

**Of Monsters and Men. The Search for the Human  
in P.O. Enquist's *Nedstörtad ängel***

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Abstract

L'intera opera dell'autore svedese Per Olov Enquist è permeata da un'interrogazione sull'essenza della natura umana, tema che si intreccia con quello più specifico della sua stessa identità personale. L'opera in cui questo interrogativo è affrontato nel modo più esplicito è il breve ma complesso romanzo del 1985, *Nedstörtad ängel*. In questo articolo, sulla base delle riflessioni offerte dai *Body Studies* e *Disability Studies*, si analizza come il tema della natura umana è trattato nel romanzo, servendosi del corpo umano come chiave di lettura.

Parole chiave: P.O. Enquist, *Nedstörtad ängel*, corpo, identità, agape

Abstract

The issue of what a human being is, often connected to a more specific issue regarding the author's own personal identity, frequently recurs in Per Olov Enquist's oeuvre. However, the work where it is most clearly stated and amply dealt with is *Nedstörtad ängel* (1985), a short but dense novel with a complex structure. Drawing on contributions from Body and Disability Studies, this article analyses how the theme of human nature is handled in the novel through the lens of the human body.

Keywords: P.O. Enquist, *Nedstörtad ängel*, Body, Identity, Agape



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## 1. Introduction

According to Danish critic Thomas Thurah, Swedish author Per Olov Enquist's writings can be read «som én lang variation over de samme temaer» (Thurah 2002, 7),<sup>1</sup> the most remarkable of which is the question «hvad et menneske er» (10).<sup>2</sup> The issue of what it is to be human – strictly connected to a more specific one, regarding the author's own personal identity (De Marco 2017, 182-183) – in fact recurs under different wordings and with different answers throughout Enquist's oeuvre. However, the novel where it is most clearly stated and amply dealt with is *Nedstörtad ängel* (1985). The author himself explains that this book is an attempt to approach the question of «vad det var att vara människa» (Enquist 2014, 17)<sup>3</sup> and even declares that the whole novel *is* the question: «Alltså: det här är frågan, om än deformerad» (18).<sup>4</sup>

In the last decades of the past century more and more attention has been paid to the role of the body in constructing, influencing and describing identity.<sup>5</sup> It cannot be a coincidence, then, that, in the book where Enquist deals most deeply with the theme of human identity, bodies play a fundamental role. In this article I will therefore make use of recent theories about embodied self and culturally determined bodies, and about the way in which bodies are used in literature to represent – symbolically or metaphorically – human experience, to explore how the bodily imagery at

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<sup>1</sup> «A long variation of the same themes». Unless otherwise stated, translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> «What a human being is».

<sup>3</sup> «What it was to be human» (Enquist 1987, 18).

<sup>4</sup> «Thus: this is the question, even if deformed» (Enquist 1987, 19).

<sup>5</sup> For a valuable survey of the development of Body Studies, see Bryan S. Turner's *Introduction* in Turner 2012.

the centre of *Nedstörtad ängel* is connected to the existential question that permeates the novel.

After a survey of the relevant critical studies, in particular those which highlight the role of the body in determining identity and those which concentrate on the unproper body,<sup>6</sup> I will analyse how Enquist's novel try to answer its fundamental question first through the presence of "monstrous characters" (3.1), then through some images (the gastroscopy, the dream of the man in the ice-grave, see 3.2) which connect to the bodily roots of human identity.

## 2. Critical studies on the body

As anticipated, in this article, I will make use of those branches of Body Studies that concentrate on the relationship between body and identity.

In addition, given the presence of a deformed person among the novel's protagonists, I will also draw on more specific fields of studies, that is Disability Studies and Teratology Studies.

### 2.1 The "tsunami" of Body Studies

«Why 'the body' now?», asks Bryan S. Turner in his introduction to *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies* in 2012 (5). His question arises from the observation that since the mid-Eighties, the body has emerged more and more as a topic of research in the humanities and social sciences, and he answers it by referring to a concomitance of causes such as

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<sup>6</sup> For the use of the term "unproper", see Paul Youngquist's *Introduction* in Youngquist 2003.

the growth of significant medical technologies [...]; the ageing of human populations and the crises around pensions, retirement, employment and reproduction; the globalization of disease and the threat of epidemics [...]; the commercialization of the body in all spheres of life (medicine, religion and economics); and finally the construction of global sports which inevitably promote the body as a vehicle of cultural, military and economic competition (Turner 2012, 5-6).

However, «the great embodiment tsunami» of the past thirty years (Johnson 2008, 159) has its roots in a much earlier current of thought, the phenomenological thinking of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. As Jensen and Moran pointed out, «phenomenology has from the outset [...] recognised that subjects are intrinsically embodied» (Jensen and Moran 2013, vii). The vision of the body shared by phenomenologists overcomes the Cartesian duality of mind and body: the mind cannot exist without the body, which is the source of all perceptual experiences (sensorial, proprioceptive, kinaesthetic), which in their turn are at the grounds of abstract thinking. At the ground of this view is the distinction between the “object-body” made of cells and tissues, extending in space as any other object (Husserl’s *Körper*), and the animated body which is the origin of all perceptions (Husserl’s *Leib*, Merleau-Ponty’s *corps vécu*, Sartre’s *chair*), a distinction that allows us to go from “possessing” a body to “being” a body. It is from the body’s perceptions – of the world, of itself, and of other animated bodies – that human consciousness evolves, thus making the physical reality of the body a fundamental component of human identity.

