

The Marathon Poet

Preparations for the great poetry race.

05:00:00 AM

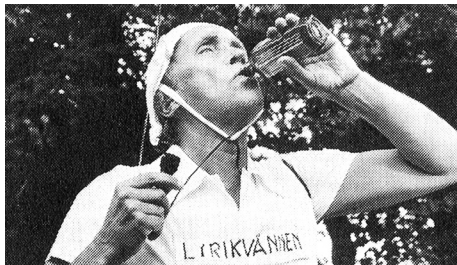
I am jogging around near Marathon, waiting
to deliver the message of triumph to Athens.
“Damn, this is really delayed,” I think to myself.
On the base of Bellman’s bust, someone has scribbled:
 This is where we get drunk!
Right away I take a sip of kefir from my canteen
turning away so Bellman doesn’t catch me.
Then some bastard on the roof of Rosendal Palace sings:
 Come now, ourselves reposing,
 A breakfast round this spring reposing
 Ulla, red wine disclosing...
He is immediately censored by a Member of Parliament:
Napoleon Svensson of Ljungskile, who, dressed in folk costume,
fires the starting gun for the marathon
and then goes to speak at the Day of Sobriety at Skansen.

05:30:00 AM

In order to run the marathon while composing
a 42 km long poem into a chin-mounted microphone
attached to a tape recorder hung down the back
you should, in addition to crispbread, butter, cheese, and herring,
and five liters of kefir,
carry as little ballast as possible.
(Ideally run without any body at all,
and certainly bring no burdensome soul.)

I start by lightening the load of the soul by emptying
every *and* and *as* from my word memory.
(Such bulky words cannot enter Modernist poetry,
Gunnar Ekelöf once told me in the early fifties.
And now the Master’s words come in handy.)

I throw *and* and *as* onto the grass where they soon form
a chalice with two wreaths of different heights
with acanthus leaves and volute-like offshoots.
I am interrupted by an angry shout: “Don’t litter in nature!”
It is a Vasaloppet skiing contestant on Sirishovsvägen Road.



Apparently he has confused Mora for Marathon.
I swiftly pick up every *and* and *as*
and put them in a picnic basket someone’s left behind.
Next, I feed the birds by offering
a handful of *and* and *as* while chirping:
Chirpp chorpp chirppchirpp
Chirdittchirditchirdividivipp
Chorpp chirp chorppchorpp
The birds completely ignore them.
A nightingale goes so far in its contempt
that it poops in my hand.
Only the house sparrows enjoy the taste of *and* and *as*.
Naturally, as they’re not real birds anyway.
A house sparrow nibbles up so many *and* and *as*
that it literally turns into an *as*.

06:00:00 AM

(Since the Master also taught me not to sing
the same note throughout an entire collection of poems
I decide to mix it up.)
I extract *as* and *and*
from my word memory.
There are soon as many *as* and *and*

as *and* and *as*.

All the house sparrows are gone.

They have turned into airborne *and* and *as*
and *as* and *and*.

Fortunately, I had put aside a fistful of
and and *as* and *as* and *and*
to prepare my feet.

I fasten every *and* and *as*
around the toes and heel of my right foot.



And all *as* and *and*
around the toes and heel of my left foot.

The sound of my jogging:

and *as*

as and

and *as*

as and

Rhythmic, like two basses
at least while we wait for the race to start.

The double basses are a nice backing for poetry
especially for the heavy uphill climbs
on the way to Athens.

In the next episode: The marathon race begins.

The Marathon Poet

*Episode three. A troublesome situation.
Apollo sends the Master to help.*

08:00:20 AM

After the start signal at Marathon,
as I had been running at sprinting speed for some 75 meters
on Bellman's Road towards Athens,
I discover in horror:
I HAVE FORGOTTEN TO BREATHE!

At this point I recall the Greek poet
Aeraphysiades's famous didactic poem *Dyspnea*:

Forever will your poem breathe
each word must be alive.

If its (and your) weight falls beneath
your death shall therefrom derive.

(Translated from the Greek by G.S., Associate Professor
in Aesthetics, Uppsala.)

