

Nine Fragments on The Art of Reading Asylum Documents

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Abstract

The blatant contradiction in the continuing claims from formally recognized democracies of guaranteeing human rights while at the same time radically undermining the right to asylum, puts us into certain difficulties when working with the growing contemporary archive of documentation of asylum processes. How, in the reading of and writing about such processes, do we avoid the pitfalls of reproducing the dehumanization these documents attest to and in claims of speaking for those denied a place from which to speak? Through nine fragments, this text proposes a tentative method, informed by fiction and poetry, for the reading of asylum documents as part of an endeavor to resist the dehumanization at work in public discourse as well as asylum inquiry documents.

Editors note

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Introduction

In November 2015, the Swedish government announced a radical but temporary turn in the country's migration policy. It was a measure said to be provoked by the arrival of a large number of asylum seekers during the summer and early fall of that year. Following the government's announcement, a temporary law was passed in 2016, which was extended in 2019. Most of the content of this law was then formally enshrined in new migration legislation adopted in 2021, confirming Sweden's new

status as one of the most asylum-restrictive countries in western Europe. Through nine fragments, this text is part of an endeavor to find a mode of reading that may be able to resist the dehumanization at work in public discourse and asylum inquiry documents alike.

Fragment One: Probability

The tramp philosopher speaks:

Such words do not stimulate the imagination of those to whom they are addressed, do not even arouse it. Such words keep the imagination sober, unfeeling, spruce and cold. That is the way the majority of people keep and guard their choice of probability. Nothing can shake us! We won't believe that!^[2]

Probability translates into Swedish as *sannolikhet*. It is a frequently used word in the documentation of asylum inquiries, relating to assessments of age, identity, life narrative, grounds for fear. The judgment on probability, on *sannolikhet*, is crucial as to whether you are granted asylum or not.

The Swedish word is composed of *sann*, “true”, and *lik*, “likeness”. What bears enough likeness to truth to be called *probable*? And what is the relation between truth and mere likeness?

The sole most important point of reference in asylum decisions is the transcript of the asylum interview. In the Swedish process this is called the protocol. *Proto-col*, from Greek *protos*, “first”, and *cola*, “glue”. The protocol is the first page that, most importantly, glues the case together. It is quite probable that the interview will be your only chance to account for your asylum case. After arriving, an official will ask you to tell your story, chronologically, and in as much detail as possible. Your words are recorded and transcribed into the protocol. Another official, the one in charge of the decision, will base their judgement on this protocol.

Gayatri Spivak writes, “[i]n every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible”.^[3] There is an almost invisible presence in the protocol, that of an interpreter, appearing briefly at the very beginning, when a standard question is asked: *Do the applicant and the interpreter understand each other?* After that, they

fade away. But since the only words transcribed in the protocol are those uttered in Swedish, the words ascribed to the asylum seeker are spoken by the interpreter. This is the first level of interpretation.

If the interpreter can be sensed throughout the protocol, it is in the form of dissonances and glitches in the narrative. How many contradictions thus appearing belong to the narrative as such, and how much is generated in the process of translation? In the final decision they are treated as deficiencies in the narrative, as if the translator's interpretation was completely transparent. The assessment of the interpreted narrative is the second level of interpretation. Together with other added evidence, this is then translated into a decision.

One of the fundamental insights in hermeneutic traditions of interpretation is that it is only through what we believe to know, through our *prejudices*, that we can initiate a process of interpretation. The probability assessment responds to that which is uncertain, yet it claims to be able to tell a narrative's *likeness* to truth. What in the narrative bears likeness to truth, what in it is *sanno-lik*? In the end, the judgment is subjective. The cool and distanced bureaucratic prose, however, seems to lay a claim that goes beyond subjectivity. What in the narrative of another person is deemed trustworthy, probable? On what grounds? Who, in the decision-making process, is master over the boundaries of probability? These are, of course, questions of power.