Recent followers of phenomenological thinking have focused on the affective and imaginative dimensions of the body,<sup>7</sup> marking the step from embodied *self* to embodied *person*, as suggested by Forlé, who maintains that «by means of our body, we can express our emotions and feelings, as

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Johnson 2018.

well as our attitudes and [...] some of our personality traits» (Forlé 2019, 110). The body is the medium through which we express our affective states, but these expressions articulate on three different levels: a basic, universal one, a culture-related one, and an individual one which differentiates us from other people. It is this last level of expression that constitutes the “stylistic mark” of each embodied person, that is, «what unifies all the acts of a person, and which allows one to recognize that individual as the person he/she is» (116). In other words, the physical reality of the body is the constituent not only of our consciousness, our ability to think and communicate, but also of our own specific and unique identity.

Since the 1990s, a number of studies have instead concentrated on the cultural and political significance of the body. Social movements such as the women’s, the LGBTQ+, the disability and more recently the geriatric movement have deployed a common constructionist epistemology to demonstrate the problematic nature of gender, sexuality, disability and age (Turner 2012, 9). The solid starting point of social constructionist studies is that «the human body has been conceptualized, engaged and, indeed, experienced in a multitude of different ways throughout history and across cultures» (Weinberg 2012, 144). However, despite being born out of the laudable desire to claim equal rights and treatment for minorities depreciated or oppressed due to their physical characteristics (gender, race, age, etc.), they have in some cases been accused of resulting in a blatant paradox: overlooking, when not denying, the physical reality of bodies, thus «suppressing the lived body in the name of the body» (Turner 2012, 10). Nevertheless, even one of the most fervent champions of social constructionism, Judith Butler, does not forget «the question of the materiality of the body», underlining that «to claim that sexual differences are indissociable from discursive demarcations is not the same as claiming that discourse causes differences» (Butler 1993, 1). For Butler, *social* constructions inscribe on the *material* fabric of the body: any discourse about the body

contributes to «a further formation of that body» (10). The “culturalist” view of the body has therefore had the merit of reminding us that the body is not merely the flesh and blood of which it is basically constituted, nor the impressions and perceptions that it experiences, but *also* the practices and values to which it is subject in its social and cultural exchanges: a sort of palimpsest where different dimensions of human embodiment overlap and interweave (cf. Johnson 2008, 163 ff).

## 2.2 *The unproper body*

In her 1997 work, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, one of the founders of Disability Studies, reframed disability as «another culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality» (Garland Thomson 1997, 5). Although the physical dimension of disability cannot of course be denied, Garland Thomson also wanted to highlight the weight of the exclusionary discourse operated by the “normate”, that is, «the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority» (8). This is even truer in literature, where «disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles» (9).

More recently, Paul Youngquist underlined how abnormality is tied to a set of cultural norms of embodiment that between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century consolidated into the idea of a “proper body” (Youngquist 2013, xiv-xxvi): the healthy and productive body of a law-abiding citizen. Abnormal bodies are defined by their non-conformity with the norm; at the same time, though, they also contribute to reinforce the idea of normality by showing what lies outside it, hence the fearful fascination they exert. This idea of abnormality as a way to bring out normality by mere

contrast implies that «the spectacle of disfigurement ministered to a historically specific need to interrogate the contours of human identity» (O'Connor 2000, 150).

Youngquist titled his book *Monstrosities*, and in recent years monsters do have carved out a niche for themselves in academic literature, if even a philosopher like Rosi Braidotti calls for a «philosophical teratology» able to «reconfigur[e] the positivity of difference» (Braidotti 2000, 165). It is a commonplace fact that monstrosities have haunted human imagination since ancient times;<sup>8</sup> however, while in pre- and early modern times a moralizing reading prevailed, where deformities were seen as a punishment for improper behavior (cf. Baratta 2016, 18), recent studies concentrate on the positive implications of the monster, seen as a hybrid that «crosses borders and weakens category classifications» (Zeller 2012, 72). Their being at the border between human and non-human allows them to represent an alternative view on human nature: «they alone shed light on what is otherwise invisible and thus make analysis possible in the first place» (75). We are not far from Braidotti's idea of the posthuman condition as a possibility to rethink subjectivity altogether (cf. van der Zaag 2016): “freaky” bodies’ resiliency, their «capacity to metamorphose and thus to survive and cope», helps explain the fascination and the «peculiarly reassuring function» of monsters in contemporary imagination (Braidotti 2000, 163). “Monsters” should therefore perform a twofold function with regard to human identity: on the one hand, they help define the norm of human nature by contrasting it; on the other, they also offer alternative visions of humanity.

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<sup>8</sup> Amsterdam University Press even has a special series, “Monsters and Marvels: Alterity in the Medieval and Early Modern Worlds”, «dedicated to the study of the monstrous and the marvelous in the medieval and early modern worlds».

### 3. *Nedstörtad ängel*

Despite its brevity (151 pages in the 1985 original edition, reduced to 88 in the unabridged but differently formatted 2014 one), this novel is of great significance in Enquist's production (cf. for instance Thurah 2002, Ekselius 1996). As Thurah pointed out, it is chronologically situated almost precisely in the middle of his career, and it can be seen as a «grundfortælling, en matrice – eller maske – for mange af Enquists romanfortællinger» (2002, 20).<sup>9</sup> It is written in a prose as terse and tight as poetry, where characters and events transcend their narrative setting to become symbols that recur over and over again, each time adding a new layer of meaning, a new shade of significance. Moreover, its complexity in plot and the set of mysterious recurring images (see below, 3.2) allow for multiple interpretations, which range from an attempt to define what a human being is (Thurah 2002), to a modern version of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice (Ekselius 1996), to a manifold metaphor for the narrator's self (Englund 2006).

