinson had already said many of the same things better, and therefore he decided to quote him several times, in particular at the end of the chapters, to make him express in the magic of his prose the essential sense of what was previously illustrated through anecdotes. We therefore find here an opposite movement in relation to the previous one: no longer the literary fiction (by Larsson) which opens up glimpses of real life, but the memory of past experiences that find a reference in the literature (by Martinson). Larsson's marine geography results enriched by numerous new toponyms, whereas anecdotes occasionally offer the author the chance to address nautical issues as well as social debates or existential questions. For Larsson's readers, this work is a sort of outlook on the backstage of his sea novels, on his (and his companions') experience of the sea and its unobvious link to daily life on the mainland.

At the basis of *Drömmar vid havet*, on the contrary, there was the need to write a beautiful book on the saving grace of beauty in life. Related to this project, there lies the question of whether a book can be written that is both good and beautiful. In Larsson's opinion, "[t]here are good, or even excellent, books that do not contain much beauty," and, despite Flaubert's ideal view, "[o]ver the years, I have come to the conclusion

<sup>18</sup> "Efter att ha förtöjt, beslagit seglen och tänt kaminen gick vi över den lilla sandstranden väster om hamnen och ut på de gigantiska vågbrytarna för att se hur Västerhavet tog sig ut. Inspektionen sa oss ingenting av värde; i frånlandsvind var det som vilket annat vatten som helst." (*Ibid.*, p. 75).

<sup>19</sup> *Från Vredens Kap till Jordens Ände*, p. 10.

that one has to decide whether one wants to write—preferably—a good book or a beautiful book.”<sup>20</sup> To this purpose, the most natural thing for the author was to invent a character who lived only for beauty, and, a year later, while sailing by Tréguier towards Spain, Larsson returned to the idea of the novel about beauty as a possible or impossible elixir of life.

The first five chapters in *Drömmar vid havet* are introduced by “There were days” (“Det fanns dagar”) and the reference to time and climate before the respective characters enter on stage provides a regularity that should recall, in the author’s intentions, the structure of the precious stones and jewels; the narrative texture outlines several stories that eventually come together in Kinsale, Ireland, when the characters are somehow asked to step out of their dreams and into reality to make them come true. In the meanwhile, these beginnings implicitly link, at least in part, the climate and landscape of these ‘northern’ ports (Sálvora, Vilagarcía de Arousa, Tréguier, Kinsale, Marstal) to the respective characters and their worldview. Moreover, these digressions make a character out of the sea (or weather or nature), which in turn appears both an inert and an active agent. Here are some examples, each one immediately followed by the text in Swedish:

[Ch. 1– Sálvora island, Galice] There were days, on the Atlantic, with an unbroken horizon all around, when sea and sky had the same deep clear blue colour. There were days when a sharp sun lit up masses of water in revolt, when chalk-white breakwaters were blown into foam strips, when the ship tumbled in the huge mountains of waves, when a rock-hard wind whipped up water smoke that made short-lived rainbows flash around the bow. These were the days that some people, even if only figuratively speaking, could give a life for. But they were also such days that most people would surely give anything to avoid experiencing, even if only due to fear of death. Or of life.

(De fanns dagar, på Atlanten, med obruten horisont runt om, då hav och himmel hade samma djupt klarblå färg. Det var dagar då en vass sol lyste upp vattenmassor i uppror, då kritvita vågbrott blåstes till skumstrimlor, då fartyget vältrade sig i de väldiga vågbergen, då en stenhård vind vispade upp vattenrök som fick kortlivade regnbågar att blixtra till runt stäven. Det var sådana dagar som somliga människor,

<sup>20</sup> “Ci sono libri buoni, o anche ottimi, che non contengono molta bellezza [...] Con gli anni sono arrivato alla conclusione che bisogna decidere se si vuole scrivere—preferibilmente—un buon libro o un libro bello” (*Diario di bordo di uno scrittore*, p. 75-76).

om än bara bildligt talat, kunde ge ett liv för. Men det var också sådana dagar som de flesta säkerligen skulle ge vad som helst för att få slippa uppleva, om än bara på grund av fruktan för döden. Eller för livet.)<sup>21</sup>

[Ch. 2– Brittany] There were days in Tréguier, in the winter, that were lifeless gray. There were days when every sound replaced silence, when the echo of footsteps between the stone houses seemed tactless, when the sky was so monotonous that one could imagine that it was not present, when the light at dusk was so powerless that the treetops' reflections in the fast flowing water of the river Jaudy could hardly be discerned, when everything was a foggy, damp and for most people hopeless mist.

