

A Classical Tragedy in the Making: Rolf Edberg's Use of Antiquity and the Emergence of Environmentalism in Scandinavia

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It is a classical tragedy, severe in its lines, implacable. Where are the Arcadian forests in which the hinds of Artemis played and Hercules fought those wild boars?

Introduction

Today, the Swedish diplomat, journalist and politician Rolf Edberg (1912–1997) is heralded as a harbinger for environmentalism in Scandinavia. His pioneering book, *On the Shred of a Cloud* from 1966, is widely acknowledged as a classic in the field of environmental literature. Less noted is the fact that his account of the unfolding ecological crisis was steeped in the classical tradition. In this essay, we seek to demonstrate that Edberg's reading of antiquity was quintessential for how he grasped the environmental problems facing modern man, and that the classical framework was of vital importance for how he structured his eco-political message.¹

Edberg's rhetoric was part of a conservationist tradition stretching back to George Perkins Marsh's seminal work *Man and Nature*, first published in 1864. Marsh's account began with the cautionary tale of the ecological crisis that preceded the fall of the Roman empire.² While scholars have acknowledged this link between the classical world and environmental politics, the link itself, however, has seldom been studied. Nevertheless, during the tumultuous years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, often dubbed 'the ecological turn', profound changes in the perception of

¹ The opening quotation is from R. Edberg, *On the Shred of a Cloud: Notes in a Travel Book*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1969, p. 133. Hereafter OSC in references to the text.

² G. P. Marsh, *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, London, 1864. See also D. Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, Seattle, 2000; J. D. Hughes, 'Preface. Beginning with Rome', *Environment and History*, 10, 2004, pp. 123–5.

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man's relationship with his natural surroundings also had repercussions for classical scholarship.³ Prominent scholars such as Clarence J. Glacken and J. Donald Hughes revisited their classical evidence from an ecocritical perspective, arguing that we had much to learn about the modern predicament from the study of ancient history.⁴ To Hughes, it seemed clear that 'the modern ecological crisis grew out of roots which lie deep in the ancient world, particularly Greece and Rome', and he emphasized that the classical past contained many examples of ancient cultures who 'depleted their environment, exhausted their resources, and exist today only as ruins within eroded and desiccated landscapes'.⁵ The demise of the classical civilizations was thereby understood as directly linked to environmental degradation. Classical history could in turn serve as a warning example. While this aspect of classical historiography is well known and still common today, less attention has been given to the public and political use of antiquity for shaping and substantiating modern environmental critique and warnings.⁶

In this essay, we explore this uncharted branch of environmental rhetoric through the pioneering work of Rolf Edberg. Beginning in the fall of 1966, he started to publically expose the environmental problems facing modern man through the lens of antiquity. We argue that the classical tradition provided a template for him to verbalize his anxiety and frustration over the dangerous situation at hand as well as form a convincing argument. To be sure, the malleability of the classical world in serving present needs has been noted by several scholars in the field of classical reception studies.⁷ Furthermore, the use of antiquity as contemporary warning is a recurrent feature in Western society from at least Edward Gibbon onwards.⁸

Paul J. Burton, who recently has drawn attention to modern political analogies comparing America to Rome, has shown that non-specialist discussions and

³ H. Nehring, 'Genealogies of the Ecological Moment. Planning, Complexity and the Emergence of "the Environment" as Politics in West Germany, 1949–1982', in *Nature's End: History and the Environment*, ed. S. Sörlin and P. Warde, Basingstoke, 2009, pp. 115–20; J. I. Engels, 'Modern Environmentalism', in *The Turning Points of Environmental History*, ed. F. Uekötter, Pittsburgh, 2010, pp. 119–20; J. Radkau, *The Age of Ecology: A Global History*, Cambridge, 2014, pp. 79–114.

⁴ C. J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Berkeley, 1967; J. D. Hughes, *Ecology in Ancient Civilizations*, Albuquerque, 1975.

⁵ Hughes, *Ecology* (n. 4 above), pp. 154–6. See also J. D. Hughes, *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans*, Baltimore and London, 1994.

⁶ See the forthcoming volume *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity: The Environmental Humanities and the Ancient World*, ed. C. Schliephake, Lanham, 2017. For recent efforts in the environmental history of Greece and Rome, see G. Shipley and J. Salmon, *Human Landscapes in Classical Antiquity: Environment and Culture*, London and New York, 1996; J. D. Hughes, *The Mediterranean: An Environmental History*, Santa Barbara, 2003; L. Thommen, *An Environmental History of Ancient Greece and Rome*, Cambridge, 2012.