The structure of the book recalls a collage or mobile (De Marco 2017, 48), where four narrative threads entwine and intersect each other, mutually amplifying their symbolic meaning: one about Pasqual Pinon, a “monster” with a second, female head on his forehead; one about K,<sup>10</sup> a psychiatrist who develops an inexplicable affection for the young killer of his young daughter; a third, more thinly sketched, which relates the love

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<sup>9</sup> «A basic story, a matrix – or a mask – for many of Enquist's novels».

<sup>10</sup> Enquist often leaves his characters without name, or indicates them only with an initial letter, especially when he is directly involved in the text as a narrator or a character – such as here, or in the autobiographical *Ett annat liv* (Enquist 2008). This could be due both to a form of discretion, in order not to expose the people around him, and to the desire to give a universal value to his narration.



story between Bertolt Brecht and Ruth Berlau; and, finally, one where a nameless narrator – with several features in common with the writer – speaks about his dreams and his relation to the other three stories. In all these threads bodily images play a fundamental role; in particular, in this article I will concentrate on the monstrous body and the physical body.

As we have seen above, the monstrous is often used as a sort of contrast agent to define what is human by defining its utter limits, and in the following paragraphs I will try to show how «la mostruosità [...] è chiaramente una delle immagini attraverso cui Enquist tenta di rispondere all'interrogativo su cosa sia umano» (Culeddu 2019, 397).<sup>11</sup> Contradicting Garland Thomson 1997 (see 2.2), in *Nedstörtad ängel* the monstrous is absolutely central: Pasqual Pinon has a physical deformity that turns him into a typical “freak”; the killer boy is guilty of a monstrous crime, the unmotivated killing of two young girls; Ruth Berlau is made monstrous by her alcoholism and her internment in a mental hospital;<sup>12</sup> and the narrator himself is at some point compared to a zombie, a living dead: «En människa med bara tre drömmar måste ha dött mycket tidigt, nästan som foster, och bara kroppen blivit kvar» (Enquist 2014, 15).<sup>13</sup> Many of them are either dumb – as Maria – or speechless, as the boy and K’s wife, an evidently non-human trait. Some critics even maintain that the novel itself is «en roman som ter sig närmast monstruös i förhållande till de förväntningar

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<sup>11</sup> «Monstruousity [...] is clearly one of the images through which Enquist tries to answer the question about what is human». Culeddu’s paper concentrates on the animal element in Enquist’s last book, *Linknelseboken*, but highlights a process of confrontation and contamination between human and non-human which has clear connections with what happens in *Nedstörtad ängel*.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Youngquist dedicates a chapter of his book *Monstrosities* to «Bad Habits» (Youngquist 2003, 89-108), i.e. substance abuse and folly.

<sup>13</sup> «A person with only three dreams must have died very early on, almost as a foetus, leaving only the body» (Enquist 1987, 15).

romanformen väcker» (Rudels 2016, 57),<sup>14</sup> but this statement could apply to most of Enquist's novels, often experimental in form and structure. However, Rudels' comment is in some measure confirmed by the author himself, when he declares that the novel is the answer to the narrator's question, «even if *deformed*» (Enquist 1987, 19, italics mine).

The physical body – his own and others' – also plays a fundamental role in the narrator's search for a definition of being human. Both physiological elements and bodily functions such as sight and speech are used in the text as symbols for humanity (or non-humanity) which contribute to answering the underlying question about human nature.

### 3.1 *The monstrous body*

– Det är ingen människa, sa vägvisaren.

Det var en varelse, med ett slags huvud, ögon som blänkte mitt i det svarta. Huvudet var till större delen täckt av hår. Under huvudet fanns en bål, en hästliknande bringa, och extremiteter nästan liknande armar som avslutades med – var det hovar eller händer? Det gick inte att se, men plötsligt blev han medveten om stanken, den tunga genomträngande stank som gjorde det nästan omöjligt att andas.

– Det är ingen människa, sa vägvisaren (Enquist 2014, 10).<sup>15</sup>

This is the first description of Pasqual Pinon, the double-headed main character of one of the threads of the book. He is clearly presented

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<sup>14</sup> «A novel that appears almost as monstrous in comparison of the expectations raised by the novel form».

<sup>15</sup> «- This is no man, said the guide. / It was a creature, with some kind of a head, eyes gleaming in the midst of the blackness. The head was in most parts covered by hair. Under the head there was a body, a chest like that of the horse, and limbs, almost like arms, which ended with – was it hooves or hands? It was hard to see, but suddenly he became aware of the stench, the heavy penetrating stench, which made it almost impossible to breathe. / - This is no man, said the guide» (Enquist 1987, 9-10).

first of all as a body, with an accumulation of material details that liken him more to an animal than to a human being: a “sort of” head, covered in hair; a trunk that resembles a horse’s; limbs “almost similar” to arms, and hands that could be mistaken for hoofs. The non-human quality of this creature is also underlined by the guide’s words, repeated twice in exactly identical terms.

A few lines later, the animal leaves room to the supernatural and the demonic: «Det är Satans barn, sa vägvisaren. Ingen människa. Vi fångade honom när han föll» (Enquist 2014, 11).<sup>16</sup> The diabolical nature of this “monster” is underlined by the fact that he lives in a mine, in the depths of the Earth, like Dante’s Lucifer.<sup>17</sup> And like Lucifer, he has “fallen”, as one of the superstitious miners who keep him prisoner to protect them from accidents, almost as a hostage, says: «Likt en från himlen nedfallen ängel hölls han som gisslan mot ondskan själv» (39).<sup>18</sup> The fallen angel of the title is therefore this beastly being living in a cave, clearly repudiated by humankind.

