

THE WOMEN FROM ALAPSUR IN GÖRAN TUNSTRÖM'S TRAVEL MEMOIR: THE DYNAMICS OF A REVERSED ALTERITY TECHNIQUE

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Abstract

Part of a larger project interrogating the strategies of different 20th century Scandinavian writers of reaching themselves by exploring anthropologic and geographic alterity during their travels, my article looks into the way that Göran Tunström's Indian explorations, evoked in his travelogue "*India – a winter journey*"², function as a catalyst of his personal destiny, reverberating in a singular form of artistic assumption. His inspiring explorations, at the same time geographical and interior, can even invite a phenomenological approach to alterity awareness, in which the portrait of the women from Alapsur plays an interesting role in reversing the functions of exotism and otherness.

Keywords: introspection, intertextuality, alterity, travelogue, India

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1. Introduction

A book in which the theme of the rapport between alterity and the conscience of the travelling author constitutes a subject of reflection in itself, *India – a winter journey*, is a post-modern travelogue published in 1984 by the Swedish author Göran Tunström. A prominent name of the second half of the 20th century in Swedish literature, Göran Tunström is not the kind of writer primarily associated with travel literature, although geographic explorations are granted a crucial role in his quest for understanding the world. In the way he approaches travelling, one can notice the meeting of alterity recorded as a strategy of reflecting upon his identity as a writer and as an inhabitant of a world he is gradually internalizing: "In Greece I met women, in South America starving children, in India a naked life and in Australia flies. When I came to China, I finally thought: I don't have the strength to take responsibility for this new country within me."³

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² The Swedish original title is *Indien – en vinterresa*. The book has not been translated into English yet; all translations in the present article are mine.

³ My translation. Original in Swedish retrieved from <https://www.varmlandslitteratur.se/Tunstrom.Goran.htm>

In *India – a winter journey*, the substance of his three journeys to India and Nepal, in the company of his wife, the painter Lena Cronquist, and their son, constitutes the material of a book in which intertextuality - the relation with the religious, mythical, and literary worlds of the other, along with the dialogue with himself as a writer, doubled by permanent meditation upon his artistic call, allow for the formulation of a real phenomenology of *self-displacement*⁴, a concept I have formulated and used for referring to 20th century travelling writers whose works witness a certain awareness about their travelling to meet otherness as an existential strategy, a life scheme or a master plan of staying alive⁵. Self-displaced writers are “those whose effort of exploring other and most of the time, though not necessarily, far-away cultures, reaches an existential dimension by its entire focus being laid on the meeting of alterity” (Boboc, 2022: 368). Among these, Göran Tunström has written a singular book in which the theme of the report between alterity and identity in the conscience of the travelling writer constitutes a subject of reflection in itself.

2. Methodology. Introspection and intersubjectivity

Against this background, my analysis addresses the way in which, while travelling, Göran Tunström reveals, through introspection and intersubjectivity, his interior growth as a result of his communication with alterity. Among many such instances, the author evokes the women from Alapsur by using an original literary technique.

This will be revealed by applying both close and distant reading to a number of fragments selected as introspectively recording the meeting of the other. Introspection seems however to be the main instrument the Swedish writer is making use of in his unusual travelogue. With Tunström, even adventure starts by introspection, in an attempt to offer a possible explanation of his impulse to travel while at the same time celebrating it:

In every human being there is an opening towards a personal adventure, if we call adventure that which deviates from the daily beaten path, and it is only in front of this opening that a human being becomes aware of his closeness to his fellow beings” (Tunström, 1984: 11).

The travelling writer’s daily beaten path is the sum of all the paths and alleys of the Koster island, where he has been living for seventeen years and where he is roaming around accompanied by all the voices, movements and days of the past inside, as we all do, for “otherwise we would not be able to survive” (ibid). But what emerges, though, through this appeal to the past, as a feeling of self-conscious belonging, will

⁴ Which is however in no way related to the *self-displacement* concept used in psychology, pertaining to psychological alienation and the death of the self.