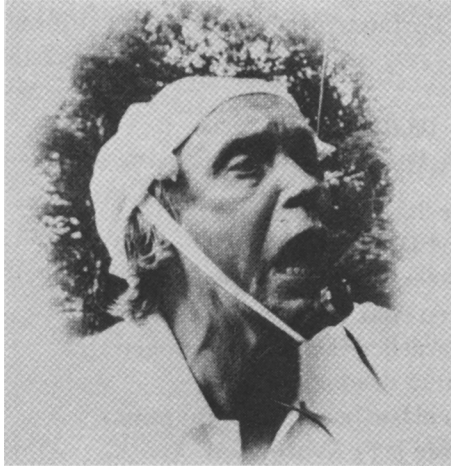
08:00:45 AM

(I call upon Apollo)

O Apollo, do you hear me?
I cannot yell, nor speak, nor whisper.
O, Apollo, at this point even bad advice would be hard-won.
Oooooooooo, Apollo, answer me!
WHAT IS A POET TO DO WHEN HE'S FORGOTTEN
TO BREATHE?
Is there any word of advice in Homer?

Out of my Södra Latin high school memory
I recite the Catalogue of Ships
from the Second Song of the *Iliad*,
but receive no other response
than Homer's snores in hexameter.
How about Virgil and Dante?

Nope, those two are jogging through Inferno
without losing their breath
despite the bad breath
from strophes I.XXV:58–60, among others.
(Do not read them!)



08:01:18 AM
(I call upon Rabelais)

Rabelais discusses words
with bad breath:
“Gråbo the poet once confused
silver herb with mugwort
when he was to season his brandy.
As a result the words
in his collection *Tinkling Testicles*
exuded such bad breath
that twelve booksellers and fifteen libraries in Paris
had to be closed and disinfected.
It took three years, until 1535,
before the booksellers and libraries
could open again.”

Rabelais adds:

“Lovely your words will breathe
if you mix correctly your mead.”

(Dear poets, always keep this motto
before your eyes, mouth, and nose.

Not even Författarförlaget’s publisher can afford
to put out poetry with gas masks.

Ach, austerity!)

08:02:24 AM

(Shakespeare)

I remember a performance
of Hamlet at the national stage Dramaten.

The title role was held by the beet-red
actor Ajax Buffooner.

During the to-be-or-not-to-be soliloquy

his breathing was so dramatic

that the crowd was literally blown away between the lines.

Me, I ended up in Nybroviken, the bay close by,

and was rescued by the Lodbrok crane.

From this we learn:

“Dressed in knitwear black
you ought to breathe, not pant.

Let let the audience slack.

From the flute, words should dreamily chant.”

(From Hamlet’s speech to the actors.

Transl. from the English by Åke Janzon, Svenska Dagbladet)

08:03:06 AM

(Apollo sends for the Master’s assistance)

The Master clatters down from Mount Olympus
in his white Bugati Type 41—“La Royale” 1931,

breaks elegantly at the turn of Bellman’s Road,

opens to page 48 in Ekelöf’s *Stroutnes*,

points at a lowercase o and says:

“This is the size of the breathing space in Sweden.”
“I see,” I respond naively, “In such a tiny o
it’s quite difficult to take a breath, isn’t it?”
The Master closes *Strountes* with a bang,
looks sternly at me, then says:
“DEAD POET DOES NOT BREATHE.”

Then he starts the Bugatti
and drives the winding mountain road
back up to Mount Olympus.

In the next episode: Dr. Retzius examines dead poet.