However, although he is named several times in the previous pages, sometimes together with his “wife” Maria, the reader has to wait until page 36 – at about one third of the book – before discovering what Pinon’s monstrosity consists of: «Han hette Pasqual Pinon,<sup>19</sup> och var född med två

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<sup>16</sup> «- It is a child of the Devil, said the guide. Not human. We caught him when he fell» (Enquist 1987, 10).

<sup>17</sup> The parallels between *Nedstörtad Ängel* and the *Divine Comedy* are highlighted by Kornerud 2010.

<sup>18</sup> «As if an angel fallen from heaven, he was held hostage against evil itself» (Enquist 1987, 45).

<sup>19</sup> Enquist used to find inspiration for his characters in reality, which then he modified according to his artistic needs. According to Robert Bogdan, Paqual Pinon was a poor Texas labourer hired by a so-called freak show, the well-known Sells-Floto Circus, to appear as the “two-headed Mexican”. The Circus even printed a photograph of him

huvuden. / Det andra huvudet var ett kvinnohuvud» (36).<sup>20</sup> His abnormality – a variety of conjoined twins – is of a kind that has always caused great curiosity and dismay among those who have witnessed it, and that already in the early modernity was made the object of public display, anticipating the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century “freak shows”.<sup>21</sup> Pinon’s case is complicated by his second head being a *female* head: the double nature of the monster, both human and non-human, both natural and supernatural, achieves a further duplicity: Pinon is both male and female. After some indecision, people began to talk about him as “them”,<sup>22</sup> especially when he gives his second head a name, Maria.<sup>23</sup> In the book – whose subtitle is, noteworthily enough, «En kärleksroman» («A Love Story») – they are described as husband and wife and their marriage, with a typical example of Enquist’s paradoxical irony, is said to be «ett tillstånd inte utöver det vanliga, men kanske tydligare» (86).<sup>24</sup> Their “monstrous” condition is

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that was sold along with the show, and that is described in Enquist’s book (2014, 20, 38). However, the real Pasqual was less exceptional than the fictional one: some claim that his second head was a wooden fake, while according to others it was a tumour outfitted with facial features (cf. Bogdan 1988, 84-85).

<sup>20</sup> «His name was Pasqual Pinon, and he was born with two heads. / The other head was a woman’s» (Enquist 1987, 41).

<sup>21</sup> Already Augustine of Hippo in his *City of God* refers to a man «double in his upper, but single in his lower half – having two heads, two chests, four hands, but one body and two feet like an ordinary man» (Augustine 2019, 92). For the spectacularization of deformities in early modern times, see Baratta 2016, 165-215, and Bondestam 2020, 11-36.

<sup>22</sup> This could be seen as an almost clairvoyant anticipation of the use of “they/them” as a singular pronoun proposed by the LGBTQ+ community and now widely adopted by the general public. See for instance <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/> [02/09/2022].

<sup>23</sup> For an interesting discussion of the combined role of body and name in defining identity, see Pilcher 2016.

<sup>24</sup> «Not out of the ordinary, though possibly more explicit» (Enquist 1987, 105).

therefore a metaphor of the complex – and maybe unmanageable – relationship between man and woman. Pinon and Maria are physically entrapped in each other, but K and his wife are also prisoners in an impossible relationship; he holds her responsible for their daughter's death at the hand of the "Säter wolf", but cannot escape from her wordless telephone calls, or her equally wordless requests for him to join her and make love to her: «De hatar varandra mycket, och blir inte fria från varandra» (32).<sup>25</sup> Also Ruth Berlau is prisoner of her own obsession with Berthold Brecht, who rejected her after being her lover for some time, but she also keeps him – or better, his plaster head – prisoner in a hatbox.

As stated above, monsters' function is often that of making visible what is normal. At some point of the book Pinon is said to bear «sitt andra huvud som en koppargruvearbetare bär sin pannlampa» (38),<sup>26</sup> with a reprisal of the Lucifer parallelism. If the novel is a poetic investigation on the nature of mankind, as we postulated in the beginning of this article, the role of Pinon's deformity should be to shed light – like a miner's lamp – on this regard, a view that echoes Zeller's monsters "shedding light" on previously unthought-of possibilities (cf. 2.2).

It is interesting to note that in two other works Enquist use a different, curious image to describe this same process: to see «var går gränsen mellan människa och icke-människa», you should use people at the periphery of the human (like Pinon) «nästan som när man testar ett ostron med en droppe citron. Om kanten drar ihop sig lever varelsen» (Enquist

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<sup>25</sup> «They hate each other a lot, and cannot free themselves from each other» (Enquist 1987, 35).

<sup>26</sup> «His second head in the same way that the copperminer does his miner's lamp, as a headlamp» (Enquist 1987, 43).

1988, 18).<sup>27</sup> The two works in question are *I lodjurets timma* (1984) and *Boken om Blanche och Marie* (2004), both with a strong connection with *Nedstortad ängel*: in the first the protagonist is a disturbed boy interned in a psychiatric hospital for having killed two people, while in the second we find again Pasqual Pinon, used as an example to try to define what love is.