⁷ C. Edwards, 'Introduction: Shadows and Fragments', in *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789–1945*, ed. C. Edwards, Cambridge, 1999, p. 3; M. Wyke and M. Bidiss, 'Introduction: Using and Abusing Antiquity', in *The Uses and Abuses of Antiquity*, ed. M. Wyke and M. Bidiss, Bern, 1999, p. 16; *Images of Rome: Perceptions of Ancient Rome in Europe and the United States in the Modern Age*, ed. R. Hingley, Portsmouth, 2001, p. 8; S. Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity*, Princeton, 2011, p. 4; M. Silk et al., *The Classical Tradition: Art, Literature, Thought*, Chichester, 2014, pp. 5–6.

⁸ See N. Morley, *Antiquity and Modernity*, Oxford, 2007, p. 127.

comparisons over time, although constantly running the risk of ‘oversimplification and distortion’, need to be studied in order to analyse how the use of antiquity influences the culture at large.⁹ With this in mind, the classical content found in *On the Shred of a Cloud* can be read as Edberg’s use of antiquity. We argue that such a reading of this book can shed new light on the role played by the classical tradition in the formation of modern environmentalist critique. Furthermore, it is our belief that the discussions in this essay can not only bring attention to the particularities of an eco-political use of antiquity, but also fuel the scholarly discussion of how the classical world and its history and literature can be made – or manipulated – to shape and substantiate contemporary arguments. Our analysis is centred on the environmentalist rhetoric in *On the Shred of a Cloud* and, in addition, to what extent this aspect of Edberg’s message found traction in the contemporary response to the book. First, however, we will summarize and situate the book’s content and its author in the historical context of Scandinavia on the verge of the ecological turn.

On the Shred of a Cloud

Rolf Edberg’s groundbreaking book drew attention to three apocalyptic threats caused by, and looming over, mankind: nuclear annihilation, overpopulation and environmental degradation. Edberg’s account interweaved learned reflections on the dire predicaments of modern man with a literary travelogue set in the Norwegian mountains and the archipelago of the west coast of Sweden. The book is centred on the description of a journey undertaken by the author and his 17-year-old son, who also functions as a symbol for the young generation whose survival was now at stake. The book was published simultaneously in Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, and was translated into English in 1969.¹⁰ Upon release, the book received considerable media attention and for that reason environmental historians have argued that Edberg’s account marked somewhat of a breakthrough for ecological ideas in Scandinavia.¹¹

⁹ P. Burton, ‘Pax Romana/Pax Americana: Perceptions of Rome in American Political Culture 2000–2010’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 18, 2011, pp. 66–104 (69–70). For the Rome-America analogy in general, see also R. Meyer, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States*, Detroit, 1984; W. Haase, ‘America and the Classical Tradition: Preface and Introduction’, in *The Classical Tradition and the Americas*, ed. W. Haase, 1994; M. Malamoud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America*, Oxford and Malden, MA, 2009; P. Burton, ‘Pax Romana/Pax Americana: Views of the “New Rome” from “Old Europe,” 2000–2010’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 20, 2013, pp. 15–40.

¹⁰ R. Edberg, *Spillran av ett moln: Anteckningar i färdaboken*, Stockholm, 1966; R. Edberg, *Fligen af en sky: Betragtninger over et ændret verdensbillede*, København, 1966; R. Edberg, *Et støvgrann som glimter*, Oslo, 1966; Edberg, *On the Shred* (n. 1 above).

¹¹ J. Anshelm, *Socialdemokraterna och miljöfrågan: En studie av framstegstankens paradoxer*, Stockholm/Stehag, 1995, p. 14; E. Friman, *No Limits: The 20th Century Discourse of Economic Growth*, Umeå, 2002, p. 139; B.-O. Linnér, *Att lära för överlevnad: Utbildningsprogrammen och miljöfrågorna 1962–2002*, Lund, 2005, p. 65; B. Berntsen, *Grønne Linjer: Natur- og miljøvernens historia i Norge*, Oslo, 2011, pp. 179–80; D. Larsson Heidenblad, ‘Ett ekologiskt genombrott? Rolf Edbergs bok och det globala krismedvetandet i Skandinavien 1966’, *Historisk tidskrift*, 94, 2016, pp. 245–66.

Edberg's book was devoted to demonstrating and explaining the urgent state of the crisis. Each of the nine chapters contained lyrical depictions of natural scenery, sharply contrasted with the grave dangers facing mankind. Cosmological and evolutionary perspectives loomed large. For instance, in the opening chapter the author deliberated upon the fact that Earth is an infinitesimal part of the universe, a small enclave of life surrounded by vast realms of death. With this cosmic gaze, Edberg emphasized the gravity of the current situation and the folly of man.¹² In the subsequent chapters, he poetically sketched the history of life on Earth, repeatedly stressing that man is but a tiny part of the web of life, yet now putting the future of life on Earth at risk. Moreover, the author's own generation had witnessed the crossing of an epochal borderline, as mankind had now acquired the means to annihilate itself.