I have met several people saying the same thing of the asylum interview; that it felt as if being the accused in a court trial. But different from being on trial for a crime, in the asylum inquiry the burden of proof is with you as an asylum seeker. If you do not succeed in being convincing enough, the consequences are severe. I have now read variations of the same judgment in several decisions: *Your narrative has not made the threat against you probable. It will not be considered in our assessment of your need for protection.*

Fragment Two: Pathos

The vagrant philosopher Sandemar is a fictional character in Harry Martinson's 1948 novel *The Road*. Martinson lets Sandemar burst out, with pathos, against what he calls the tyranny of the "entrepreneurs of probability". These are the cruel representatives of a regime that wishes to expel the wanderers, the vagrants, from the face of the earth. Dressing the world in neutral and lifeless words, the

entrepreneurs of probability practice an active blindness to the pain of others. Their words are icy, without compassion, without flesh. For Sandemar, they are expressions of a devilish logic.

In public exercises of authority, there is a widespread and partly justified suspicion toward emotional involvement. Decision-makers should be unbiased. Sympathies or antipathies should not determine the outcome of a process. But does it follow that *pathos* must be erased? Pathos, a concept mainly used in rhetoric, is the setting in movement of emotion, creating compassion. In the asylum process and its decision-making, there is a dilemma that is never acknowledged in the case documents I read neither in legislation nor directives. At a certain point, the rejection of pathos in the encounter with someone's personal narrative of fear and suffering begins to operate as a dehumanizing device. Cool bureaucratic prose produces indifference rather than impartiality, and this indifference cannot be understood separate from what is one of the most burning contradictions of today's Europe; that while there is a formal recognition of the validity of universal human rights as stated in the UN declaration from 1948, non-European refugees keep dying at its borders. Meanwhile, detention camps are built for those who, despite an ever-harsher border regime, succeed in crossing. The categorical dismissal of a person's account of their sufferings and losses, so frequent in asylum decisions, is one way to dismiss someone's grievability.^[4] *Your narrative will not be considered in our assessment of your need for protection.*

Through the mouths of his characters in *The Road*, Martinson speaks with pathos for the vagrant community he himself at times belonged to. *The Road* is the world told from the perspective of the tramp, the one constantly on the move, the despised and expelled. Those never listened to, it might seem, need fiction in order to appear as humans. But even in Martinson's narrative, speech is met with obstacles. The hostile gazes, the suspicions, the recurrent persecutions with time it wears the words of the vagrants down to what Martinson calls *gnomic dialogues*. Not only articulated speech, but also mutilated mumbling configures an image of Sweden as seen from the roadside.

Fragment Three: Fiction

The Road is fiction. Fiction, Elisabeth Hjørth argues, is by definition a form of critique. She writes: "Every sign is a shift in the prevailing order, an addition that in some way changes the state of things".^[5] This does not mean that fiction is by

definition good, it only means that it is not satisfied. Fiction confronts its reader with an opening: *The world could also look like this.*

The word *dikt* in Swedish derives from the Latin *dico*, “to say”. It can refer to a poem, but also fiction, or it can mean a lie. What is the relationship between speech *dico* fiction and truth? It has been said that the writer of fiction speaks the truth by telling a lie. These matters, however, are rarely considered when it comes to official documents, such as those in an asylum inquiry. Asylum documents are not literature. These documents do not aim at shifting or adding anything to the world, they aim at uncovering facts. But facts too are subject to subjective judgments. Sometimes hidden, when the interpreter through whom all communication between the official and the asylum seeker passes, is made invisible. Sometimes visibly, in the final judgment of the decision-maker: *Your narrative has not made the threat against you probable.*^[6]

What if we were to read these documents in a similar way as we read literary texts? That is, read them as *texts* in their own right? Read their different levels and the glitches between these levels as part of a literary composition. And, most importantly, read contradictions and silences as bearers of meaning, rather than as deficiencies in the narrative. Performing such a reading would also imply not letting the documents be reduced to the preparation for an execution of an act, for the very language in them becomes acted on. One thing that we would perhaps see clearer is the violence taking place on the level of language, through the production of indifference, the denial of grievability.

