

L'île au trésor

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'The Treasure Island' along with 'Robinson Crusoe' were my favorite books as a child. Or rather the books I encountered on a child which left an impression deep enough to be impressive to me also as an adult. The first I encountered was Robinson Crusoe, but not in an original version, but a version intended for children, radically condensed and profusely illustrated, and of course in Swedish. The predicament of the marooned sailor caught my imagination deeply. Many years later I read the full story, and was somewhat disappointed, and then further on I read English version, but what affected me was not the literary style but the contents, and I have never felt any great urge to reread them. From an artistic point of view what caught me was the film by Bunuel¹ which I watched with my mother. I remember the long waves on the shore and the eponymous hero exhausted wading along, and the encounter with Friday, surely very important in any dramatization if not in the book per se, and hearing the first words in English I distinguished and understood, namely 'milk'. The attraction of Robinson Crusoe was how he gradually built up his own private civilization the details of which fascinated me. I was also sad to learn that he had been in isolation for thirty years, his entire life between twenty to fifty confined to the island, because for a boy not yet ten, the age fifty seemed impossibly far into the future and heralding the end of life. Part of the disappointment when I read the full story was that it was filled with adventures of the time before the shipwreck, which I thought of as a gratuitous digression, although of course not in those very words.

The 'Treasure Island' or rather 'Skattkammarn' as it was known in Swedish, I first encountered the summer of 1957 in an illustrated comic version. Me and my brother was spending three weeks with our paternal grandparents, while our parents was on a car trip to England, their first trip out of Scandinavia for my mother, the second for my father in almost twenty years. I had learned to read and read and wrote a lot during that stay, and of the comics I do not remember very much, except a picture of the broken into ship by Silver and the fact that they had gotten rid of him cheaply. I proudly explained to some play-mates that many had been killed in the story, which from the perspective of a child supposedly is a recommendation. The book itself I got as a birthday present two years later, when we were spending two months of the summer outside Lund by the very shore of the Sound while my mother was taking a summer course in physics at the university. We were renting a top apartment of a big yellow brick building sheltered from a busy road by a huge hedge. In the apartment of the hosts it reeked of fried herring, and as there was no kitchen in our abode, my father (who as usual was doing most of the household work in my childhood) cooked our meals on a camping stove. There was a short dirt walk to the shore, passing by the huge nets suspended on poles by the cottage of a local fisherman, and when you reached the sound, there was a pungent stench of rotting seaweed. It was in

¹ Filmed in Mexico 1950-52 released in 1954

this setting I read through the book for the first time and would in succeeding years read it a lot, greatly enjoying the illustrations by the Swedish draftsman Eric Palmqvist².

What intrigued me about the book? First the very beginning - *Indens r 17..* (In the year of the lord 17..) putting the setting in a distant, but yet not too distant time, having just become aware of historical dates and already formed some romantic conception of the 18th century. Then the inn in the desolate parts by the sea and the appearance of the old seaman (Billy Bones) who by his rather marginal appearance evokes a much larger cast of characters to be revealed. The powers of evocation are the strongest when exercised by something marginal, allowing a freer reign of the imagination. Then my youthful imagination was caught by the dramatic incidents following upon the death of Billy Bones and the discovery of the coins and above all the treasure map. The Dr. Livesey with his long clay pipe introduced to the story a sane and reassuring character, the roles doctors traditionally are expected to play. The meeting at the manor of the squire also added to the charm, the splendor of the house in comparison with the inn, was never explicitly described in the book, but anyway they entered my imagination³. It all combined to create an atmosphere of expectation, further enhanced by the departure for Bristol, a city which appeared to me, along with that of the protagonist Hawkins, very exciting and romantic. Books which you read when very young often introduce many things to you for the first time, and as those things will stay with you for the rest of your life, the books themselves will tag along, getting a free ride, even if they do not necessarily deserve to be remembered. So Bristol entered my consciousness and has ever since had a romantic appeal, just as Hull entered with Robinson Crusoe, but less romantically. But of course the real character of the book is not Hawkins but Long John Silver, who if any is a most ambiguous character. One may not be expected at that tender age to appreciate the conflicting emotions such a character inspires, but I guess a large part of the fascination of the book resides in the encounter with this ambivalent personage. It is mainly him we can thank for making a case for 'The Treasure Island' to be real literature, and if so the book gave me the first taste of it (sorry Astrid Lindgren). The depth of the impression he made on me was testified by the fact that when I some years later, at the age of 16, was to write my Swedish essay for my 'Realskoleexamen'⁴ I choose not only as my subject 'a character of fiction' but selected Silver to be the one depicted. As I recall I started out very well but lost heart