⁵ Among which Sven Hedin, Karen Blixen and Axel Munthe, in articles I have recently published.

be revealed, paradoxically, foreshadowed by alienation and estrangement: “I am roaming around with the memory of the books I was reading on these cliffs (...) through this landscape so foreign for me” (ibid).

Koster island is, for Göran Tunström, not the *home* where he was born or where he lived during the very first years of life, but a later adopted *home*, where the memory of the first living years is marked by estrangement and a feeling of not belonging. Being a native of a place and a non-native of another are for the Swedish writer feelings intertextually introspected. His reference is Karen Blixen’s African world, where the natives’ territories mean at the same time their past and their way of belonging to the world. Nevertheless, Tunström is a born traveller and has his share of the nomads’ constant need of new landscapes to be taken as reference points in their future contemplation of the temporary home landscape: “now I know this landscape. It told me what it had to tell. In order to have the power to see it and distinguish it more clearly, I have to see something else. When you express such things in a loud voice to the one you share your life with, your words sound like this: I think this winter we are leaving” (ibid, 21).

Reflection accompanies, in Tunström’s writing, both his getting out of the Nordic home space and the start of the Indian journey; it is as if reflection upon the habit of sketching notes, drawing and riding a bicycle, the three instruments making possible the meeting of alterity had to precede any form of immersion and the very contact with *the other*. Two art forms and a means of transportation – his writing, his wife’s drawing and their bicycles – are the tools under which a new landscape, with all its components and the movements gradually giving it life is little by little revealed to the eye: “You have time to see. The bicycle and the sketchbook do good to the soul. You stand on the side of the road and see India marching in front of you” (ibid, 28).

The journey through Punjab villages starts on bicycles. Göran is writing, his wife Lena is drawing. They are creating sketches of portraits and landscapes at the same time, accompanying each other in deciphering the rhythms of an everyday existence whose incredible novelty can only be experienced with an upsurge of intensity, as “it is only with love and hatred one can describe an Indian day, never with indifference” (ibid, 62).

3. Communication with alterity

There seem to be four elements of alterity triggering the travelling writer’s creative power and releasing his artist identity awareness through inner dialogue and introspection: the human store with all its new faces, the landscape with its doses of complexity and frankness, or simplicity, and of live presence, the author’s own dreams – unsettling and activating a whole collection of connections extending over time and geography, and the daily street rituals in which he finds himself included.

Understanding that he cannot describe the human being in himself or herself, since “we are relations, we are the play between us” (ibid, 227), the travelling writer is gradually crossing India from Punjab to Nepal and from Nepal to the South never tired of immersing himself in spontaneous interactions with the locals while at the same time permanently conversating with himself; and he is using this as a permanent identity awareness exercise, in the same way as he goes in for listening to the Christmas Oratorio together with all the British ambassador’s guests huddled together against the backdrop of the Himalaya mountains. Having become a part of this “western unit in the foreign immensity, I see them let themselves be reminded of their identity. Which is necessary for them to be able to move on” (ibid, 120).

Faced with the flow of endless crowds of new faces passing by them, the Swedish travellers need to write them down in order to be able to see their own feelings, and need to fix the faces on paper so that they can hear them talking. They often find themselves patiently waiting for a new point in time when they can remain in the human store of faces a longer period; missing a train or breaking a leg - everything can become a good occasion for the Swedes to stay in different poor and forgotten villages for days and weeks on end. Among these, Alapsur in Punjab is the only place where their very mirroring in the inhabitants’ eyes receives a concrete name: *sadhu*.

We are probably not maharaja but sadhus, holy people. Nobody has ever before seen a white person here in Alapsur. The women here have never been to a town, they don’t know what a newspaper is, they never heard about Indira Gandhi, or Mahatma Gandhi, they don’t live in India, but in Alapsur.