The narrative setting of Edberg's text shows affinity to the genre of pastoral, often associated with Vergil and Theocritus. Greg Garrard has noted that ecocriticism, from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and onwards, has been shaped by the pastoral tradition, a genre that has proved 'infinitely malleable for differing political ends'.¹³ To Garrard:

Classical pastoral precedes the perception of a general crisis in human ecology by thousands of years, but it provides the pre-existing set of literary conventions and cultural assumptions that have been crucially transformed to provide a way for Europeans and Euro-Americans to construct their landscapes.¹⁴

Edberg's use of this classical genre, 'as a reflection of human predicaments', to follow Garrard, thereby becomes a multilayered form of classical reception and use. By mimicking the pastoral, and, as we will show in the following, by drawing heavily on bucolic motifs found in classical literature, he engaged in both an indirect and a direct dialogue with the past in order to come to terms with the perilous situation at hand.

However, while the classical tradition is present throughout the book, especially through poetic allusions and references, it was also deliberately brought to the fore in the chapters where Edberg discussed the unfolding ecological crisis (most notably in chapter seven). In this part of the book, Edberg made extensive use of classical history and mythology to strengthen his argument, thereby moulding his environmentalist message. It is noteworthy that this use of antiquity was not mirrored in other parts of the book, for example, when Edberg in the opening chapters pondered the threat of thermonuclear war. This suggests that Edberg found the classical tradition particularly convenient to structure and sharpen his environmentalist argumentation.

¹² For a discussion of the cosmic gaze and its Stoic implications, see D. Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*, Baltimore, 2001, pp. 27–8.

¹³ G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, London, 2012, p. 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Rolf Edberg and the Emergence of Environmentalism

Edberg's pioneering account found a ready audience far outside of his home country. When the book was first released in 1966, Edberg was the Swedish ambassador to Oslo, a position which he had held since 1956. He had previously been a member of the Swedish parliament and he had also worked as editor in chief for several social democratic newspapers. Even though Edberg lacked any formal higher education, he was extraordinarily well-read, both in the humanities and the natural sciences.¹⁵ The fact that Edberg was not an academic, however, set him apart from the growing number of concerned scientists – such as Rachel Carson, Jean Dorst and Barry Commoner – who in the 1960s began raising the alarm on environmental issues.¹⁶

The era in question saw the emergence of the modern environmental movement and witnessed the celebration of the first Earth Day.¹⁷ In the Scandinavian context that we have set out to examine, an exceptional role was held by Swedish scientist Georg Borgström. Inspired by the American conservationists William Vogt and Fairfield Osborn, he had already in the late 1940s started to warn his contemporaries of an impending global catastrophe. At the heart of Borgström's concerns lay the related issues of overpopulation and dwindling natural resources, matters that would also play a part in Edberg's influential account.¹⁸ In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there had also been intense anxieties around the threat of thermonuclear war.¹⁹ Edberg had actively taken part in this debate and been a part of the Swedish delegation to the United Nations working on the issue of disarmament.

This deep engagement in global issues is plainly visible in *On the Shred of a Cloud*. Even though the book today is best known as an environmentalist account, it is in fact just as dedicated to the threat of thermonuclear war. Moreover, Edberg was not solely focused on the future well-being of mankind. His concerned outlook was holistic and as such he saw the entire biosphere as endangered. This worldview echoed sentiments felt by other public intellectuals at the time and would in the

¹⁵ Rolf heter jag – en bok om Rolf Edberg, ed. J. Backlund, Karlstad, 2000.

¹⁶ R. Goodell, *The Visible Scientists*, Boston, 1975; L. Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, New York, 1997; M. Bess, *The Light-Green Society. Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960–2000*, Chicago, 2003; M. Egan, *Barry Commoner and the Science of Survival: The Remaking of American Environmentalism*, Cambridge, 2007.

¹⁷ J. McCormick, *Reclaiming Paradise: The Global Environmental Movement*, London, 1989; A. Jamison, R. Eyerman, J. Cramer and J. Læssøe, *The Making of the New Environmental Consciousness: A Comparative Study of the Environmental Movements in Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands*, Edinburgh, 1990; R. Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History*, New York, 2000; A. Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-in Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation*, New York, 2013.

¹⁸ B.-O. Linnér, *The Return of Malthus: Environmentalism and Post-war Population-Resource Crisis*, Isle of Harris, 2003; M. Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*, Cambridge, 2008; T. Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism*, New Brunswick, 2012; R. J. Mayhew, *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*, Cambridge, 2014.