In her *Förtvivlade läsningar* (Desperate readings), Hjorth argues for an ethical reading that lets itself be guided by the longing for a justice that will always be found beyond the horizon of the possible. If we are to push the limits of the possible, we need to put our imagination to work.^[7] With the asylum inquiry documents in my hand, I search for a mode to read the distanced bureaucratic prose that will put into motion and help me train my imagination. I need for someone to hold my hand and lead me by the authoritative force of this bureaucratic prose. So again, I turn to *The Road*. Like the contemporary migrant, Martinson’s vagrants are never allowed a place to rest. They speak to me from a world that is strange and all too familiar at the same time. As characters they are indeed *sanno-lika*, bearing the mark of likeness to truth.

Fragment Four: Mobility

Martinson writes:

[T]he sedentary are in the majority. Those who wander and roam are the minority, and they have made it an unlawful minority. But the minority dodges. It runs away, and it is right. It can dodge and run from them, and lie to them and defy them.^[8]

Martinson's *The Road* was first published in the same year as the UN declaration of human rights was. But the narrative begins in the late nineteenth century. Not earning one's living in an "orderly" manner had then recently ceased to be a crime. Yet, according to the vagrancy law of 1885, you could still be locked up and put in forced labor, which was now framed as "treatment".^[9] In Martinson's narrative, *The Mount* is the place for this violent care.^[10]

The Road narrates a few decades of the relation between modernity and mobility in Swedish history. The movement of people in space is accompanied by ever-more finely tuned mechanisms for sorting and controlling, as well as repressive measures against those bold enough to transcend the boundaries of their given space. While the history of modernity could be written as a history of such surveillance and repression, as Valentin Groebner has shown us, there are threads that can be traced back all the way to medieval times.^[11]

Today, most of us tend to take the freedom to move within nation-states for granted. Without having to worry about documents, we can cross borders between municipalities and regions. Martinson's vagrants, for whom being at the wrong place at the wrong time can lead to forced labor at the Mount, remind us that such freedom is historically situated. It does not have a given direction, it can be granted to us or taken away. And, it has never applied equally to everyone.^[12] Nothing is therefore a given in the ideological regime that let political borders *between* states structure our understanding of movement in space. The border has no material existence, it materializes only through practice. Today, this materialization does not even need to be tied to a geographical location for us to apprehend it as a border *between* states. The random screening of persons who may dwell anywhere within the state border but who, based on appearance, are suspected of lacking the right to do so, is now called "border control" with the addition "inner".

What would Swedish migration policy today look like, if we following Martinson's wanderers put borders between nation-states in brackets? If we instead focus on the declared need to surveil and control movement, regardless of whether it is between nation-states, provinces, or towns? Looking at the history of modernity as a history of control over mobility, we can draw a line of continuity between the vagrancy law of 1885 and contemporary migration law. The markers of difference attached to the migrant, addressed in measures of "integration", will then appear as secondary. What is, after all, "integration", if not the ideological legitimization of repressive measures against those bold enough to transcend their assigned place? All the while others preferably those of us with little real need to move can keep nurturing myths of global mobility.

When vagrancy was decriminalized, no one could be sentenced as a criminal on the simple ground of lacking an "orderly" life. It might be considered progress. From another perspective however, decriminalization expanded the lawless status of those on the move. In the name of treatment, you could still be locked up, put into forced labor. Today, migrants with deportation orders are the only category that can be detained without allegation of crime or suspected of intention of self-harm. The term is that they are *stored*; in Swedish, one is put in *förvar*. Those insisting on moving beyond their given place be it Martinson's tramp or the undocumented migrant of our times seem to automatically move beyond the sphere of "normal" law.

Fragment Five: Engineering

Should the detention of people not formally suspected of crimes not be a scandal? While migrant "storage" places in Sweden have continuously grown in number during the twenty-first century, questioning their existence in public debate has become increasingly rare.^[13] Sweden is, of course, not unique in this respect. In several other countries that formally uphold the rule of law as guiding principle, the zone of lawlessness in which the undocumented are caught is just as grim.^[14] We could, in this respect, talk about *the scandal of the absence of scandal*. While lip service continues to be paid to the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution, this same right is increasingly undermined in practice. The title of the Swedish parliamentary committee inquiry, delivered in September 2020, is telling: "a long-term sustainable migration politics".^[15] This inquiry constituted the base for the new migration legislation passed in 2021. When the Swedish government announced drastic restrictions in 2015, these were presented as painful yet

necessary measures to deal with a limited crisis. When over five years later the same changes were made permanent in law, it was called “long-term sustainability”.