When I, leaning on Rhandarva and Hardy, limp through the village street together with Lena and Linus, women seep out of their huts and fall to their knees, they kiss Lena’s feet, they touch us, finger us, to see if we are real. If Linus’ blonde hair is real. And they ask to be drawn. A sadhu does not need to live in a specific place. A sadhu is someone who has had contact with the unknown. We are coming from the unknown. (ibid, 232)

Sadhu – the holy person epitomizing, in Hindu tradition, the function of the ascetic assuming the role of the intermediary mediating between the human community and the unknown – is a status attributed to the three Swedes not on account of their following a spiritual discipline, but by virtue of their association with the unknown they were coming from, and this unexpected investment is achieved by the overlapping of two categories: geography and metaphysics. This role inversion, the revelation of a different mentality gradually being decoded through the ritual gestures of the natives in relation to the foreign travellers is both surprising and surprisingly efficient. Its dynamics relies heavily on a mirroring scheme and on reversing the categories of the unknown and known, of the other and the familiar, which proves an ingeniously convincing literary technique when it comes to approaching alterity.

When Lena makes drawings of them, she actually “sees” them. She puts down their faces on paper and the paper will reach further out into the world, away in the unknown. This way, she enhances their existence. I think it is this their veneration is all about. And they never beg for the drawings, just let them circulate between them, they smile and point with their fingers, they recognize and thank for the attention they have been given. (ibid)

The group portrait gains even more weight by the use of the complementary instrument of documentation: Lena's sketching. Again, Lena's gesture of drawing individual portraits of the group members functions as a mirror, this time reflecting the moment of the others' becoming self-aware. Mirroring themselves in the eyes of the Swedish travellers, who are for them symbols of the unknown, qualifying as sadhus, the women from Alapsur have the twofold benefit of being offered an image of themselves while at the same time accessing communication channels able to enhance their existence and place it in a direct relation with the unknown.

Besides, the fact that in the sadhu figure, the meeting of otherness is recorded in a self-mirroring fashion adds an extra touch of authenticity to the feminine group portrait from the village of Alapsur. As usual in Tunström's travelogue, a group portrait precedes an individual one. And the group portrait always bears the sign of a more incomprehensible alterity, or of exotism, as compared to the sketches of individual portraits. Especially the feminine group portraits are usually more mysterious, harder to decipher, sometimes even gaining mystical nuances. Individually, the characters partially lose some of the incomprehensible air, their exotism being slightly converted into stereotypes, as is the case of the Naxalite student of political science the Swedish travellers meet on a train, and whose portrait gradually turns into a collection of stereotypical features.

This is however hiding a feature seemingly recurrent for Tunström when it comes to sketching observational portraits: a rather subversive quality. But while some of these sketches end up as small caricatures, as the secretary from Bundala or the swindler driver from Rajahstan, others develop into small psychological portraits whenever there is more dwelling on their dialogue with the Swedish travellers. Through this dialogue, an essential characteristic of the sketched character is revealed, placing her or him in a relation of tension with the background they are coming from. Sometimes, this tension may even be due to a communication problem, because in Indian trains or villages, the English language can bring people together just as easily as it can separate them, making communication possible or hindering it.

Geographic exotism is placed under the same paradoxical sign. Alapsur, on a first note, is indeed a very offering place, offering Tunström “the landscape he was searching for and the atmosphere of complexity and immediateness he needed” (Hammar, 1999: 308). But otherwise, albeit crossing an exotic landscape, with

desert, rice fields and sugar cane plantations, or the Himalaya mountains, there is hardly any trace of exotism in the way this landscape is decoded and introduced by the Scandinavian travelling writer. The discussion rather evolves around a couple of symbolic elements carefully picked, among which the bicycle, as the means of transportation able to offer the ideal rhythm of accessing the other's space, the temple, as an instance of religious and cultural alterity expressed in architecture, or the peacock, the bird which, although a token of Indian national identity, is hunted for dinner. Read and interpreted in symbolic key, all these serve, similarly with the dreams, to the theme or the interplay between alterity and identity, which could almost be seen as a hidden theme of the book insofar as the journey is permanently recorded in terms of progressive discovery generating inner change.

Göran Tunström's reflective prose raises deep questions about the influence that travelling has upon himself; many introspective fragments discuss the psychological and mental processes triggered by a journey. Between the paradoxical estrangement at home, on the Koster island, and his regeneration through travelling, the identity of the author-traveller-character is built along the text reflecting the steps of Paul Ricoeur's theory about narrative identity.

