

Article

# Recovering a “Lost Europe”: The De-Centering of Master Narratives in Eyvind Johnson’s *Natten är här*

Elliott J. Brandsma

Department of German, Nordic and Slavic, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706, USA; ejbrandsma@wisc.edu

**Abstract:** A socially-engaged literary Modernist, whose writings possess an incisive skepticism toward political power, Eyvind Johnson (1900–1976) was a working-class autodidact who became a prominent voice in Swedish letters during the twentieth century. His historical novels have attracted the most critical attention to date, but his short fiction from the 1920s reveals a young author increasingly suspicious of what postmodern theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard would later call master narratives—totalizing views of historical events that serve a political or universalized function. In “Kort Besök” (A Short Visit), “Det Förlorade Europa,” (The Lost Europe) and “En Man i Etolien” (A Man in Aetolia), from his 1932 short story collection *Natten är här* (The Night Has Come), Johnson’s characters resist and subvert various master narratives, maintaining their dignity and individuality in the face of destructive political, military or nationalistic agendas. Although his formal experimentation, introspective storytelling and narrative irresolution firmly situate him in the Modernist literary tradition, Johnson’s disruption of grand narratives about historical events in these stories previews postmodernity, with its radical interrogation of language’s subjugating power, suggesting a new avenue for evaluating and apprehending his literary innovations. Short fiction, thus, offers an accessible entryway into the complex art of Eyvind Johnson, whose intricate novels about centuries past have long resisted casual readership.



**Citation:** Brandsma, Elliott J. 2021. Recovering a “Lost Europe”: The De-centering of Master Narratives in Eyvind Johnson’s *Natten är här*. *Humanities* 10: 46. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10010046>

Received: 1 January 2021  
Accepted: 9 March 2021  
Published: 10 March 2021

**Publisher’s Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Keywords:** Eyvind Johnson; literary modernism; Nordic literature; Sweden; World War I

## 1. Introduction: Eyvind Johnson, Literary Modernism, and Master Narratives

Despite sharing the 1974 Nobel Prize for Literature with fellow Swede Harry Martinson, Eyvind Johnson has remained a relatively obscure novelist on the international literary scene for decades. Born in Sweden’s Norbotten municipality in 1900, Johnson left behind his impoverished homestead as a teenager and made his way toward Stockholm, intent on becoming a professional writer. He got his start writing articles for various left-wing periodicals, including the anarchist magazine *Brand*, which was instrumental in introducing the writing of European Modernists to the Swedish public. After struggling to find work in Sweden during the 1920s, Johnson traveled extensively across Europe, meeting influential members of Modernist artistic circles, such as the French surrealist author and poet Philippe Soupault, with whom he became close friends (Jansson 2013, p. 681). During his travels, Johnson’s reading also “widened to include the most radical . . . writers of the period, in particular Proust, Gide, and Joyce,” whose introspective techniques and depictions of subjective human experience would have a “profound and lasting” (Graves and Holmes 1999, p. 287) impact on his art. Later in his career, Johnson started publishing novels “far-seeing in lands and ages” (Nobel Citation 2020), his most celebrated masterpieces being elaborate works of historical fiction. *Hans Nådes Tid*—translated into English as *The Days of His Grace* in 1968—is perhaps his most famous export. A saga about Charlemagne’s conquest of Northern Italy during the eighth century, the novel received the 1962 Nordic Council’s Literature Prize and was translated into a host of international languages shortly thereafter.

Like all his translated works, however, *The Days of His Grace* vanished from print in the English-speaking world not long after its release, Johnson's subject matter proving a difficult sell beyond niche academic circles. Even Gavin Orton, who penned a book about Johnson for the *Twayne World Authors Series* in 1972, concedes that "[Johnson's] works can seem obscure and ambiguous: his highly developed irony makes no concessions to the casual reader" (Orton 1972, p. 19). Swedish film director Troell (1966)'s first feature-length film was an adaptation of Johnson's semi-autobiographical novel *Här har du ditt liv* (Here Is Your Life). The film's release brought the author a short period of commercial fame and received several recognitions at the Chicago and Berlin International Film Festivals in 1966. But Johnson's Nobel win a decade later would spark considerable controversy. At the time of the prize's announcement, both he and Harry Martinson were members of the Swedish Academy, the committee tasked with awarding the prize every year. Following an onslaught of criticism and accusations of favoritism from the Swedish press, Eyvind Johnson passed away in 1976, and his writings, though treasured by small audiences in Sweden to this day, have remained in the backrooms of used bookstores, searching for a new generation of readers.