¹⁹ P. Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, Chapel Hill, 1994; M. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age*, Berkeley, 1997; R. Jacobs, *The Dragon's Tail: Americans Face the Atomic Age*, Amherst, 2010; J. D. Hamblin, *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism*, Oxford, 2013.

upcoming years mould particular aspects of the burgeoning environmental movement.²⁰

Thus, in his book, Edberg reflected upon a wide range of global threats. However, it is his concern for environmental issues that is of particular interest from the perspective of classical reception studies. Compared to other environmentalists of the era, Edberg stands out in his insistence on the value of adopting a historical and, specifically, a classical perspective in order to frame his critique of modernity. In the Scandinavian public and political discourse of 1966 in general, and in the social democratic tradition of Sweden in particular, classical references or ancient historical comparisons were not a salient feature of political rhetoric. The long-fought battle between classical and modern education had in all three countries been settled at the beginning of the twentieth century in favour of the latter, arguably giving classically imbued rhetoric a suspect quality.²¹ Moreover, most debaters at the time primarily saw environmental hazards as local inconveniences and not as a question of global survival.²² Indeed, it was not until the 1970s that the term ‘environmental’ was habitually given a distinct global connotation.²³ Consequently, Edberg stands out both in his prolific use of antiquity and in his early adoption of a global framework. In fact, we will show that the scope of Rolf Edberg’s environmental concerns was intrinsically linked to his use of antiquity. Our empirical analysis is structured into three sections. First, we will demonstrate the range of classical references found in the book. Secondly, this will lead into a discussion of Edberg’s particular use of ancient history and literature as a way to corroborate his claims of an ongoing ecological crisis. In the third section, we turn to the contemporary reception of Edberg’s classical framework. Finally, in our conclusion we will discuss which consequences this rhetorical strategy had for Edberg’s environmentalist message and how our analysis can shed new light on the role played by the classical tradition in the formation of modern environmentalist critique.

²⁰ L. Sargent Wood, *A More Perfect Union: Holistic Worldviews and the Transformation of American Culture after World War II*, Oxford, 2010.

²¹ For Sweden, see L. Nilehn, *Nyhumanism och medborgarfostran: åsikter om läroverkets målsättning 1820–1880*, Lund, 1975; B. Lindberg, *Humanism och vetenskap*, Grillby, 1987; for Denmark, see V. Skovgaard-Petersen, *Dannelse och demokrati: Fra latin- til almenskole*, København, 1976; for Norway, see H. Dahl, *Klassisisme og realisme: den høgre skolen i Norge 1809–1869*, Oslo, 1976; A. F. Andresen, *Opplysningsidéer, nyhumanisme og nasjonalisme i Norge i de første årene etter 1814*, Oslo, 1994. Cf. C. Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, Baltimore and London, 2002; B. van Bommel, *Classical Humanism and The Challenge of Modernity: Debates on Classical Education in 19th-Century Germany*, Berlin, 2015.

²² J. Thelander and L. Lundgren, *Nedräkning pågår. Hur upptäckts miljöproblem? Vad händer sedan?*, Solna, 1989; L. Lundgren, *Acid Rain on the Agenda. A Picture of a Chain of Events in Sweden*, Lund, 1998.

²³ K. F. Hünemörder, *Die Frühgeschichte der globalen Umweltkrise und die Formierung der deutschen Umweltpolitik (1950–1973)*, Stuttgart, 2004.

Steeped in the Classical Tradition

The link to antiquity was clearly meaningful to Edberg. *On the Shred of a Cloud* contains frequent allusions to the classical world and its literature, not only in the parts where Edberg pleaded his eco-political case. There are recurring references to philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle; mentions of historical individuals such as Cicero, Caesar and Augustus; and nods to deities like Athena, Mars and Apollo that imbues the text with a learned quality. Even when attempting to create humorous effect by, for instance, comparing unearthed ‘Venus figures, round of bust and loins’ to ‘inflated sex queens of our modern dream factories’ (OSC, p. 97), Edberg effectively showed his readers his knowledge of the classical world.

The question, however, is why Edberg would have embraced such a rhetorical strategy at all. The topic itself did not automatically invite the classical angle, as several contemporary books on similar subjects bear testament to.²⁴ Nor was the Scandinavian political or literary discourse at the time characterized by a classical veneer or content. In this context, it is important to note that from Edberg’s perspective, classical adornment might have actually run the risk of not only deterring readers but also distracting them from his message. The mere fact that Edberg used antiquity to explain the modern predicament, in spite of it being an anomaly at the time, speaks to his conviction of the salience of the parallel.

The references to antiquity also had a poetic purpose and charged the text with a literary quality. Edberg himself mixed his scientific observations with more lyrically aspiring prose in which the classical tradition proved instrumental. His contemplations regarding such historical places as Troy, Carthage and the Ur of Abraham thereby infused his message with a poetic scope, suggesting that his environmentalist message was epic in proportion. Antiquity, in other words, broadened the horizon and raised the stakes to a transhistorical level.