Brazilian philosopher Vladimir Safatle argues that indifference is to be considered a form of social engineering. We should, therefore, not treat it as a lack of compassion perhaps. Instead, indifference is actively produced according to its political function. In order to sustain a system of flagrant inequality, a certain dose of indifference is needed and in times of crisis it takes on monstrous forms.^[16]

While I am writing this, seven years after 2015, the landscape of our migration politics is still determined by the crisis discourses of that particular year. These discourses framed the political turn, as well as the press conference during which the turn was announced, and what came down to a performance of inevitability; the tense self-containment of the Prime Minister, the tears of the Deputy Prime Minister, a decision, we were made to understand, that hurt those who had to make it. And the message was: *It pains us, but no other way is possible*. A politics of false necessity, the pain so displayed was that of the executioner, and if only people had not arrived in such great numbers, these painful measures would not have had to be taken. Therefore, responsibility for what had to be done must lie with those who came, those who boarded the rubber boats, those who walked alongside the highways, those who sought a place on the already full trains. *Why did you force us to be evil?*

The unspoken ground for this performance is indifference. For one, the stake is a broken self-image. For the other, it is life itself.

It is in the experience of loss that Judith Butler seeks a possible ground for a non-excluding human coexistence. Regardless of other differences, we all have some notion of loss. Losing someone is also losing who I am in relation to this someone, and in that respect loss reveals how exposed we are to one another. If there is a human experience that is universal anywhere, it is here. And yet, while some losses are framed as grievable, others seem to disappear in undifferentiated masses. Certain categories of people live lives that even while they live it appear strangely unreal, in a sense already lost. The material loss of these lives is therefore apprehended as merely confirmations of the order of things.^[17] That such a confirmation cannot acquire the quality of a scandal is self-evident.

In 1996 a boat full of refugees capsized near the southeastern tip of Sicily, and

nearly 300 people drowned. Despite it being the largest civil shipwreck in the Mediterranean since World War II, Italian authorities denied that the accident had taken place for years.^[18] The contrast with how the shipwreck near the coast of Lampedusa was handled in 2013, is striking. This time, not only Italy but the whole of Europe resonated with declarations of *shame*. Italy declared a day of public mourning, and the dead were posthumously granted Italian citizenship and given state funerals. While the dead were honored in this way, however, the survivors were treated as suspected criminals for having entered Italy illegally. The message was clear: *Europe will only embrace you when dead.*^[19]

In the 2020s, shipwrecks just as deadly need neither be hidden, nor be appropriated in national ceremonies of penance; they do not generate more than small paragraphs in the papers anyway.

Fragment Six: Differentiation

The law passed in 2021 permanented a restrictive migration policy as “long-term sustainable”. “Integration” is seen as the key to sustainability. In the preparatory inquiry for the new law, several arguments contended that a restrictive migration policy is actually counterproductive for integration. Reforms introducing temporary instead of permanent residence, as well as enforcing economic criteria for family reunion, risk obstructing sentiments of belonging in the new society.^[20] If indifference is to be understood as an art of engineering, it needs to be functional. How to understand that indifference in the face of human longing for safety, predictability, and livable lives together with their closed ones, stands in the way for an integration that is at the same time said to be the ultimate goal of migration politics?

The concept of “integration” has been the main ideological justifier for restricting the right to asylum. “We” cannot, it is argued, receive more people than can be successfully “integrated”. This integration is understood as a unidirectional process, the individual’s gradual inclusion in an imagined community where full participation is associated with a range of markers: you need to speak good Swedish, have a regular job or a successful business (with white customers, *nota bene*). Not too many children, please. And you should live in a neighborhood that prefers not having people like you in it. You, as an individual, bear the main responsibility for your own integration.