In *Nedstortad ängel* the role of Pinon as a “testing oyster” is made explicit in one of his first appearances in the text, where he is compared by the narrator to «en liten kamerakula som sänks ner i mig, betraktar mig och mina gamla drömmar inifrån, vänligt och kritiskt» (Enquist 2014, 15).<sup>28</sup> The specific meaning of the «little spherical camera» will emerge later (see 3.2), but already from this first hint the role of Pinon’s monstrous body in making the narrator’s interiority visible is made clear.

The idea of making somebody visible – of making him or her *human*, since it is only in relationship to the others that we are human – returns in several other passages of the book: Shideler – the freak show manager who rescues Pinon from the Mexican mine where he was kept prisoner – makes him visible by admitting him to his circus; Pinon makes Maria visible by unwrapping her from the filthy cloth he wears around his head. In the opposite direction, some characters are instead made invisible: the boy in his cell conceals himself by wrapping his head in a bedsheet; and Brecht stops seeing Ruth, as if she does not exist, thus turning her into «en ormskinn» (8), a snake skin, something below human. Seeing somebody – including oneself, as the narrator in the gastroscopy episode (see 3.2) or Pasqual looking at himself and Maria in the mirror – is therefore a way of

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<sup>27</sup> «Where are the boundaries drawn between human and non-human; a bit like testing an oyster with a drop of lemon. If the edge withdraws, the beasts are alive» (Enquist 2004b, 139).

<sup>28</sup> «He is a little spherical camera, which has been lowered into me, observes me and my old dreams from inside, kindly and critically» (Enquist 1987, 16).

recognising his or her existence, his or her identity, which, as we have seen is one of the declared themes of the novel.

As mentioned above, another one of the many antinomies of the novel is that between silence and speech. Verbal language is what distinguishes man from animals, and it is not surprising that, in a book about the borders between human and non-human, so many characters are dumb or speechless. Maria is physiologically unable to speak, having no vocal chords nor lungs to make them vibrate; K's wife seems to have lost the ability to speak together with her daughter and carries on a wordless relationship with her husband, made of mute telephone calls and silent sexual intercourses; the interned boy either hums wordless songs (as when he is found by K's wife after having killed their daughter) or writes cryptic messages on small pieces of paper, which he later smears with excrements. All characters in the book seem to delegate the speaking to the narrator:

Jag antar de ville att jag skulle formulera en fråga åt dem, en som gick att besvara, men så enkelt är det ju inte.  
En fråga som innefattade pojken, K och hans hustru, Ruth, Pasqual Pinon, Maria – och i viss mån mig själv, om nu Heisenberg hade rätt i att den som ser förstör bilden (Enquist 2014, 18).<sup>29</sup>

Although some critics see K's wife and Maria's dumbness as a form of gender subalternity (cf. Rudels 2014, 322 f), I rather view it as yet another element of the complex system of symbols that revolve around the book's initial question, what it is to be human. By spotlighting his characters' inabilities, both physical (Pinon's deformity), functional (Maria's and K's

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<sup>29</sup> «I suppose they wanted me to formulate a question for them, one that could be answered, but it is of course not so simple. / One question, which included the boy, K and his wife, Ruth, Pasqual Pinon, Maria – and possibly myself, if it happens that Heisenberg is right about the observer destroying the observed» (Enquist 1987, 19).

wife's speechlessness) or psychic (Ruth's and the boy's mental disorders), Enquist is positioning his "monster" in the grey area on the borders between human and non-human.

### 3.2 *The physical body*

Först gled kameran ner genom ett väldigt, nästan oändligt djupt schakt, en brunn med nästan vita, svagt ringformade väggar; men det fanns en botten på brunnen, ett slags fiskmun med mjuka slöjliknande läppar som långsamt gav vika, och ögat sjönk in mot fiskmunnen som nästan lockande öppnade sig och inte hade tänder och bara gav vika, nästan som en smekning mot ögat, ett förbiflytande system av läppar och slöjor som smekte sig mot ögats sidor.

Och så, plötsligt, befann vi oss i grottan.

Det var en gigantisk grotta, en väldig underjordisk grotta med blåvitt skimrande tak med mjukt insmygande rödvita toner, den höjde sig i en väldig båge över den sjö som täckte grottans golv: ett hav var det snarare, ett gult bubblande slemliknande hav, ett levande hav som rörde sig och förvandlade sig, ett Solarishav, ett hav som tycktes tala, fast stumt, i andra former än dem jag kunde uppfatta och tolka. [...] Och då, plötsligt, för första gången, och med en kraft så oerhörd att den nästan dödade mig, förstod jag att jag befann mig inne i mig själv. [...]

Under några minuter hade jag blivit iakttagen av mig själv. Nästan sett mig själv, på det sätt som andra hela tiden såg mig, men utan att berätta. Det var det skrämmande. Det jag sett var det fysiska, men ändå inte bara (Enquist 2014, 20-21).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> «First the camera slid down through a huge, almost infinitely deep shaft, a well with near-white, slightly ringshaped walls; but there was a bottom to the well, a kind of fish mouth with soft lips like veils which slowly gave way, and the eye sank down towards the fish mouth which opened almost temptingly and did not have teeth and just relaxed, almost if caressing the eye, a structure floating by, made up of lips and veils which stroke themselves against the sides of the eye.

And then, suddenly, we were in the cave.