Although the cynical reception of his Nobel win clouded his legacy, Johnson was an innovator among his Swedish contemporaries, his accolades solidifying him as one of the country's foremost Modernist writers. Throughout the 1930s, he wrote in tandem with authors such as Vilhelm Moberg, the self-educated chronicler of the Swedish-American emigrant experience. Similar to poet Harry Martinson and novelist Ivar Lo-Johansson, Johnson dedicated this chapter of his career to writing about "a period some twenty years earlier [to] chart the problems of [his] youth" (Graves and Holmes 1999, p. 265), before dedicating his literary efforts to historical fiction in the succeeding decades. To fully appreciate Johnson's contributions to Swedish Modernist aesthetics, however, scholars must examine his entire oeuvre—not just his historical novels and ventures into social realism during the 1930s. Most extant book-length scholarship about Johnson centers on his longer works, such as the semi-autobiographical tetralogy *Romanen om Olaf*, or the Krilon trilogy—the author's scathing critique of Nazism and fascism. But Johnson had honed his craft through short fiction during the 1920s, submitting pieces to miscellaneous Swedish newspapers, and it is in his short fiction that his Modernist inclinations to render human consciousness, the fragmentation of time, and "the individual's relationship to human society through interior monologue" (Childs 2000, p. 3) started to take hold.

Johnson was a particularly avid short story writer between 1920 and 1930, when he spent "ten years on the Continent, first in Berlin, then in Paris" (Orton 1972, p. 13). One of his first books from this period, *Natten är här* (*The Night Has Come*), offers a collection of short stories that showcase not only his Modernist experiments with dissonant and fractured literary forms but also the influence of authors like Marcel Proust on his depictions of memory and his "preoccupation with time" (Brantly and Wright 1996, p. 349). In Proustian fashion, the stories contain flashbacks, dramatic shifts in location, and, in most cases, a limited first-person narration: hallmarks of Modernists' rejection of the nineteenth-century's realism, which Swedo-Finnish Modernist writer Rabbe Enckell described "as a misguided attempt to represent reality objectively" (Jansson 2013, p. 678). What is perhaps most interesting in these tales, however, is Johnson's emerging skepticism and disdain toward political power, as well as the narratives used by both governments and citizenry to enact and enforce it. In an interview with *Contemporary Literature* in 1971, Johnson laments the "victimization of others," of defenseless individuals, that necessarily accompanies "the curse of political power" (Dembo and Johnson 1971, p. 3), and it's this scrutiny of the powerful that characterizes "the service to freedom" (Nobel Citation 2020) upon which his artistry rests. Throughout *Natten är här*, Johnson depicts characters whose lives are at odds with or riven by political forces beyond their control, and their reactions to these encroaching forces unveil a particularly innovative characteristic of the author's early writings.

In these stories, Johnson frequently decenters what Alicia Fahey identifies as master narratives: “stories of transcendent or universal truths that promote a . . . totalizing view of past events . . . [that] usually represent state interests” (Fahey 2014, p. 411). By undermining the hegemonic quality of these narratives, Johnson seeks to restore the dignity of individuals caught in the crosshairs of lofty or nefarious political ambitions. “Kort Besök” (A Short Visit), which appears at the beginning of the collection, depicts Henri, a character oddly unaffected by talk of World War I, despite having participated in the conflict and witnessed its atrocities firsthand. Henri’s indifference befuddles, even angers, the story’s narrator—that is, until he learns how “all the horrible things that could happen to [Henri] had already happened” before the war, namely the death of his beloved wife. In “Det Förlorade Europa” (The Lost Europe), Johnson’s narrator records his encounters with sordid, unhappy figures while passing through Germany during the interwar period. While some of the characters struggle to accept the bleak changes and brutal realities of their war-torn country, the story’s most “apolitical” figure—Heinz—maintains his wits, even as those around him vanish, hallucinate or slowly lose their sanity. This grim tale, of which the narrator holds “no fond memories,” (Johnson 1932, p. 99) offers a series of ground-level accounts depicting the war’s aftermath on German citizenry, perspectives that contradict the grandiose master narratives of an increasingly ambitious and inhumane German state.