(Det fanns dagar i Tréguier, om vintern, som var livlöst grå. Det var dagar då varje ljud avlöste tystnad, då ekot av fotsteg mellan stenhusen tycktes taktlöst, då himlen var så enformig att man kunde få för sig att den inte var tillstädes, då ljuset i skymningen var så kraftlöst att trädkronornas spegelbilder i floden Jaudys snabbflytande vatten knappt kunde skönjas, då allt var ett disigt, fuktigt och för de flesta hopplöst töcken.)<sup>22</sup>

[Ch. 4– Ireland] There were days in Kinsale, in the winter, that were windless and gentle. There were days when every sound had time to cease before the next took over, when the smoke from the coal-fired fireplaces and boilers hung in the air like an early morning fog, when the sky was a bluish blush that reflected, floated out and became a marbling in Bandon River as the sun set and the tidal current shifted strength and course. The smell of coal, of dewy grass, of the sea, of food from the many restaurants, of beer and tobacco from the even more pubs enveloped Kinsale in its own distinctive scent.

(Det fanns dagar i Kinsale, om vintern, som var vindlöst blida. Det var dagar då varje ljud hann tystna innan nästa tog vid, då röken från de koleldade öppna spisarna och pannorna hängde kvar i luftrummet som en morgontidig floddimma, då himlen var en blålätt rodnad som speglade sig, flöt ut och blev en marmorering i Bandon River allteftersom solen sjönk och tidvattenströmmen skiftade styrka och lopp. Lukten av stenkol, av daggvätt gräs, av hav, av matos från de många restaurangerna, av öl och tobak från de än fler pubarna svepte in Kinsale i sin egen särpräglade doft.)<sup>23</sup>

These lively and effective descriptions, in spite of their shortness, provide eloquent proof of Larsson's aesthetic purpose and of his attempt to make an autonomous actor out of the sea, or, more appropriately, out

<sup>21</sup> *Drömmar vid havet*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

of natural elements and human signs by the sea, suggesting an exchange of life and energy between humans and nature. A rigorous realism supports a lyrical connotation, where life lies in wait and nature plays with human stuff, mixing it with its own.

Not less important, as suggested, is the role of the sea as a mute companion of the artistic creation: Larsson reveals that he wrote some of his works on a boat, moored in some port, or in the stops of some voyage. Here the sea remains outside, yet, actually, it contributes to the privilege and the need for a writer to disconnect, to move away and thus concentrate on the worlds he has decided to (re)construct and evoke. The parallelism between writing and life on sea is in any case recalled several times in the writer's testimonies. For instance, Larsson reports that, before devoting himself to *Den keltiska ringen*, he had in mind Erskine Childers' legendary little classic *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), the story of two young Englishmen who sail in October among the East Frisian islands and discover the German plan to invade England, and adds: "it was no coincidence that it was precisely that [book] that drew my attention: at that time, my partner and I had moved to live all year round aboard our new second-hand sailboat, the *Rustica*".<sup>24</sup> After all, Larsson himself acknowledges that *Den keltiska ringen* is not just about identity and the struggle for independence, but also about sailing and approaching the open sea on a small boat: "I started it in the second winter that I spent on board of the *Rustica*, in the port of Dragør, and I finished it on board of the same boat in the port of Howth, just outside Dublin. In between there were three years of life on a boat and sailing cruises in Celtic waters."<sup>25</sup> That is why he decided to describe in a realistic way the life on board of a boat that is at the same time, he writes, accommodation, luggage and a tool at the service of freedom and adventure.<sup>26</sup> The same thing, actually, had already been valid for the writing of his novel about Long John Silver (1995), the character taken

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<sup>24</sup> "E che fosse proprio quella ad assillarmi non era un caso: all'epoca io e la mia compagna ci eravamo trasferiti a vivere tutto l'anno a bordo della nostra nuova barca a vela di seconda mano, il *Rustica*" (*Diario di bordo di uno scrittore*, p. 42).