Although Edberg’s use of antiquity was in many ways conspicuous, it was at times more subtle. A good example of this is the thematic link between modern and ancient man that the author developed through the motif of the sea in chapter seven. From a narrative backdrop of how he and his travel companion laid down to sleep in their vessel, aptly named after the Greek word for sea, *Thalatta*, Edberg recalled in a lighthearted manner, ‘the Greek sage who declared that there are three kinds of people – the living, the dead, and those who go to sea’ (OSC, p. 128). Even as he characteristically refrained from mentioning the source of the somewhat obscure quote, attributed to the sixth-century poet Anacharsis, (who in fact was Scythian in origin rather than Greek), Edberg concluded that we all belong to the third category of people and that our longing for the sea comes from the fact that we all originate from it in a biological sense. He then continued to elaborate on the theme:

So one may muse, sitting in the twilight while the *Thalatta* tugs gently at her anchor line and friendly little wavelets pat her hull. ‘*Thalatta, thalatta*’ – the sea, the sea! That was the cry of Xenophon’s beaten, thirsty, and exhausted ten

²⁴ R. Carson, *Silent Spring*, Boston, 1962; B. Commoner, *Science and Survival*, New York, 1966; H. Palmstierna, *Plundring, svält, förgiftning*, Stockholm, 1967.

thousand when they caught their first glittering glimpse of the Mediterranean over the rim of the desert. (OSC, p. 129)

Moreover, not only history but also mythology served Edberg's motives of aligning the modern and the ancient world. Remaining on the subject of the sea, Edberg reminded his reader that in Greek mythology, Prometheus not only stole the fire of the gods but also gave humans ships. With the offhanded remark, 'As Aeschylus put it', he then quoted directly from *Prometheus Bound*:

And the chariots of the sea, rushing forth
On wings of linen were shaped by me. (OSC, p. 130)

Accentuating his knowledge of Greek mythology, Edberg sent 'a grateful thought to the defiant one who was fettered by the gods' (OSC, p. 130). Neither the name of the poet Anacharsis nor the title of Aeschylus tragedy was given. While this in all likelihood is a reflection of Edberg's apprehension to appear pretentious, it had the added result of giving the quotations a poetic quality in his prose, bordering on stream of consciousness. Edberg swiftly moved between his familiarity with antiquity and his scientific knowledge, between ancient verse and quotations and his own personal contemplations. By drawing lines to the past and to the future, in the process interweaving ancient history, mythology and classical literature with his own philosophical thoughts, Edberg, however, also had his environmentalist message in mind.

Ancient History as Modern Evidence

Further examination of the role played by classical references in the text reveals that the seemingly innocuous personal musing of modern man's kinship with the seafaring Greeks discussed in the previous section also had a more profound bearing for Edberg's argument concerning the need for societal change. In fact, the book's main line of ecological reasoning was developed in direct reference to the classical world and its literature. By observing the ruined landscapes all around us and comparing these observations with depictions of nature found in ancient literature, Edberg claimed to have found tangible evidence of the ongoing environmental crisis – a classical tragedy in the making (OSC, p. 131).

Ancient history, Edberg argued, shows in no uncertain terms the destructive path that man has taken. But clay tablets and parchment scrolls only contain mere glimpses of man's history:

Real history is written in the ground: in the marshes where Babylon once dazzled with its splendor, in the sand dunes now covering the palaces and brothels of Carthage, in fleeced hillsides that once carried hanging gardens, in muck-filled rivers and emptied lakes. The mightiest ruins on man's road are not those we meet on the Acropolis or the Roman Forum. They are ruined landscapes. (OSC, p. 131)

Edberg's critique of modern society can be said to centre on the lack of balance between man and his natural surroundings. The deforestation and subsequent erosion of the topsoil in ancient Greece provided him with an instructive case in point. Specifically, the topic of deforestation has found traction among classical scholars with an ecocritical perspective. Like Edberg, scholars have based much of the arguments on literary accounts, such as Plato's *Critias* and Theophrastus's *Historia Plantarum*.²⁵ This in turn has prompted scholars like Oliver Rackham to point out that such written accounts of deforestation cannot be taken at face value, insisting that the written evidence of the period is piecemeal and unevenly distributed.²⁶ In the public sphere, however, such parallels were none the less valuable. To this effect, Edberg solicited the most revered of classical literature. As the author's mind once again turned to ancient Greece and to 'the island of islands, Ithaca, "the far visible one"' (OSC, p. 132), Edberg reminded the reader of how the *Odyssey* speaks of the lush pastures of Ithaca, well suited for goats and cows. Quoting from the *Odyssey*, but without providing any references, he focused on Homer's mention of 'all kind of forests' and 'never-dying brooks' (OSC, p. 132). The depictions of nature found in Homer, then, proved to Edberg that the Greek archipelago was once characterized by its rich natural surroundings. Turning his eye towards the same area today led him to an alarming conclusion:

Today the home island of the wily goat king-turned-seafarer is a rock-filled desert with bare hills and desiccated fields, furrowed by brooks gone dry. Ulysses yearned for home; the Ithacans of today would like nothing better than to emigrate from their used up land. (OSC, p. 133)

Edberg's reading was selective, if not deceptive, since Ithaca is repeatedly described as 'rocky' (*kranaē*) in both the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*.²⁷ Nevertheless, the claim served Edberg's purpose. While modern man, then, through the poems of Homer (Edberg also mentioned Pindar), still can get a sense of the 'original beauty' of the classical world, he can just as easily observe that same area today and deduce man's historical destruction of his own surroundings. This method of deduction, what Hughes has referred to as 'intuitive judgements' worthy of investigation, was central to the arguments of earlier accounts of the connection between the ancient world and conservationist concerns as well, such as that of George Perkins Marsh.²⁸ In Homer's Ithaca, Edberg claimed to see a pattern repeated in the classical archipelago in its entirety, since sailing the same waters today, one would find nothing but a plundered and abandoned world. Islands that Homer described as

²⁵ D. Hillel, *Out of the Earth: Civilization and the Life of Soil*, New York, 1991; M. Williams, *Deforesting the Earth: From Prehistory to Global Crisis*, Chicago, 2003; T. Kwiatkowska and A. Holland, 'Dark is the World to Thee: A Historical Perspective on Environmental Forewarnings', *Environment and History*, 16, 2010.

²⁶ O. Rackham, 'Ecology and Pseudo-ecology', in *Human Landscapes in Classical Antiquity. Environment and Culture*, ed. G. Shipley and J. Salmon, London, 1996. See also R. Salares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World*, Ithaca, 1991.

²⁷ See *Iliad* III.201 and *Odyssey* I.247, XV.510, XVI.124, XXI.346.

²⁸ Hughes, *Pan's Travail* (n. 5 above), p. 2.

fertile and beautiful were now sterile landscapes and deserts. For Edberg, the evidence resided in history and in classical literature.

To further substantiate his claim, Edberg summoned Plato who was said to have observed the catastrophe already in his own day. Edberg quoted the philosopher, again with no detailed reference, as saying that ‘the rich and soft soil has run off and only the emaciated skeleton of the country remains’ (OSC, p. 133). The ruin of the topsoil, in turn, was put forward as the primary cause of ‘the decline and fall of Greek culture’ (OSC, p. 134). The Greeks thereby themselves destroyed the foundation of their own existence, yet Edberg sees this as nothing unique in the history of man. Rather, Greece was part of a pattern. It was merely an echo of the earliest civilizations, the Sumerians, the Assyrians and the Babylonians. ‘Over the Ur of Abraham and joyful Nineveh now lies an arid desert’ (OSC, p. 134). Around Nebuchadnezzar’s capital were now marshlands as a result of intense irrigation which had made the earth too salty. The fate of the world’s history was to Edberg profoundly connected to these circumstances:

One of the little ironies of history is mirrored in these swamps. Alexander the Great, driven by the population pressures of his homeland into warlike adventures and the founding of a brief world hegemony, conquers mighty Babylon but is himself laid low by the new, the *real* masters of the region – a little malaria mosquito accomplishes what all the arrows of the Persians failed to do. (OSC, p. 134)

At this point, we may take note of the way Edberg continuously used assertive historical causation to substantiate his broader argument. As a case in point, Edberg stressed that overpopulation was the certain reason why the Greeks turned from goat-herding to sea-explorers even in Homeric times. Overpopulation was, from Edberg’s perspective, also the unquestionable reason for Alexander’s conquests, just as his death was an undisputed result of the irresponsible irrigation of the areas around Babylon. In other words, ancient history was in a very clear way made to serve the present.

The inescapable pattern of the destruction of man’s own natural surroundings was further developed in detail. This classical ‘drama’, as Edberg called it, had been repeated again and again ‘in brutal monotony.’ The Romans merely reprised this Greek drama ‘on a Caesarian scale’ (OSC, p. 135). Step by step, the unfaltering causation of historical developments gave proof to Edberg’s claims:

The soil being drained in the campagna, the fields pressed on to the steep slopes of the Apennines, where the earth, laid bare, was washed into the valleys, muddying rivers [...] Soon Rome was forced to burst its borders; a power no longer able to sustain itself on bread and circuses had to admit that it was more needful to navigate than to live, and increasingly, bread-grains, olives, and wines were imported from beyond the water. [...] Sicily having been thoroughly sapped, North Africa became the new great granary and a cornerstone of the world empire. And so Phoenician Carthage had to be destroyed to make room for the plows and triumphal arches of the Romans. (OSC, p. 135)

While Edberg's use of history was indeed assertive, he did not adhere to traditional historical views. Rather he opposed them. Historians emphasize the sack of Rome by Alaric and his goths because, Edberg suggested, 'armed men pounding on the gates of the world empire have a greater dramatic appeal than shepherds and peasants leaving eroded soil behind them.' But what he called the epitaph of the Roman Empire was in reality written in the landscape of the Mediterranean. One had only to look at the land to realize the destruction (OSC, p. 136).