After having stated that a more restrictive migration policy might get in the way of integration, the state inquiry, however, also brings up those factors that will compensate for these negative effects. Significantly, the compensating factors are the same as the obstacles.^[21] The very conditioning of permanent residence and family reunion on economic capability is supposed to work for the refugee like the carrot at the end of the stick for the donkey. What is said to stand in the way for integration is simultaneously promoted as the cure.

If you fail, you will have to bear responsibility not only for your own failed integration, but also for the closed borders. “We” cannot, after all, receive more people than can be successfully integrated. If only former generations of immigrants had tried a little harder, more could have been saved today. As Sofi Jansson-Keshavarz observes, this is the exact same logic that was used in what came to be called the “Lucia decision” of December 1989, the first more radical turn toward a restrictive asylum politics in post-war Sweden.

The risk of becoming deportable follows those without citizenship like a shadow. Just as with grievability, it is unequally distributed. A number of legal and administrative changes the possibility to “change track” from asylum seeker to labor immigrant, the introduction of temporary permits of different lengths have in recent years increased differentiation among people who have in common that they once arrived in Sweden to seek asylum. There are different legal statuses with different levels of insecurity: being undocumented with direct threat of deportation; being undocumented but not transformed into legal residency even if no country is willing to receive the potential deportee; a residency permit for one year, for three years, or permanent residency. Yes, permanent. But beware, behave, be sure to prove yourself obedient and worthy. For as solid as it might appear, it can still evaporate. You may become illegal again.

Different categories living different levels of deportability in a labor market in which your participation will be the indicator of your level of integration. Will you complain over bad working conditions if your legal status depends on your employment? The only status that is irreversible is being a citizen. For how much longer is, however, an open question. With ever shorter intervals, the suggestion of conditional citizenship is brought up for political discussion.^[22]

Fragment Seven: Obscenity

They were shares in Proof That I am In My Right Mind Ltd., and in Swedish Citizenship Company, etc. They could prove this much, that he wasn't an escaped lunatic, strayed village idiot or a Russian saw-sharpener. What they proved over and above that lay in the previous cigar-Spanish plane and was caviar to the general and abracadabra to the uninitiated. That part of bureaucracy or bureaucrasmos fastened on to the cosmos and got hold on it in a vaguer manner than the other personal particulars which gave more direct information about which book to consult in order to discover that he had been given three warnings for vagrancy and spent a whole year wielding a sledge-hammer in the Mount. On the other hand, they proved that he at least was not a member of the Sicilian Mafia, or an inhabitant of Mars or the Man in the Moon who happened to have tumbled down.^[23]

One of Martinson's characters loses his documents, and finds himself in a condition of being, in terms of legality, naked. The history of identity documents is a history of surveilling the unwanted beggars, vagrants, Roma. Groebner discusses an illustrative example from sixteen-century Germany. While Roma people where demanded to show documents proving their origins and their right to pass, the police were also given orders to confiscate any such documents since in the hands of Roma they were automatically considered to be forgeries.^[24] In the afterword to the Swedish edition of Groebner's book on the history of identity documents, Maria Johansen notices how the category of the "living dead" enters as what she calls "a haunting" in the Swedish parliament of 1734. What is designated, she remarks, is not some kind of ghost from the past. The living dead is the person who, through law, has been expelled from the community and made illegal.^[25]

Today, the world of the illegals is, in the Swedish media, mystifyingly called *skuggsamhället*, the "society of shadows".^[26] This supposed society of shadows is what Nicholas De Genova calls "the obscene" instead. Illegality, he tells us, is a spectacle. It is performed through external and internal border surveillance, detentions, and deportations. This illegality is the *scene* of exclusion that hides the *obscene* of inclusion. Not even the undocumented migrant is excluded from society at large, but rather included as exploited labor without any position whatsoever from which to raise demands. What the intense debate on integration and the need to combat the society of shadows obscures, is the normalization of this labor force completely in the hands of capital. Illegality, De Genova emphasizes, is no anomaly, no exception to the rule. It is its uttermost consequence.^[27]

In the asylum process, the burden of proof lies with the applicant. As an applicant, you arrive deportable, and you need to offer the Migration Agency proof of the contrary. This is the legal procedure, is what is justified as part of the rule of law. Seen from the material relations to which the law functions as a confirmation, however, deportability is produced through the very asylum process. The more radically you are excluded from the political community, the more lawless is your inclusion in the economic regime. Those who are deported as part of the spectacle of exclusion are but collateral damage.