Lastly, “En Man i Etolien” (A Man in Aetolia), from the book’s second half *Skymning—Gryning* (Dusk—Dawn), offers “an unheroic account of Homer’s life . . . presumably [the one] mentioned by Eumaeus in the *Odyssey* (Book XIV)” (Orton 1972, p. 84). A world-renowned poet often granted mythical status, Homer, by authoring the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, has become a sort of nationalistic figure, with many regions of Greece and the Mediterranean claiming to be his place of origin. In fact, little is known about Homer’s life and birthplace, and some scholars question if he existed at all (Kirk 2019). Johnson attempts to fill this vacuum of knowledge and uses this story to humanize Homer on his own terms, liberating him from the constraints of Greek nationalism upheld through master narratives. What emerges is a portrait of a man rife with flaws: a murderous drunk, a lowly orphan, a grizzly farmhand, and an at times raucous, slovenly poet, but a person who is first and foremost “a free man” (Johnson 1932, p. 236). “En Man i Etolien” represents one of Johnson’s initial ventures into the genre of historical fiction, but his Modernist propensity for reinvention of myth permeates each line of the text, reflecting a growing awareness of the individual’s tenuous position in relation to nationalist ideologies.

In his introduction to *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard describes “incredulity” towards master narratives as a key component of the “postmodern condition” (Lyotard [1979] 1984, p. xxiv). Theorist Simon Malpas elaborates on this notion further, claiming that the “postmodern [represents] a loss of faith in progress and a splintering of . . . universal projects . . . into a vast field of competing projects and narratives” (Malpas 2005, p. 43). By focusing on individual perspectives instead of all-encompassing narratives that cannot possibly explain reality, Johnson’s short stories exhibit a nascent attempt to “challenge the premises of those discourses that have shaped the modern experience” (Malpas 2005, p. 44). This aspect of Johnson’s writing exemplifies the complex interrelationships and murky distinctions between Modernism and Postmodernism, terms that often manage to sidestep a satisfying, comprehensive elucidation. Taking a closer look at *Natten är här* not only provides a more accessible entry-way into the artistry of one of Sweden’s Modernist writers but also reveals a man deeply committed to fighting against “war, social oppression, and the humiliation and annihilation of the individual” (Smeds 2001, p. 30). His Modernist aesthetics evince the absurdities of the age in which he wrote, focusing on issues related to rapid industrialization, political upheaval, and irrevocable social change. By decentering what might be later termed as master narratives, he sheds light on a “lost Europe,” the individuals otherwise eclipsed by the shadows of national interest. The following three analyses illustrate how this technique emerges in Johnson’s fiction and helps to advance the author’s liberatory agenda.

## 2. “A Short Visit”: Master Narratives’ Disconnection from Personal Pain

After World War I, Modernist writers across Europe imbued their work with pessimism, a “sense of a failed, fragmented society, in which the uncomprehending individual was swallowed up by huge forces outside of personal control” (Childs 2000, p. 27). Aspects of this pessimism pervade Johnson’s short story “Kort Besök,” or “A Short Visit.” A sort of overture for the collection *Natten är här*—this story decenters French master narratives surrounding World War I by highlighting their irrelevance to an individual’s personal suffering. Specifically, Johnson targets French war narratives that emphasize the conflict’s brutality as a means of inspiring collective identity and a unifying sense of national trauma. He focalizes the tale through a nameless narrator, a traveler paying a visit to an unspecified French village near the Montmorency Forest outside Paris (likely St. Leu-la-Forêt, where the author stationed himself for several years). Late on a rainy evening, the narrator receives an unexpected drop-in from Henri, a man he has seen walking around town but has never met before. After accepting a cigarette and exchanging a few moments of polite conversation, Henri—for no discernible reason—begins talking about the war, which took place years ago. He chats about the conflict incessantly but with a perturbingly nonchalant attitude. Henri’s choice of topic perplexes the narrator because to him and the rest of the villagers, the war “rests in a horrible past that everyone knows a great deal about, and to which no one can contribute anything new . . . [E]veryone felt like they knew it backwards and forwards, just as well as everyone else” (Johnson 1932, p. 13). Nevertheless, Henri indifferently recounts his war stories, explaining quietly “that he had been at Somme and Marne, and at the place called Morte-Hommes, and at the great battle: Verdun” (Johnson 1932, p. 13). But all the while he makes dismissive gestures and relays his memories listlessly, as though meaningless to him—an attitude that heightens the story’s central tension. When the conversation falls on the battle at Verdun, one of World War I’s deadliest skirmishes, the narrator’s irritation with Henri intensifies:

I had read a lot about it. I had also spoken about it with others who were there: Germans and Frenchmen. All of them had a strange tremor in their voice when they mentioned Verdun—how scarred their souls had been. The very word caused the humanity in them to burst out in an indignant cry from deep within their hearts, an objection to repeating something so horrific—an echo of despair from the horrors of *that* time. However, this man, Henri, sat completely calm in front of me, describing how the heavy cannon fire annihilated entire regiments, troop after troop. (Johnson 1932, p. 14)

Bothered by his flippant attitude, the narrator tries everything—sarcasm, diversion, small talk—to steer the conversation away from the war but to no avail. He begins to suspect that Henri wants to sell him war bonds, magazines, or life insurance, but when he insinuates to Henri that such things are of no interest to him, the peculiar visitor doesn’t engage, continuing to prattle on about the war uninterrupted. Speculating that Henri might be keen on war history, the narrator attempts to discuss “kriglitteratur” with him, but alas, Henri denies having read any grand novels about the war, even though some, he has heard, are well-written. Only when the narrator hints that he must excuse himself and hitch a ride on the next train to Paris does Henri pause and appear distressed. Then the reasons for his short visit start to emerge.

When asked why he is so unaffected by the war, Henri explains that it was something he was “forced to participate in” and the worst thing that could happen to him occurred beforehand: the death of his first wife, whose name is never mentioned. Before discovering this personal detail, the narrator finds it impossible to conceive of anything more gruesome, more traumatic than the war, which has been conveyed to him through others, through cultural memory, and through master narratives detailing its brutality. Yet, to Johnson, these sweeping narratives warrant skepticism as they serve a political purpose: to galvanize the French around their stake within the conflict and justify their sacrifice. As Ross Wilson notes, “to even mention the battles of the war, such as the Somme, Vimy or Gallipoli, within these states is to seemingly conjure, almost automatically, visions of devastated, debr-

strewn landscapes, suffering soldiers enduring the torrent of industrialized warfare and strong emotions of pity, sadness, anger and national pride" (Johnson 1932, p. 43). However, the heaps of bodies, the cannon fire and competing national interests are irrelevant—banal conversation—to Henri, who presumably stops by the narrator's apartment only to reminisce about his deceased lover. Rather than commiserating with the story's narrator and sharing in a collective trauma "to legitimize a sense of self" (Wilson 2014, p. 49), Henri divorces his feelings from the political narratives surrounding the conflict, validating his own personal suffering. When the narrator encounters Henri again on a sidewalk at the story's end, their exchange emblemizes and emphasizes this disjuncture between political narratives and personal pain:

I met him on the street several weeks later. We happened to walk straight towards each other on the narrow sidewalk. He had no way of escaping without stopping to say hello.

—Say, I said, what did you want from me that evening?

He looked very embarrassed.

—I beg your pardon, he said finally. I actually wanted to sell you a typewriter. But I forgot my demonstration model in the apartment below, and when I came over to you, it was as though I also forgot who I am *today, in this moment*. I was sitting there the whole time trying to remember why I stopped by. You see, I used to live where you live. My first wife died there. In a way, it was, well, an—unintentional—farewell visit.

He smiled at me, embarrassed.

—Isn't it funny—how one can forget like that?

—You talked about the war the whole time, I said.

—Yes, of course. Yes, of course, he nodded.

And just then he seemed incredibly bored. (Johnson 1932, p. 19)

Whether readers are supposed to believe Henri's explanation for his abrupt visit is unclear, but the resumption of his indifferent attitude toward the war suggests an underlying detachment, something beyond trauma or callous irreverence. Perhaps his long-winded discussion served as a means of buying time to revisit his old apartment and relive old memories. Perhaps he truly is a forgetful salesman, who found himself hemming and hawing his way through an awkward social situation. These explanations are beside the point. What is clear by the story's end is that Johnson intends to center Henri's individual experience—the tragedy of his private loss—over the master narratives that the story's narrator actively tries to impose on him. While "Kort Besök's" narrator recites conventional memories of the war's horrors, Johnson—through Henri's example—unearths a story otherwise lost among the political jockeying of World War I. In a fairly conventional Modernist fashion, readers are confined to the narrator's perceptions of events, creating a subjective reality, where true communication between individuals fails to occur (Brantly 2018, p. 5). But this brief tale of miscommunication showcases one of the main tenets and finest innovations of Johnson's art; he reasserts the validity of personal pain and tragedy above the lofty master narratives of the French government and people, salvaging the dignity of individuals—and their unique stories—from the smoldering wreckage of war.