² (1908-99) He also illustrate many of Astrid Lindgrens books, and designed the new Swedish bills in the mid 60's. Also Swedish translations of books by Twain, London and Verne were illustrated as well. I was much impressed by his illustrations as a child, and I think my father had met him, but I haven o idea in what context. He died in Bollns, where my parents taught 1950-55, and I think my father had some contacts with artists, I was given as a baby a small oil painting by someone my parents knew, and that could have been of those artists.

³ To some extent the imagination of my readings have been somewhat sullied by images which was thrust upon me, such as those of the Sawyers 3D pictures, which were very popular in my childhood, and I had a fair collection of them, no all lost along with the viewer

⁴ In the old times in Sweden, compulsory schooling was only for seven years, traditionally at the age of eleven you could apply for a higher more select level - Realskola -and then to go to the Gymnasium. By the time it was my turn, you could not apply until the age of thirteen and shortly thereafter the form was abolished, and nine years of schooling became compulsory.

as I went along, as I feared that my rather detailed summary of the plot may count for so called misunderstanding of the topic, and hence the confident beginning petered out. I do not believe that this early essay has survived all my moves of the last half century. Now to be honest, apart from the delineation of Silver's character the second half of the book is a bit of a disappointment, at least as far as the adventure of the treasure hunt goes. Of course the attack of the pirates of the fort is exciting, at least to a child, but I noted, maybe even with a touch of sarcasm at that early age, that the only people killed were those that were blank as characters and nothing more than names. Everyone else survives, if not always wholly unscathed. Apart from Silver, what made an impression on me was the description of the island, especially the sound of surf, which was the first time I encountered it. In fact somewhere in the book the protagonist Hawkins refer to that sound of the surf as the most lasting memory of his visit, and that it had an almost nightmarish effect on him. It was an island he was happy to leave and put behind him, perhaps because it was so deeply associated with the pirates, and the legendary Captain Flint of a truly psycho-pathological nature. (But was not Silver even worse, even higher on the pecking order than Flint himself for all his bravado?). And then of course one should not forget one important part, the sea itself and those frail vessels which so intrepidly rode on its waves. Until the arrival of steam engines, going on the seas was a most romantic venture, and the navigation and handling of a vessel was a very complicated business, a typical commercial sailing ship having hundreds of different sails. For modern readers thinking of just driving a boat, the importance of captain Smollett will be lost on them, as well as the appreciation of the pirates. Nowadays, with container traffic, all the romanticism of the sea has been squeezed out. Modern life invariably involves a trivialization and concomitant alienation of life. One should not assume that Stevenson was particularly knowledgeable about the sea, although to a modern reader he certainly appears so, only that at his time this was much more of common knowledge.

The book this time was written in French, with constant comparison with the original. Good books never age, or so we were assured, but translations, being interpretations do. What strikes me in the original is the dense and elliptic form of the language employed by the author, while in the French, things have been explained and made explicit. Idiomatic expressions also differ between the languages. In English Smollett at one time talks to himself, while in French he talks as if he talks to himself. Why this discrepancy? The translator slipping? Trying to improve on the text (a deadly sin for a translator)? Or that 'talking to yourself' would sound strange in French and not adequately catching the sense of the English. Also, Stevenson makes the pirates speak a rather grammatically deficient English with 'I does' and 'he don't', none of that in the French.

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