In his book *Anrop och ansvar. Berättarkonst och etik hos Lars Ahlin, Göran Tunström, Birgitta Trotzig, Torgny Lindgren*⁶(2002), literary critic Anders Tyrberg dedicates a few pages to analysing how the character's identity is built in a few of Göran Tunström's novels. The conclusion is that "it is narratively determined because it is created by the narration process. It is relationally determined because it depends on the surrounding context" (Tyrberg, 2002: 54). This perspective upon identity as being narratively determined and placed in a mutual relation with the others' identity, which in its turn is created narratively has been expressed and reflected upon by a number of thinkers and philosophers of anti-Cartesian tradition, starting with Martin Buber and continuing with the phenomenologists Emanuel Levinas, Gabriel Marcel and Paul Ricoeur. Among them, Paul Ricoeur (1990) is especially relevant insofar he dialectically links the self to otherness when discussing his concept of *narrative identity* developed in his book *Soi-même comme un autre*, stressing upon the relational character of identity - which was missing from Antiquity's definition of substance.

From my point of view, Tyrberg's argument about the characters' identity can easily be extended to Göran Tunström's travel memoir. To sum it up, a person has no direct access to his own identity, but is forced to touch it indirectly, through communication with others. The dynamic dimension of a story can function as a model for an identity reuniting change and constancy. A subject has only indirect access to oneself but by connecting different happenings and life fragments can build what Ricoeur is calling

⁶ *Call and Responsibility. Narrative Art and Ethics with Lars Ahlin, Göran Tunström, Birgitta Trotzig, Torgny Lindgren* (my translation).

narrative identity. This supposes, no doubt, a hermeneutic effort, because “la compréhension de soi est une interprétation; l’interprétation de soi, à son tour, trouve dans le récit, parmi d’autres signes et symboles, une médiation privilégiée...” (Ricoeur, 1990: 138). So this hermeneutics of the self cannot take place in isolation; identity can only be built by communication with others. The question about identity is essentially a question about the stories in which the subject is implied and plays a role. Thus, our identity is narratively determined and can only be conceived of in a communicative context.

In Tunström’s travel memoir there are many instances supporting this perspective on identity as impossible to be built in isolation, as it can only be formed by relation with others. As an echo of Ricoeur’s thoughts, which were to be published some years later, the travelling writer of the Indian winter diary published by Tunström in 1984 writes about his return to Koster island after the third winter spent in India by commenting a quote from Mircea Eliade’s *Myth of the Eternal Return*: “But who is returning! What is it from me which is returning, what is it from me which has been lost and will never be able to feel the chilling fingers of the wind on my face. The expelled cells which have entered the soil of India” (Tunström, 1984: 259, 260).

The identity building dialogue will soon be resumed at Surjeet’s visit to Sweden and it will be carried on in the same two terms of change and constancy, between two persons who are the same old friends and at the same time forever others, renewed by the dialogue between them and between them and the world:

He is the one who gave us that India which is now a large part of our memories and experiences, in other words: a part of our selves, if the ego is the sum of our experiences. It is due to him that the sugar cane will always ring in us in the light of the dawn and of the evening. Thanks to him, the fire of our desert village burns every night under the roasted peacock. And maybe it’s a wrong India, because what I saw was a fighting India, an India with a future. (Tunström, 1984: 261)

4. Conclusion

The image of a traveller continuously renewed by the dialogue with the other is endorsed here by a phenomenological interpretation of a subject forever changing by the experience of and while experiencing the world. Among travel memoirs inviting studies on the representations and strategies of constructing alterity in the approach to cultural landscape with 20th century Scandinavian writers of travel literature, Göran Tunström’s travelogue is a very particular one, allowing for a real hermeneutics of otherness. A postmodern travelogue, deconstructing stereotypes about India, it documents alterity in a unique intertextual manner, accompanying it with introspection and meditation upon the artistic call enhanced by the crossing of

the other's universe and reflection upon the relation between otherness and identity in the consciousness of the self-displaced writer.

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