<sup>25</sup> "L'ho iniziato nel secondo inverno che passavo a bordo del *Rustica*, nel porto di Dragør, e l'ho finito sempre a bordo del *Rustica* nel porticciolo di Howth, appena fuori Dublino. In mezzo ci sono stati tre anni di vita in barca e di crociere a vela in acque celtiche." (*Ibid.*, p. 48).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

from Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* (1883), where the sea is tropical and not Northern:

In 1992, I arrived in Kinsale aboard the *Rustica*, to spend the winter there after four months navigation in Scotland and along the Eastern coast of Ireland. There, while the low pressures coming from the Atlantic were raging, I feverishly wrote *Long John Silver*, almost always lying in the starboard berth. I wrote by hand, with a pencil, on notebooks with red and black covers made in China [...] Whenever I had a few chapters ready, I transcribed them on the computer and sent the disks to my sister Miriam in Stockholm.<sup>27</sup>

The novel's last draft was written down in Tréguier, on the Northern coast of Brittany, which would later become the setting for part of *Drömmar vid havet*. Larsson is aware that he probably could not have written *Den keltiska ringen* without having experienced summers and winters on a sailboat and having sailed in Scottish waters.



In conclusion, Björn Larsson's portrayals of the Northern Seas build up a unifying map of different waters, ports, landscapes, real people and fictitious characters, spreading from the Germanic to the Celtic cultural area. Here, the representation of North is more our factual assessment and—at the same time—our critical synthesis of the different landscapes he deals with than the author's clear intention of exploring the diverse facets of a presumed North. The choice of this topic, in fact, comes to him as a literary expression of his genuine experience of sailing and as the effort to characterise the sea as a means to understand human beings and their essence while considering them from a particular perspective, where many points of reference disappear or are redefined. Realism and enlightening observations mark his descriptions, in an involving but never rhetorically epic (rather somewhat ironic) representation, where sea may alternatively act as an unobtrusive friend, an empathic spectator, as well as an irreducible otherness and a violent and destroying presence, with its own, pitiless logic. At sea, humans are nearly constantly called

<sup>27</sup> "Nel 1992 arrivai a Kinsale a bordo del *Rustica*, per passarvi l'inverno dopo quattro mesi di navigazione in Scozia e lungo la costa orientale dell'Irlanda. Lì, mentre imperversavano le basse pressioni provenienti dall'Atlantico, scrissi febbrilmente *Long John Silver*, quasi sempre sdraiato nella cuccetta di dritta. Scrivevo a mano, a matita, su quaderni con la copertina rossa e nera fatti in Cina [...] Ogni volta che avevo pronti un po' di capitoli, li trascrivevo al computer e mandavo i dischetti a mia sorella Miriam a Stoccolma." (*Ibid.*, p. 68-69).

up to meditate or react, either taking the advantage of solitude and calm or showing off their own heroism, which can even take place in a daily job on the sea.

Long periods on or by the sea have accompanied Larsson's creative moments, providing determined isolation as much as a source of inspiration. In his works, the sea emerges in all its complexity, from technical data and attempted measurements to lyrical responses and existential meditations, and offers carefully expressed perspectives on characters, action, social and aesthetic issues. Far from merely being a beautiful and fascinating background for adventures, Larsson's sea displays all benefits and dangers connected to freedom, as well as the always tempting power of dreaming, which sea life ever triggers and nurtures. Sea life becomes therewith an intense apprenticeship on knowledge and its limits, and on human relationship with the unknown. Larsson's overall treatment of the sea is led by the purpose of both presenting this environment in its real features and accounting for its literary potentiality, scrutinizing human imaginary and expectations in a partly ecocritical attitude, as far as sea rise up as an active and sometimes interacting player, which is worthy lively digressions, stands for nature voice and hosts and witnesses (sometimes mocks) human strives and pursuits.