### 3. "The Lost Europe": The Aftermath of Utopic Master Narratives on the Individual

First published in *Vintergatan* in 1931, "Det Förlorade Europa" appears midway through *Natten är här*. Like "Kort Besök," the story mostly takes place in the aftermath of World War I—right after the inflationary period of 1922–1923, when Germany struggled with national debts and failed to pay its war reparations. Instead of openly condemning German domestic policy or prognosticating about the country's economic future, Johnson

illustrates in this story how the war split Germans' consciousness in two, with some embracing the bleak realities of the present and others clinging to the Utopic visions of an irredeemable past. Like many Modernist texts, the story's narrative "plunges the reader into a confusing and difficult mental landscape . . . which must be moved through and mapped . . . in order to understand its limits and meanings" (Childs 2000, p. 4). With a curiously-named narrator "Herr J.," the tale corresponds closely with Johnson's own biography; he lived in Berlin during the early 1920s, which at the time, "was a place of human misery and political and artistic ferment" (Orton 1972, p. 13). During his travels to this city, Johnson encountered a host of "strange existences" who served as "living documents in the history of the times" (Johnson 1932, p. 19) and the literary portraits he paints of these individuals center them as victims of Germany's overreach of power, which was fueled by aspirational master narratives of a German-led European empire. Employing an innovative "cirkelkomposition" (Smeds 2004, p. 5), which reflects Modernism's "preoccupation with repetitive and cyclical rather than chronological" (Childs 2000, p. 8) time, Herr J. pieces together the lives of several wayward souls from memory; the narrative starts in the present, delves back into the past, and then circles back to the present again—highlighting figures who fail to adapt to the new Germany, hollowed out by its disrupted political projects. Grim and brooding, tragic and heart-wrenching, "Det Förlorade Europa" cautions readers against the human toll of unchecked governmental power; it animates the psychological hardships of those deceived by master narratives, ones promoting nationalistic objectives and military ambition.

Johnson populates the story with a cast of colorful characters—all of whom are described from the first-person narrator's point of view—but four stand out as vitally important to detecting the liberative purpose behind Johnson's apparent decentralization of master narratives. Fru Kurzner—Herr J.'s "short, wrinkly, and disheveled" landlady—longs to move back to Leipzig (despite her surly husband's wishes) because "for her, Leipzig was an incarnation of a bright and happy time: the time before the war" (Johnson 1932, p. 88). But her innocent desire to return to "times . . . dead forever" eventually drives her to insanity. At the end of the story, Herr J. learns that she was found among "the worst kind of rabble" during a police raid in Leipzig, after leaving her husband and children without explanation. Similarly, Herr J.'s neighbor Ziegler, a thrice-married Austrian who cavorts with revolutionary circles in Scandinavia before joining (then deserting) the Red Army, experiences a jarring lapse in memory while on a walk with Herr J. one afternoon. He enters a restaurant that he frequented before the war as though no time has passed, perplexing Herr J., who watches the entire scene unfold in bewilderment. In the story's conclusion, we learn that Ziegler also vanishes from the neighborhood without a trace, after garnering a reputation for skipping out on his bills after eating at restaurants. Moreover, Ziegler's landlady, Fru W., has two sons, the upstanding Heinz and the ruffian Otto; while Heinz abstains from political life and works at a bank, Otto carouses and lands frequently in jail. But Fru W. cannot bring herself to scold or reprimand her wayward son too harshly because he "always talked about how things *were*, before" the war (Johnson 1932, p. 97). She, too, cannot come to terms with a diminished Germany, favoring Otto—despite his faults—because he keeps her Utopic, aspirational memories of the past alive, intact. Right before the story's end, Herr J. watches Fru W. chase a group of singing school children down the street, shouting Otto's name, certain that a younger, more innocent version of him sings among them. In various ways, these souls are unable or unwilling to confront the broken political promises of the German state, dwelling in the past, hoping to redeem a world that never came to fruition.