It was a gigantic cave, an enormous underground cave with a ceiling shimmering in bluish white with softly shifting redwhite shades, it rose in a great arch over the lake,



As we have seen in 3.1, at the beginning of the book Pinon is compared to «a little spherical camera» lowered into the narrator's body (Enquist 1987, 16). A few pages later, the author describes in detail the experience of a gastroscopy he underwent some years earlier. This oneiric, sensuous, almost hallucinatory passage is clearly reminiscent of science-fiction masterpieces: *Solaris* is openly mentioned in the passage, Verne's *Voyage au centre de la Terre* a few lines later («en resa inte till jordens mittpunkt genom Hekla utan bara sett en bit av mig själv», Enquist 2014, 22)<sup>31</sup> and it is impossible not to think of *Fantastic Voyage*, the innovative film from 1966 in which a miniaturized submarine with five people onboard is injected into a human body. The fantastic imagery helps attribute an aura of exceptionality to a nowadays common medical practice: it is not a mere gastroscopy we are reading of, but an exploration of the interior of the self that short-circuits the distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*: the animate/lived body experiences the physical body not through self-perception, as customary, but objectively, as an object among objects. The physiological details of the physical body are seen as mysterious beings that carry an even more mysterious truth: valves are insistently described as mouths or lips, organs that can swallow – like they do with the endoscopic camera – but that are also designed to speak, to communicate,

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which covered the floor of the cave: it was more like a sea, a yellow bubbling sea of mucous, a living sea, which moved and transformed itself, a *Solaris* sea, a sea, which seemed to speak, though dumbly, in form other than those I could grasp and interpret. [...] And then, suddenly, for the first time, and with a power so overwhelming that it almost killed me, I understood that I found myself inside me. [...]

For some minutes I had been observed by myself. Almost seen myself, in the way others saw me all the time, without telling. This was frightening. What I had seen was physical, but not only» (Enquist 1987, 22-25).

<sup>31</sup> «I had journeyed, non to the centre of the earth through Hekla, but just to see a bit of myself» (Enquist 1987, 24).

as seems to do the «Solaris sea»<sup>32</sup> in which the stomach content is transfigured. These lips – dumb as Maria’s – and this sea seem willing to communicate some message, which the narrator does not understand; only in the final lines of the passage does he realize that he had been watching himself «in the way others saw me».

According to Sartre, the gaze of the Other is a menace for the Self, that is objectified by it and risks to be destroyed: «the Other looks at me and as such he holds the secret of my being, he knows what I am. Thus the profound meaning of my being is outside of me, imprisoned in an absence. The Other has the advantage over me» (Sartre 1956, 363). In the gastroscopy passage, the narrator goes through a similar experience: for a second, he catches a glimpse of «the profound meaning of [him]self», and is deeply shocked by its possible consequences: «Allting var möjligt. Det jag sett var bara början» (Enquist 2014, 22).<sup>33</sup>

However, this aggressive movement from the other to the self is completed by a specular one, from the self to the other, represented by a dream of a man in an ice-grave, which recurs three times in the less than hundred pages of the book. In the first occurrence in the Prelude (rendered by the English translator as «Opening song»), the image is quickly sketched: an unknown man lying in a grave in the ice, with his face covered by a thin frozen film (Enquist 2014, 9). Here it is the Self, the narrator, who objectifies the Other, turning it – literally – into a *Körper*, a dead body, cold and stiff.

A few pages later the dream is described in more detail:

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<sup>32</sup> In Lem’s novel and Tarkovsky’s film, the ocean covering the surface of planet Solaris is an alien life-form of its own.

<sup>33</sup> «Everything was possible. What I had seen was only the beginning» (Enquist 1987, 25).

Måste vara: den döde Finn Malmgren i hans isgrav. [...] Som barn var just den bilden den som starkast etsade sig in i mitt medvetande: jag föreställde mig hur jag återfann Finn Malmgren i hans isgrav, död, och hur en tunn ishinna hade bildats runt hans kropp och täckt hans huvud och ansikte, och hur han legat där med öppna ögon och stirrat rakt upp genom ishinnan [...].

En så maniskt återkommande bild. En så lustfylld skräck att leva och dö bakom en ishinna. Mer lust än skräck, kanske (Enquist 2014, 31).<sup>34</sup>

The dead man is Finn Malmgren, the Swedish meteorologist who died during Umberto Nobile's failed polar expedition with the airship *Italia*. In the autobiographical *Ett annat liv* (Enquist 2008) the origin of the image is associated to a book the author read in his childhood: as many other impressions from his life – the heavenly harp, the cycle ride to the Lord's Table, the resurrected cat –<sup>35</sup> also the man in the ice-grave is turned into a «maniacally recurring image». Its symbolic significance is stated explicitly: the ice film that covers the man's face offers protection and isolation at the same time, it shields from danger but also from contact, it symbolizes a life-saving armour but it also implies death by congelment and suffocation. It is therefore explicitly used as a symbol for an ambivalent wish for life and death at the same time, maybe – at this point – with a slight imbalance in favour of the latter. It is certainly not by chance that

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<sup>34</sup> «This must be: the dead Finn Malmgren in his ice-grave. [...] As a child it was just that image which became most sharply etched into my mind: I imagined how I would find Finn Malmgren in his grave in the ice, dead, and how a thin film of ice would have formed round his body and covered his head and his face, and how he would have been lying there, his eyes open and staring, straight through the film of ice. [...] Such a maniacally recurring image. Such a pleasurable fear at lying and dying behind a film of ice. More pleasure than fear, perhaps» (Enquist 1987, 34).

<sup>35</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Enquist's recurring images and symbols, see Ekselius 1996 and De Marco 2017.

another of the protagonists of the novel, the killer boy, commits suicide in his cell by pulling a plastic bag over his head and holding it tightly closed.