Rounding out his classical exposé, the author lamented the destruction of the Mediterranean world. Since its history is of such fundamental value to Western Civilization and its ideas, the fate of the region became all the more painful. Yet, he holds what happened to Greece and Rome was still taking place on a 'global scale':

The fate of Ithaca, of the archipelago, of the world of classical culture, is about to become that of the whole world. (OSC, p. 136)

With this rhetorical crescendo, the classical past became a direct warning to the present. But Edberg's warning was not, as shown, based on a simplistic analogy. To him, ancient history, mythology and classical literature together proved a pattern to which modern man had to respond.

Classical Arguments and Contemporary Reception

The release of *On the Shred of a Cloud* in the fall of 1966 was met with general and enduring interest. The book was reviewed in all the major, and several minor, newspapers in Sweden and Norway, and was also, albeit more sparsely, well received in Denmark and Finland. Hence, Rolf Edberg's dire warnings and apocalyptic message were repeated and emphasized throughout the public spheres of the Nordic countries. But what did the contemporary critics make of the author's use of antiquity? And did Rolf Edberg himself, after the release of the book, continue to put forth his environmentalist message in a classical frame?

An overview of book reviews makes it evident that while some commentators acknowledged and reiterated the book's classical references and use of antiquity, a great many failed to comment on this part of Edberg's message. Many commentators focused solely on the threat of thermonuclear war, thereby failing to echo Edberg's classical framework. This, of course, is noteworthy in itself, as the link with antiquity undeniably formed a major theme in the text and references to places and people of the classical world were frequent. However, among those critics that did pick up on Edberg's classical viewpoint, there were certain themes that apparently struck a chord. Chief among these was the notion that human history was written in the ground. Several commentators affirmed – or quoted directly – Edberg's observation that the mightiest ruins on man's road were not those we meet on the Acropolis or the Roman Forum – but the ruined landscapes left behind by ancient civilizations.²⁹

²⁹ R. Numelin, 'Världen och människan i nuet', *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 4/9, 1966; O. Nordrå, 'Under kannibalenes sol', *Morgenbladet*, 15/9, 1966; O. Hølaas, 'Visdommens og dårskapens verden', *Aktuell*,

Another theme that reverberated in the public sphere was the contrast between Homeric Greece and its modern counterpart. One Danish newspaper even published a photograph of a barren landscape with the following caption: ‘Greek infertility – but in Homer’s days Greece was lush and fertile’.³⁰ The comparison was apparently seen as valid proof. The dangers of deforestation and erosion were repeatedly emphasized and modern Greece got to serve as a warning example. Following Edberg, several reviewers stated that only two percent of the original topsoil of Greece remained.³¹ More explicitly, one newspaper emphasized that the destiny of Ithaca could become the fate of man if current trends were not hampered.³² Even though one reviewer called for any kind of reflection ‘that hasn’t been put through the rhetorical meat grinder’, and some complained of his poetic prose, Edberg’s depiction of the environmental crisis as a classical drama on the verge of being repeated found traction among reviewers.³³ More importantly, the relevance of this way of using classical history as a departure for a modern discussion of topsoil and overpopulation, albeit ignored by many reviews overall, was not in itself put into question.

For the ambassador himself, *On the Shred of a Cloud* opened up new venues. Edberg was invited to compose essays and publish extractions of his work in newspapers, journals and magazines. One striking feature of the abbreviated expositions is that Edberg in these instances consistently chose to focus on the environmentalist message and, in addition, persisted in framing his argument with the aid of antiquity. For him, the central argument of the book was clearly not the threat of thermonuclear war, but the classical tragedy in the making. For instance, in the Norwegian newspaper *Arbeiderbladet*, Edberg began his first article in a three-part series, by reiterating that in Greece we can follow the pattern of a classical tragedy of fate, infallible in its consequences. This once paradisiacal region, Edberg stressed, was particularly vulnerable to deforestation. The devastation was so severe that already Plato reflected upon it.³⁴

The classical argument also took centre stage in an extensive interview from the spring of 1967 conducted by the first full-time environmental journalist in Sweden, Barbro Soller. This interview was published in Sweden’s largest and most prestigious newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, and was also translated to Norwegian and published in *Dagbladet*. Here Edberg once again underscored that the fall of the Greek and Roman civilizations began with environmental destruction. He

Footnote 29 continued

7/1, 1967; A. Gottschalk Rasmussen, ‘På fjeldet med bekymringer’, *Fyns tidende*, 24/9, 1966, S. Fagerberg, ‘Efter oss ökenvinden’, *Dagens Nyheter*, 4/9, 1966; H. W:son Ahlmann, ‘Människan på jorden’, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 4/9, 1966; S. Rinman, ‘Godnatt jord?’, *Göteborgs- Handels och Sjöfartstidning*, 17/12, 1966.