In the end, the only character who seems unfazed by Germany's crumbling social infrastructure is "the absolutely honest, the absolutely apolitical, the absolutely straightforward" (Johnson 1932, p. 99). Heinz. Herr J. encounters him years later while passing by his old residence in Berlin, and they exchange polite conversation, nothing more. After updating Herr J. on the demise of Ziegler, Fru Kurzner, and Fru J., Heinz reports that he "did not get involved in politics," diligently performing his duties at the bank without

fuss. Instead of falling for sweeping political narratives about rebuilding a prosperous and powerful Germany and involving himself in the country's recovery, he seems to absolve himself of social responsibility, emerging from the storms of war largely unscathed. Heinz can be interpreted as cold and detached, or shrewd and strategic, depending on one's interpretation. But it's his removal from the chaotic lives of his neighbors and immediate family that shields him from the tumult of Germany's post-war decadence. His preservation can be construed as a byproduct of self-interested neutrality. It can also be understood as a sort of self-inoculation from the pitfalls of master narratives, of revisionist histories that serve national over individual interests. Ultimately, the narrator departs from the residence, unsure which way to go to get back to Berlin, because all the paths "are without fond memories" (Johnson 1932, p. 99). Here, Johnson truly reveals "his opposition to oppression" (Brantly and Wright 1996, p. 353), his continual scrutiny of political forces and narratives. Those vested in Germany's (or, in the case of Ziegler, Russia's) grand promises of a Utopian future end up in shambles, forever lost in their illusions. Apolitical figures might evade the consequences of their government's actions but they also relinquish their concern for their fellow man—Johnson offers no blameless choice to readers. By decentering grand narratives about a glorious future and the possibility of national progress, and instead focusing on the characters' tragic destinies, Johnson poignantly, if not pessimistically, depicts "the post-utopian sense of rupture, estrangement and 'pollution'" (Thomsen 2015, p. 82) of 1920s Europe, a continent mired in post-war malaise and a faltering sense of cohesion.

#### 4. "A Man in Aetolia": Freeing Mythological Figures from Nationalistic Master Narratives

The second half of *Natten är här* dramatically differs from the first in both subject matter, form and genre. Skymning—Grymning (Dusk—Dawn) consists of four stories, all set during times of Greek antiquity, marking Johnson's first ventures into the Modernist technique of mythopoesis, which involved the generation or reinvention of myth. This return to the past falls perfectly in line with popular aesthetic thought from the Modernist period; many Swedish authors of this time experimented with or reinvented ancient literary forms as a means of steering what they saw as a rudderless culture, bereft of vision and meaning. In his monumental essay "Ordkonst och Bildkonst" (Word Art and Pictorial Art), Pär Lagerkvist—a contemporary and colleague of Johnson's—contends that modern literature lacks "striving, belief, and idealism" and should, therefore, look to "the darkness of the past . . . and call forth the marvelous, full-blooded poetry that is lying there . . . so that we may learn artistic observation, artistic creation, and artistic seriousness" (Lagerkvist [1913] 1991, p. 64). Johnson seems to answer this call in "En Man i Etolien" (A Man in Aetolia), the final installment of his collection, but here, he doesn't perpetuate views of ancient Greece "as it usually conceived—romantically and heroically" (Orton 1972, p. 84). The tale portrays Homer, often hailed as one of humanity's finest poets, in a rather unflattering light, shattering conventional nationalistic views of him as a mythical wordsmith. Gone is the man who, through *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, elevated and helped establish the Greek language and people. Gone are the images of Homer as a stoic statue, an imposing intellectual who inspires imagination, awe and a sense of national pride. Instead he becomes a wanderer, a sort of Modernist *voyageur* in ancient times, who travels widely, possesses a weak constitution, "crooked and broken teeth," and "can't stand the smell of blood" (Johnson [1960] 1968, p. 233). He works as a lowly manual laborer and endures physical abuse from his colleagues, for he "had no value to anyone," and grows drunk quickly at gatherings, only distinguishing himself through his captivating stories and singing voice. Initially, he goes by the name Dekatos—a generic Greek word meaning one of ten; Johnson doesn't clue readers into Homer's identity until the tale's last line, making his unsympathetic portrait all the more surprising. Rather, Johnson spends most of the story upending master narratives and popular assumptions about Homer in order to individuate him, thereby liberating him from the nationalistic affiliations long associated with his art. Even in his mythological fiction, Johnson endeavors to restore and dignify

individuals, whose truths and humanity have been supplanted or distorted by powerful narratives beyond their purview.