However, the full importance of the ice-grave image for Enquist's poetics is revealed by the third and last occurrence, which closes the book. This version of the dream pulls together all of the novel's many threads: «Det var en mycket liten expedition: det var Pasqual Pinon och hans Maria, jag själv, K, hans hustru, pojken, och Ruth B» (Enquist 2014, 87).<sup>36</sup> The main characters of the book's different stories are crossing the polar plain, when they come across the ice-grave; however, this time it is not Finn Malmgren lying in it: «Jag såg genast vem det var. Han låg utsträckt på rygg i isgraven. Det var pappa, precis som på kortet» (88).<sup>37</sup> The author's father is lying in the grave, and the hint to «the picture» immediately suggests to the reader what is coming next. In a previous passage, in fact, Enquist had described the paralyzing seconds when he first saw his father's mourning portrait and thought to be looking at his own picture in a coffin – an experience he likens to the gastroscopy: a moment of objectification of the self. It is not a surprise, so, that the dream ends with the narrator seeing himself in the grave: «Jag böjde mig fram, andades mot ishinnan, strök samtidigt med fjädern mot den. Isfågeln försvann långsamt, ansiktet kom fram, och det var jag» (89).<sup>38</sup> As with the mourning portrait, the narrator confuses himself with his father, although with an inverted order: here it is the father who turns out to be the son, and not

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<sup>36</sup> «It was a very small expedition. It consisted of Pinon and his Maria, myself, K, his wife, the boy and Ruth B» (Enquist 1987, 107).

<sup>37</sup> «I saw at once who it was. He was lying stretched out on his back in the ice-grave. It was Daddy, just as in the corpse-picture» (Enquist 1987, 108).

<sup>38</sup> «I leaned forwards, breathed on the film of ice, stroked it with the feather at the same time. The ice bird disappeared slowly, the face emerged, and it was I» (Enquist 1987, 109).

the opposite. However, although the man in the ice-grave is dead, this revelation is not laden with anguish, as were the experiences of the mourning portrait and the gastroscopy. All movements are soft and quiet, the narrator's breath and the feather strike the ice-covered face like a caress: it reminds of the peaceful epiphany of self, rather than the shocking revelation of the gastroscopy experience.

The gaze from the Self to the Other and vice-versa is turned into a circular movement, with Sartre giving way to Emmanuel Lévinas. For the Lithuanian philosopher the meeting with the gaze of the Other is not a war, an attempt to destroy – to objectify – each other: it is an invitation to mutual comprehension and solidarity. Although the face of the Other «si affaccia nell'orizzonte del soggetto come fenomeno inquietante e turbativo della stabilità dell'essere» (Di Marco 2016, 10),<sup>39</sup> for Lévinas it is the Other who allows the self to become itself: «ce mouvement du Moi vers Autrui est aussi un mouvement de libération du Moi» (Salmon 2012, 109).<sup>40</sup>

It is interesting to notice that for Lévinas the presence of the Other, his/her very existence for the Self, is incarnated in his/her “face” (“le visage”); also Enquist in this book seems obsessed with the characters' faces, which are either hidden – by an ice film, some rags or a plastic bag – or revealed, as in the final dream, where the «épiphanie du visage» (Lévinas 1961, 43, 73), the acceptation of the Other through the Self's reflection in his/her face, evokes the possibility of a (dreamed) universal reconciliation.

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<sup>39</sup> «Appears in the horizon of the Subject as a perturbing phenomenon which upsets the soundness of being».

<sup>40</sup> «This movement of the Self towards the Other is also a movement of liberation of the Self».

#### 4. Conclusion: the power of Agape

In the opening lines of this article, we postulated that *Nedstörtad ängel* is basically a poetic rendering of the question “What it is to be human”, and we chose to use the body as an instrument, a lens to explore its possible answers.

A first, tentative answer to be found in the novel is summarized by Thurah: «monsteret er mennesket. Ikke den fysisk deformede, ikke vanskabningen, men den forstødt, dvs. den, der er adskilt [...] fra andre» (Thurah 2002, 25).<sup>41</sup> After traveling for a while with Shideler’s freak show, Pinon and Maria join a Satanic sect founded by a malformed person, Anton Lavey:<sup>42</sup>

Satan, den från himlen utstötta och förkastade ängeln, blev sektens Gud. Honom tillbad de, i en tro som var humanistisk, inte teologisk. Medan de kristna satte Gud i centrum, satte satanismen människan i centrum. Medan Guds son uppstigit till himlen hade Satan blivit störtad från himlen, ned till människorna, och där hade han förblivit. Så hade han blivit de utstötta helgon, de avvisades Gud, de icke framgångsrika, de förkastades, de icke fulländades, alltså människans Gud. [...] Ställd inför frågan: vad är en människa? en fråga som alla inom sekten många gånger ställts inför, och av personliga skäl också velat få besvarad, ställd inför denna fråga använde de sig själva som svar, eller prövade sig själva som svar (Enquist 2014, 76).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> «The monster is the human being. Not the physically deformed, but the refused, i.e., that who is separated from the others».

<sup>42</sup> This is another example of Enquist’s playful use of reality: an Anton LaVey was really the founder of a Church of Satan, but about thirty years later than in Enquist’s version, and his sect had nothing to do with disabled people.

<sup>43</sup> «Satan, the angel expelled and ejected from heaven, was made the God of the sect. Him they worshipped, following a belief which was humanistic, not theological. While Christians placed God at the centre, Satanism placed man at the centre. While the son of God had ascended to heaven, Satan had been cast out from heaven, down to mankind, and there he had remained. Thus he had become the saint of the outcast, the

The monster is not only a litmus test – or a drop of lemon – to define what is human; the outcast, the rejected, the unsuccessful, the condemned, the imperfect *is* the human itself.