³⁰ O. Hyltoft Petersen, ‘Vi plyndrer vores hjem’, *Aktuelt*, 13/9, 1966.

³¹ Fagerberg, ‘Efter’ (n. 27 above); H. Peterson, ‘Vår svåra framtid’, *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, 5/9, 1966; E. Ericson, ‘Jordens och människans öde’, *Karlskoga tidning*, 25/10, 1966; A. Hauge, ‘Hvor ille har vi ikke røktet vår gode jord?’, *Stavanger Aftenblad*, 1/10, 1960.

³² S. Rosen, ‘Fjälltur med mörka framtidsperspektiv’, *Hallandsposten*, 5/9, 1966.

³³ L. Gustafsson, ‘Hur skall vi rädda livet?’, *Expressen*, 7/9, 1966.

³⁴ R. Edberg, ‘Jordens resurser och den tekniska människan’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 31/1, 1967.

emphasized that the classical pattern had been repeating itself throughout history and had now taken on global proportions. The writing was not on the wall – it was written in the ground.³⁵

Conclusions

Rolf Edberg's environmentalist message of the mid-1960s was, as our analysis has demonstrated, both implicitly and explicitly steeped in the classical tradition. In this, he was part of an intellectual lineage stretching back to George Perkins Marsh in the nineteenth century. However, during the eventful years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when modern environmentalism emerged at the global stage, this rhetorical use of antiquity was not incessantly employed. Rather, the *lingua franca* of this era was modern science and its ecological arguments, population charts, advanced simulations and meticulous calculations. Rolf Edberg himself was no stranger to this scientific branch of environmentalist rhetoric.

Moreover, the modernistic and social democratic Scandinavia of the mid-1960s was by most accounts conceived of as a place and culture firmly situated outside of the classical tradition. The political discourse was first and foremost oriented to the future and towards sustained material progress. The past in general, and the distant past in particular, was rarely employed to launch new ideas or draw attention to pressing needs. However, it is evident that Edberg's environmentalist message was intrinsically linked to his reading of antiquity. In our conclusion, we will therefore highlight four aspects of how this rhetorical strategy shaped his environmentalist message.

Firstly, the classical tradition provided Edberg with the means to demonstrate that the newly discovered ecological crisis was not without precedents. On the contrary, the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome had previously fallen victim to the unwitting destruction of their own environment. Hence, classical history provided a cautionary example for modern man. Secondly, he used the classical tradition to draw attention to directly observable consequences of environmental decay. Edberg's depiction of the unfolding environmental crisis did not rest on visions of the future. Rather, he invited his readers to compare the ruined landscapes of modern Greece with Homeric accounts of lush and fertile counterparts. In this didactic way, Edberg used the classical tradition to make the consequences of environmental degradation more tangible for his readers. Thirdly, Edberg's knowledge of the classical tradition gave his account an extended scope. The ambassador's environmentalist message had no chronological or spatial boundaries. His focal point was the whole of humanity, even life on Earth itself. To corroborate this, he drew upon the classical tradition in a way which presupposed a unity between past, present and future. In other parts of the book, he employed cosmology and evolutionary history to similar means, but for his environmentalist message classical history and literature was his main argument for transhistorical alignment.

³⁵ B. Soller, 'Vi plundrar våra barns jord', *Dagens Nyheter*, 12/4, 1967; B. Soller, 'Vi plyndrer våre barns jord', *Dagbladet*, 22/4, 1967.

Fourthly, the classical tradition was used to emphasize that the dire predicament was a crisis of civilization. By invoking the fall of ancient Greece and Rome, Edberg's environmentalist critique got directed towards modern civilization at large. He did not criticize certain individuals, groups or activities – rather he saw ancient civilizations, and by analogy its modern counterpart, as structurally responsible in its entirety. This framing led Edberg to propose an all-encompassing, albeit vague, solution to the environmental crisis: a radically altered worldview that could form the basis of a new global civilization.

In sum, these four aspects underscore that the groundbreaking eco-political message of Rolf Edberg was inseparable from his reading of the classical tradition. Moreover, our analysis of the contemporary reception demonstrates that his rhetorical strategy found traction in the public spheres of Scandinavia. Edberg's persistent employment of the classical evidence in interviews and abbreviated opinion pieces further accentuate the importance of the classical tradition for the framing of his environmentalist message. Thereby, our essay makes evident that by adopting perspectives from classical reception studies, we can gain new insights into the emergence of modern environmentalism, as well as demonstrating the persistent relevance of the classical tradition in modern history.

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