An additional way that Johnson seeks to untangle Homer from the web of master narratives is by highlighting the scope of his freedom from hegemonic forces throughout the story. While the author certainly depicts Homer as someone reprehensible and subaltern, he also emphasizes that he is beholden neither to his employers nor his companions. Fellow workers might mock his grizzly appearance and beat him up indiscriminately, but “none of the masters, farmers, and soldiers ever forgot that he was a free man, who rented out his hands but owned his body and his life” (Johnson 1932, p. 236). As such, his masters never strike him or intervene on his behalf when the other laborers quarrel with or provoke him. Despite his impoverished state, despite his lowly social position, Homer maintains agency over his life and affairs, hopping from farmstead to farmstead on his own whim and accord. Later in the text, the narrator also challenges the idea that Homer and his legacy can be claimed by one part of the Mediterranean over another, effectively detaching him from regionalist agendas. He takes a job on a farm close to Calydon, and while there, he insults and gets in an altercation with a boastful Zakynthian soldier named Fenevs. Enraged, the soldier takes “a bone from the meat, which lay in front of him, and hurl[s] it with all his might straight into the face of the squinting servant, who curled up in pain and howled like a trampled dog” (Johnson 1932, p. 239). When Homer “lift[s] his bloody and swollen face, one could see that his left eye had been crushed,” prompting him to spend several weeks on the farm convalescing. During his recovery, his attendants administer medicaments that make him delirious; he begins telling stories about gods and heroes to entertain the servants tasked with his care. In his compromised state, he offers a rather murky explanation of his origins that allays any region’s assertions of being his rightful homeland:

They [his attendants] were the only ones in the world who found out the truth about where he came from: not from Levkas, like he had said before, but rather far from the North and far from the East, and from that region, where his mouth became filled with Aetolian and Ionian dialect words, whose meanings were barely intelligible; and far from the West where the world ended with a tall cliff and an impassible blue sea; and from lands south of Crete, with their expanses of dancing sands. (Johnson 1932, p. 240)

The ambiguity of this passage—which suggests Homer could be from the North, South, East, and West of the Mediterranean—ultimately renders his origins inscrutable. This vagueness aligns with the same commitment to individualistic freedom demonstrated in Johnson’s other stories. Homer’s deluded state arguably calls into question the reliability of his words, but eliding a specific mention of Homer’s place of origin decenters nationalistic claims to his artistry, restoring his sense of distinction and purpose.

Thus, whether he is discussing the inhumanities of war or the romanticized progenitors of Greek myth, Johnson consistently elevates the humanity of his subjects above all else, irrespective of their power, position, or political function. Even this short story’s conclusion serves to further untether Homer all from political association, continuing to paint him as pacifist and unheroic. After recovering from his injuries and slaughtering Fenevs as he sleeps, Homer flees from this farm and wanders off into the wilderness, his ultimate destination unknown. He journeys to Fasalos and Atrax, Olympos and Stymfalia, picking up a series of uncomplimentary nicknames along the way. For example, in one locale, he becomes known as “the Hobbling Drunkard,” because “he drank a lot in those times and his legs, more or less, stiffened” (Johnson 1932, p. 243). Despite traveling far and wide across the Greek isles, he “never took part in any war,” continuing his abstention from political participation of any kind. He merely exists as a “fraudster” and a “drunkard” until he loses his sight in Melibosa, and it’s with his loss of vision, that he develops his legendary singing voice. Only after besmirching all romanticized views of him does the narrator finally reveal that Dekatos is in fact, the famed poet Homer, attributed with writing some of the world’s most admired epics. Through this unbecoming story, Johnson skewers the highly-constructed nature of national heroes’ identities; he delves deeply into the past to

fill in the gaps of Homer's life, yet performs a similar task to the one completed in "Kort Besök" and "Det Förlorade Europa." He situates the individual apart from the master narratives affecting their lives, using fiction to arrive at a clearer version of truth. He continues his charge of imagining and uncovering the forgotten Europe, long in the storm of human ambition.