How I Found the Voice of August Strindberg on Seven Phonograph Rolls

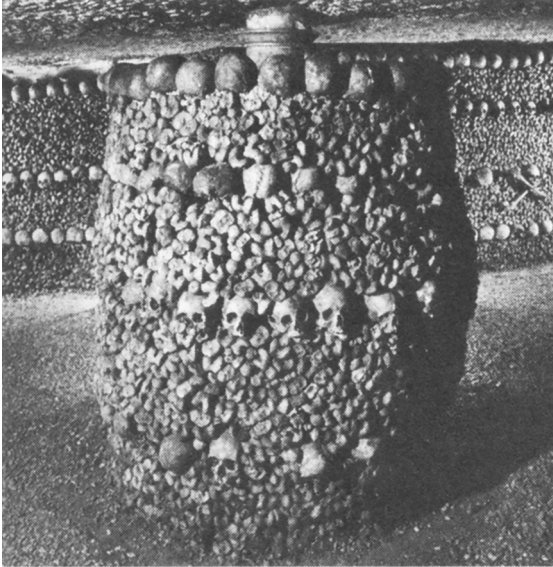
During a visit to Paris in the spring of 1968, in an antiquarian bookstore I came upon an early edition of Rousseau's *Le contrat social* with August Strindberg's signature on the cover sheet. Apparently, the book had belonged to Strindberg during his time in Paris—1895-96, the *Inferno* crisis years—and through peculiar paths it had ended up with this antiquarian. In itself it was certainly a surprising find. But imagine my astonishment when I discovered a map on a piece of folded, yellowed stationery in the book, drawn and signed by August Strindberg. My initial thought was that I should donate this remarkable find to the Royal Library in Stockholm. But as I unfolded the map, moved as I was by the higher powers, I decided to explore it myself.

The map most closely resembled a rebus with a macabre drawing of a barrel in the middle. The barrel was constructed out of hundreds of bones, kept together by a number of shoved-in skulls. Apparently the skulls were meant to represent the bands of the barrel. On the uppermost of these bands, a cross was drawn on one of the skulls. Beneath the barrel, an inscription: Swedenborg.

Naturally, I was unsure whether this was an actual map. It could just as well be a stage sketch for some play by Strindberg, previously unknown, at least to me. However, the more I studied it, the clearer it became that it was indeed a map. If I could interpret the mysterious images of the map it might lead me to a site where Strindberg had hidden something. Well, that was just a guess, of course. The map might also be a mystification by Strindberg to confuse the Strindberg scholars. Nonetheless, during my remaining time in Paris I ruminated over the map. I was unable to come to a conclusion, even after I had returned to Stockholm. After some months I gave up. I re-inserted the map into the book, which I then placed in the bookshelf.

A few years passed, and in the fall of 1972 I once again had reason to travel to Paris. I recalled the map and brought it with me, determined to solve its riddle. Now or never. On the train I was leafing through a couple of Paris guidebooks. Suddenly, in

one of them I caught a glimpse of a photograph of something I immediately recognized from Strindberg's map. It was the macabre barrel of bones and skulls. It was captioned: "The Barrel' in the Crypt of the Passion, Paris Catacombs." The photograph was identical to Strindberg's drawing. No, not quite. The cross Strindberg had drawn on the topmost skull was missing.



"The Barrel"

At that moment, someone opened the door to my compartment. It caused a draft and Strindberg's map flew out through the open window. As I arrived at Gare du Nord in Paris, I immediately took a cab to the catacombs. I arrived right before their closing. The last group of visitors had just entered. I descended through a long narrow staircase with a candle in my hand and after an hour of walking I found myself in front of "The Barrel" in the Crypt of the Passion. I swiftly peeked around to establish that I was alone. Amazed by the detachment and tranquility that filled me, I removed the skull that had been marked with an X on Strindberg's map. A rusty metal box stood in the hole left by the skull. I swiftly placed it in a bag, returned the skull, and left the

catacombs without drawing any attention to myself.

An hour later in my hotel room, I broke open the padlock to the metal box. When I opened the squeaky lid, I thought I heard a faint breath and I regretted that I... But, too late! In the box were seven phonograph rolls badly battered by cold and dampness.

I called a friend at the Phonothèque Nationale in Paris. With his help I borrowed a phonograph and rented a recording studio where we played the phonograph rolls.

On the first of the seven rolls, Strindberg is recounting his occult phonograph field recordings, made at the Hotel Orfila in March and April of 1896. He concludes by asking the person who finds them to carry out six missions. Strindberg gives these six missions the name *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

There are literary historians who claim that Strindberg's French was not the best. I can refute this claim. Strindberg spoke exceptional French. These phonograph rolls serve as testimony to that. Besides, anyone can be so convinced by listening to my tape recordings. Unfortunately, the phonograph rolls disintegrated during the transfer to tape. They self-destructed, which, all things considered, Strindberg must have intended. Strindberg's voice has acquired a slightly different timbre on the tape. But the voice heard is unmistakably his, which is sensational, to say the least. In fact, for many years now, the National Library of Sweden has sought phonograph rolls with the voice of Strindberg.