Fragment Eight: Violence

A passage, again, from *The Road*:

For it is the many who decide what reality is and how it shall be, and the minority has to conform or go under. Their reality would never be considered other than improbable and unreal. It would be called out of touch with reality. And that was just what they were [...]; queer and unreal, people out of touch with real life who must each travel alone their destined ways towards the land of death. They would only be considered real to the extent that they were not themselves.^[28]

The documentation of an asylum inquiry includes at least two levels of violence. The first might be the most relevant in the logic of the inquiry but is less relevant here. This is the violence narrated in the interview that will form part of your case for asylum. The second level of violence is administrative and consists in those operations that make certain lives, as Butler says, appear unreal. Unreal lives cannot be grieved.^[29]

Johansen argues that our critique must neither limit itself to *what* information is gathered about those declared unwanted, nor to *how* it is processed. The question is thus not mainly about if we can prove wrongdoings and mistakes in each specific case. What is needed, Johansen emphasizes, is a profound critique of those “administrative fictions that make impossible a continuing becoming together with others”. One of these is the legal fiction of “illegal persons”, persons who, by being deprived of rights, are placed in a condition of being like living dead among us.^[30]

In the beginning of this collection of fragments, I asked if the “icy words” of the

asylum inquiry, to borrow a word from Sandemar, can be read in a way that rejects dehumanization by setting the imagination in motion. This would equal what Hjorth, referring to Butler, discusses as an ethically responsible mode of reading; making use of a sensibility toward the other that is never a question of cultivating ones will, but rather of letting oneself be called.^[31] But to what call?

I read the text, and it speaks to me from the paper. How does it call me, to which call am I open? And what can I do with the fragmented voices transcribed through an interpretation lined with obstacles that in the execution phase is treated as smooth and transparent?

Who are you that I glimpse in the gaps and cracks of the text?

I was my mother's son.

As I said, I was my mother's son and she knew the age of her son.

How my mother could understand my age, what do you mean with that question?

I have no idea how she knew my age, but when I asked her she usually answered.

As I said, I was my mother's son and every mother knows the age of her son.

As I said, I asked my mother and she told my age.

Doctors' certificates spread out on my desk, a few years' documentation of the breaking down of a child. And the conclusion in the decision: *Since it seems to be the asylum process that makes you sick, a return to that from which you fled will be good for you. Probably.* Words making the life of a child unreal, his losses irrelevant, his dreams insignificant.

Where do I begin a protest?

There are political frames that determine not only who can speak, but more importantly who and what can be heard. An ethical reading, Hjorth argues, must

orient itself toward the horizon of the impossible, least it will fall into a self-righteousness once again confirming the privileged subject.^[32] If there is a language here that need to be brought forth, it must be also through its own silences.

Fragment Nine: Horizon

The Road, again:

He knew that there was a protest which can never be voiced as it should be voiced, because there is no one to whom to direct it. There was none who would understand it other than the queer ones themselves, and it could not be addressed to them. Therefore it could only be given one form, one formulation, which was: touch us not! Leave us in peace! We own that which is astray. The lost is our property. It is a large and remarkable property. It faces the stars, the woods and the seas, the roaming waves and the wind-sown flowers.^[33]

Spivak, once again: “In every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible”. The violence in the documents from the asylum inquiry lies in the production of an indifference that facilitates the sorting of people into the categories of grievable or ungrievable, confirmed in different levels of deportability. The force of this violence dwells in the executive capacity of these texts. They are texts decisions by government agencies that interfere directly with people’s lives. To read them as I have suggested, as texts in their own right, cannot mean reducing them to mere texts and nothing but texts. Rather, the question of the reader’s responsibility toward the production history of the text becomes all the more urgent.