## 5. Conclusions

The short fiction of Eyvind Johnson provides not only a fruitful study of literary Modernism but also a window into the development of the author's innovative artistry. *Natten är här*, though published before the height of Johnson's fame, shows a writer increasingly interested in preserving individual dignity, even in the face of formidable political encroachment. His apparent scrutiny of master narratives combats a reductive or universalized view of the past and asserts the inherent value of singular perspectives—a characteristic he cultivates in his later novels as well. Whether he is interrogating conventional retellings of international conflicts or nationalistic romanticization of ancient myth, Johnson encapsulates the spirit of an era in Swedish literature in which deep questioning and keen social engagement started to flourish. His perceptible disdain for narratives that service political agendas also foreshadows postmodernity's radical questioning of language: its function, its integrity, and its power to liberate or oppress. Therefore, reading Johnson's short fiction can help reconfigure and sharpen our understanding of Modernism and Postmodernism's evolution in the Swedish context as well as both movements' continual impact on Sweden's literary culture. After decades of obscurity, it is perhaps time to dust off Johnson's earliest books from our shelves and revisit his contributions to world letters once again.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Brantly, Susan. 2018. Nordic Modernism for Beginners. *Humanities* 7: 90. [CrossRef]
- Brantly, Susan, and Rochelle Wright. 1996. Into the Twentieth Century: 1890–1950. In *A History of Swedish Literature*. Edited by Lars Warme. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Childs, Peter. 2000. *Modernism: The New Critical Idiom Series*. London: Routledge.
- Dembo, L., and E. Johnson. 1971. An Interview with Eyvind Johnson. *Contemporary Literature* 12: 301–4. [CrossRef]
- Fahey, Alicia. 2014. Voices from the Edge: De-Centering Master Narratives in Jane Urquhart's. *The Stone Carvers*. In *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film*. Edited by Martin Löschnigg and Marzena Sokolowska. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 411–26.
- Graves, P., and P. Holmes. 1999. Three Novelists of the 1930s: Vilhelm Moberg, Ivar Lo-Johansson and Eyvind Johnson. In *Aspects of Modern Swedish Literature*. Edited by Irene Scobbie. Norwich: Norvik Press.
- Jansson, Mats. 2013. Crossing Borders: Modernism in Sweden and the Swedish-Speaking Part of Finland. In *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*. Edited by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 666–90.
- Johnson, Eyvind. 1968. *The Days of His Grace*. Translated by Elspeth Harley Schubert. New York: The Vanguard Press. First published 1960.
- Johnson, Eyvind. 1932. *Natten är här: Noveller*. Stockholm: Bonniers, (All translations from the text are my own).
- Kirk, Geoffrey. 2019. Homer. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available online: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Homer-Greek-poet> (accessed on 28 December 2020).
- Lagerkvist, Pär. 1991. *Word Art and Pictorial Art*. Translated by Roy Swanson, and Everette Ellestad. First published 1913.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition*. Translated by Geoff Bennington, and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. First published 1979.
- Malpas, Simon. 2005. *The Postmodern: The New Critical Idiom Series*. London: Routledge.
- Nobel Citation. 2020. Eyvind Johnson—Facts. Nobel Media AB. Available online: [NobelPrize.org](https://www.nobelprize.org) (accessed on 31 December 2020).
- Orton, Gavin. 1972. *Eyvind Johnson*. New York: Twayne Publishers Inc.
- Smeds, Fredrik. 2001. *Stildrag i sex noveller av Eyvind Johnson*. Karlstads: Karlstads Universitet.
- Smeds, Fredrik. 2004. *Tiden, Minnet, Kriget Och Dess Följder: Studier i Eyvind Johnsons Verk*. Karlstads: Karlstads Universitet.
- Thomsen, Bjarne. 2015. Marginal and Metropolitan Modernist Modes in Eyvind Johnson's Early Urban Narratives. *Scandinavica* 54: 61–90.

Troell, Jan. 1966. *Här har du ditt liv*. Stockholm: Svensk Filmindustri.

Wilson, Ross. 2014. It Still Goes On: Trauma and the Memory of the First World War. In *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film*. Edited by Martin Löschnigg and Marzena Sokolowska. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 43–57.