However fascinating and appeasing this answer could be, it is not Enquist's last word on the matter. In the very final pages of the novel, Enquist adds a further gloss:

Vi var en organism, hade vi plötsligt förstått. Tillsammans kunde vi lösa uppgiften, för det var bara tillsammans vi var en människa. Tillsammans skulle vi hitta målet, lösa den oerhörda uppgiften.

Det var en känsla av stillsam lycka och beslutsamhet, vi skulle alla hjälpa till. Ruth och pojken och K och hans hustru och jag och Pasqual och Maria. *Tillsammans var vi en människa* (Enquist 2014, 88, italics mine).<sup>44</sup>

Only by joining forces can the imperfect become really human. Isolated from one another, dumb, incapable of communication like Maria or the killer boy, human beings remain incomplete, imperfect – a monster. Together, they are complete, they can face their task. As Thurah recognised, in Enquist «[mennesket] søger sin opfyldelse i den anden. I tilgivelsen, i kærligheden» (Thurah 2002, 85).<sup>45</sup> The keyword here is “kærlighed”, love,

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God of the rejected, of the unsuccessful, of the condemned, of the imperfect, that is the God of the people. [...] Faced with the question: what is a human being? – a question which all belonging to the sect had been confronted with, and because of personal circumstances also wanted to find an answer for – faced with that question they used themselves as an answer, or tried themselves as an answer» (Enquist 1987, 91-92).

<sup>44</sup> «We formed an organism, we had suddenly understood that. Together we could solve the problem, for it was only together that we made up a human being. Together we would reach the goal, carry out the enormous task. / It was a feeling of quiet happiness and resolution, we were all going to help. Ruth and the boy and K and his wife and I and Pasqual and Maria. *Together we formed a human beings*» (Enquist 1987, 107-108, italics mine).

<sup>45</sup> «[The human being] seeks his/her fulfilment in the other. In forgiveness, in love».

but a particular form of love, which recurs in many of Enquist's book, that is, *agape*.<sup>46</sup> As is often the case, Enquist gives the term a personal meaning:<sup>47</sup> «Agape: att inte behöva göra sig förtjänt av förlåtelsen» (Enquist 2014, 48, 78),<sup>48</sup> as he defines it in *Nedstörtad Ängel*. The word appears twice, both times immediately after another of his many symbolic images: that of the celestial harp, an acoustic phenomenon he witnessed in his childhood, which came to represent the fascinating but frightening contact with the transcendent (cf. De Marco 2017, 100-106; Ekselius 1996: 157-228); here in *Nedstörtad Ängel*, however, the experience of the “song from the stars” has nothing menacing about it: it is a shared experience, and that changes everything: «Förr drömde jag mig alltid ensam i den. Vilken oerhörd skillnad mot nu, sedan jag lärt känna Pinon och hans hustru» (Enquist 2014, 78).<sup>49</sup> The key is again human communion: as in the closing dream analysed in 2.2, being together makes a disturbing experience (the ice-grave, the menacing song from the stars) peaceful. The final answer

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<sup>46</sup> «In the New Testament, the fatherly love of God for humans, as well as the human reciprocal love for God. In Scripture, the transcendent agape love is the highest form of love and is contrasted with eros, or erotic love, and philia, or brotherly love. [...] The term necessarily extends to the love of one's fellow humans, as the reciprocal love between God and humans is made manifest in one's unselfish love of others. See also charity», *Encyclopaedia Britannica online*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/agape> [06/09/2022].

<sup>47</sup> For an in-depth treatment of agape in Enquist's works, see Agrell 1993. Part III of her monography, *Forskningsresan som roman. "Tillvaron som citat". Hypertextualitet och alteritet I P.O. Enquists Hess*, uses agape, together with politics and style, as a “starting point” for Enquist research.

<sup>48</sup> «Agape: not to have to earn forgiveness» (Enquist 1987, 57); «Agape: not to have to attempt to deserve to be forgiven» (95).

<sup>49</sup> «I was always alone in it before when I dreamed. What a fantastic difference from now, when I have got to know Pinon and his wife» (Enquist 1987, 95).



– at least for this short novel –<sup>50</sup> seems to be that being together is the precondition to being human. This realization passes through the mutual recognition of the self and the other looking at each other's face: the very last words of the novel are those of the dreaming narrator finding out that the face of the other in the ice grave is his own: «the face emerged, and it was I». Lévinas again, in other words. And it is not by chance that the philosopher who presented «la subjectivité comme accueillant Autrui, comme hospitalité» (Lévinas 1961, 12)<sup>51</sup> is evoked to close a book where agape and communion are presented as the keys of human nature – be it only in a dream.

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<sup>50</sup> Enquist's quest for the human is an unceasing effort, as both Thurah and Culeddu highlighted in their works. According to Culeddu, his whole oeuvre is an attempt to «raccontare la disgregazione del soggetto come perdita e lutto e di mettere in scena innumerevoli tentativi di una sua ricomposizione, ma anche di delineare finalmente un Io ibrido la cui scomposizione non si configura più come informe sconfitta ma come liberatorio abbraccio delle proprie intrinseche caratteristiche di dinamismo, rizomaticità e molteplicità» (Culeddu 2019, 392: «narrate the disgregation of the subject as loss and bereavement and to stage uncountable attempts to reconstruct it, but also to sketch an hybrid whose dissolution is no longer a formless defeat but a liberating acceptance of his/her own intrinsic characteristics of dynamism, rhizomaticity and multiplicity»).

<sup>51</sup> «Subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality».

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