The Swedish title of Martinson’s novel is *Vägen till Klockrike*, or *The Road to Klockrike*. In one of the first chapters, dusty tramps have gathered around a signpost where three roads meet. The signpost says: *Road to Rosensjödalen. Road to Rök. Road to Klockrike*. Naive tramps sometimes try to reach Klockrike, but the slave hunters always find them. Klockrike is, so it seems, reachable only by dreaming.^[34]

The reason is banal. The parish of Klockrike is squeezed between two districts that both have riding police patrols. If you get caught you might be sent to the Mount. As unreachable, Klockrike becomes the horizon of impossibility toward which the

desire of the poverty-stricken tramps orients itself. A place imagined without neither slave nor free.

This Klockrike can be read as one possible spelling of what Enrique Dussel, in a Christian prophetic tradition, calls the Kingdom of God. Dussel's Kingdom is situated in a dialectic relation between a *now* and a *not yet*. It can therefore never be nailed to any present, but cracks to it are opened by certain practices of the poor. These practices are the ones consisting in a refusal to accept exploitation and oppression, the defiance of borders, the desire for justice.^[35] As Brazilian bishop Dom Hélder Câmara once expressed it: "the protest of the poor is the voice of God".^[36] Following Câmara, anyone desiring justice must therefore listen carefully for this voice, raised from that place where the harshest consequences of an unjust regime are suffered.

Such a listening must by necessity also entail the listening to the void of an impossible protest. For Hjorth, performing an ethical reading is also to tirelessly defend the vision of the human.^[37] To read the asylum inquiry without reproducing the dehumanization within them, is a constant struggle to break up the processes that make lives still lived appear as unreal and therefore ungrievable. But of those whose words are caught in them, through different levels of translation, interpretation, and dehumanization, what remains is sometimes only silence. Therefore, we also need to listen carefully to the mutilated words and sentences, listen to the gnomic silences of the protests that cannot be voiced.

Borrowing one final time the words from Martinson:

The unreality of it all was a burden; the oddness hard to bear. Those who have not experienced those things from within, and over a period, should never be allowed to express an opinion as to what shall be called probable.^[38]

Footnotes

1. Martinson, Harry. *The Road*. Translated from Swedish by M.A. Michael. London: Cape. 1955 [1948]. p. 85.
2. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press. 2012, p. 142.
3. Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso. 2004.
4. Hjorth, Elisabeth. *Förtvivlade läsningar: Litteratur som motstånd och läsning som etik*. Göteborg: Glänta produktion. 2015, pp. 7–8.
5. This phrasing is an example. In some decisions, the probability of parts or even the whole of the narrative is recognized. However, such a recognition does not necessarily lead to approval of asylum, just as a dismissal of probability does not automatically lead to a negative decision. The categorical dismissal of probability is, however, frequent, turning the whole of a person's narrative irrelevant for the decision made.
6. Hjorth, *Förtvivlade läsningar*, Chapter 1.
7. Martinson, *The Road*, p. 112.
8. Edman, Johan. "Lösdrivarlagen och den samhällsfarliga lättjan." In *Villkorandets politik: Fattigdomens premisser och samhällets åtgärder—då och nu*. Edited by M.-A. Egerö and H. Swärd. Malmö: Égalité förlag. 2008.
9. The vagrancy law disappeared in 1865, but, as Edman observed, it was replaced by a similar law about antisocial behavior. This latter law was only abolished with the social service reform of 1982. Edman sees these laws as a "reminiscence" from the nineteenth century, paradoxically surviving through the greater part of the twentieth century. But history does not move in one direction. It is significant that then migration minister Tobias Billström in 2010 motivated the deportation of a number of Roma from Romania referring to the since long abolished vagrancy law. The twenty-first century has also seen a number of projects on the municipal level aiming at prohibiting begging. See Hansson, Erik. "Det känns fel": *Om det svenska samhällets reaktioner på närvaron av tiggande EU-medborgare, 2014–2016*. Uppsala: Uppsala University. 2019. p. 36.
10. Groebner, Valentin. *Personbevis: Passets födelse i medeltidens Europa*. Translated from German by Tommy Andersson. Göteborg: Glänta produktion. 2009.
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