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'A Window on the World'

Introduction

As European cultural capital in 2014, Umeå wants to present itself as 'a window on the world', as the programmatic Umeå2014-internetsite states. The ambition is not only to make the city and its cultural life better known in Europe, but also to show Umeå as the centre of a large, culturally creative and innovative Northern Swedish region. Among the lively cultural activities taking place in and around Umeå today and in the past—from food to fashion, from films to folklore, from fairy-tales to football—literature, as one of the very old, established and transnationally known forms of cultural expression, still plays a very important role, even in today's multi-media-world. The town of Umeå and the Northern Swedish provinces of Västerbotten and Norrbotten have produced many writers, who have placed the region on the literary map of Sweden and indeed, of Scandinavia. Authors as different as Eyvind Johnson, Gustav Hedenvind-Eriksson, Hilja Byström, Sara Lidman, Peter Englund, Gunnar Kieri, Olof Hederyd, Bengt Pohjanen, Bernhard Nordh, Torgny Lindgren, Stig Larsson, Frida Åslund, Göran Burén, Per Olof Enquist, Göran Lundin, Niclas Lundkvist, Mikael Niemi, Kerstin Ekman, Roger Fjellström, to name but a few, were either born in the area and/or worked for a large part of their lives in Umeå or the surrounding northern provinces. Even though some of them certainly are more widely known and read than others, all have—among many other aims and interests—drawn upon their experiences of the life and the people of the provinces of Northern Norrland, to describe traditions

and developments, or to depict the specific nature of the Northern North. Some of them have even acted as spokeswomen and -men of a specific Norrland-agenda.

The aim of this volume is to take a fresh look at the six internationally best-known of these Norrland-authors. The writers chosen represent different generations, genres, interests and sexes; they range from the Nobel-prize winner Eyvind Johnson (1900–1976), who was born in Svartbjörnsbyn/Överluleå, as the oldest, to the topical bestseller-author Mikael Niemi (*1959) from Pajala, whose sudden international popularity following his novel *Populärmusik från Vittula* was even superseded by the film-version (2004). They include Sara Lidman (1923–2004), the great spokeswoman for the people of rural Västerbotten, exemplified by the traditions and rapid changes of her home-village Missenträsk, and Kerstin Ekman (*1933), who was not born in Norrland, but lived in rural Jämtland and by highlighting the Northern Swedish landscape became an ambassador of an ecological understanding of nature. The two established Västerbotten-authors P.O. Enquist (*1934) (from Hjoggböle) and Torgny Lindgren (*1938) (from Raggsjö) are both nationally and internationally renowned and have been translated into a number of languages, thereby also transporting their Norrland-impressions into the world.

But the fact that they all can be identified with a place, a town or a province, does not mean that their works are restricted to regionalism or that the region in question is homogeneous, unchangeable, always the same (the contribution on Eyvind Johnson in this volume makes that especially clear). The literary representations of the Nordic North offer a varied picture, a generic and thematic plethora of impressions, some familiar and reassuring, some new and unsettling, even to a reader familiar with the region. Literature as a medium in general contributes to some form of border-crossing—thematically by depicting new insights and provoking new thoughts, linguistically by challenging our every-day use of language, and temporally by invoking memories, blending present and past or transgressing time-zones. And while its spatial construction highlights the Nordic North, it thereby implicitly challenges the (still dominant) national paradigm of literature and puts well-known dichotomies between centre and periphery to the test. In a globalised world, stress on the local is an important strategy for addressing lack of transparency, all-encompassing mobility and ever-increasing speed.

Their works are in the following explicitly addressed from a European and world-literary perspective. Some 200 years after the term was coined, world literature has again been put onto the academic agenda of literary studies (cf. e.g. Casanova 1999; Moretti 2000; Damrosch 2003; Prendergast

2004). It is not understood as a qualitative term denoting canonisation or distinction, but as a term that attempts to do justice to the rapidly expanding world-wide literary market, to the enhanced medial distribution and the geographical as well as typological diversification of texts. In accepting the heterogeneity of the literatures of the world and refusing to exclude any, it negates clear-cut dichotomies of important and unimportant, high and low, central and marginal. Literature is a global medium: international trade, translations and internet-presence help its world-wide circulation, but, as David Damrosch argues, “even a genuinely global perspective remains a perspective *from somewhere*” (Damrosch 2003: 27; italics in the original).

This ‘somewhere’ can be seen as a fixed point which all the texts discussed in this volume set out from. But literary texts not only represent a place and its people, depict a recognizable reality—traditions, customs, moods and movements—, they can at the same time generalise or even question and problematise these concrete phenomena. Novels and stories mirror experiences, they show nature or modernisation, people’s emotions and relationships, their anxieties and their hopes for the future. But this specificity allows for and even invites abstractions. The same text can therefore be read in different ways: as affirming or challenging one’s own experiences, as familiar or as strange. This difference in reception is not only due to the individual reader, but also to literature’s inherent qualities. In spite of its mimetic ambitions, its formal construction may function like a secret chamber which opens up for very different and sometimes very personal approaches. In this way, this volume aims to present a fresh look at well-known Norrland authors by explicitly addressing them from an external perspective,¹ by confronting a region with the world, the familiar with the strange. And it intends to show how Umeå’s claim to open a window upon the world is fulfilled in its own distinctive way by literature.

The most elementary methodological approach to literary texts is a hermeneutical one, that moves between an attempt to understand, to make sense, and the awareness of strangeness, trying to map the tension between understanding and distancing reflection. In this respect, the contributors are all hermeneuticists, they read literature in order to make sense, but never forget to allow for its alterity. They are both experts and strangers at the same time. The six authors are researchers and teachers of Swedish (and Scandinavian) literature, but they live and teach (mostly, or partly) outside Sweden, in universities in Canada, France, Germany, Poland and Great Britain. As it is often the case in modern academic life, their nationality is not necessarily identical with their place of work—they are used to transgressing the national paradigm both biographically and methodologically. And so they do not primarily see the oeuvres in question as contributions to

a national literature, but as go-betweens and messengers between a region and world-literature, between the very specific and the general. This interrelation is made very explicit in Krzysztof Bak's article: by reading Torgny Lindgren's allegedly very personal autobiography against and with Augustine's *Confessions*, he is able to demonstrate Lindgren's equation between Västerbotten and 'the Western tradition' as a whole. Helena Forsås-Scott shows how Kerstin Ekman juxtaposes the remote Norrland forest with Western civilisation in order to question received categories and established hierarchies of power. Even Sara Lidman's 'hembygd,' an allegedly very specific place, appears in Wischmann's reading as a metaphorical place, which opens up for a sensory relationship not only to Missenträsk/Västerbotten but likewise to the world.

With their different backgrounds and academic interests, the authors of this volume have chosen a variety of approaches to their topic: some concentrate on one work by an author (Krzysztof Bak, Thomas Mohnike), others offer a representative survey of a complete oeuvre (Antje Wischmann, Elisabeth Herrmann), others again choose a thematic approach which they investigate in a selected number of relevant works (Bjarne Thorup Thomsen, Helena Forsås-Scott). They are all experts and 'insiders' insofar as they know their field and have already published on the topic of their articles, but here they add new insights to scholarship by relating the specifically regional aspects of their topic to some sort of 'outside'-perspective. Thematically and methodologically too their approaches show considerable variation: in the course of the anthology the relationship of "Norrland and abroad" is investigated by concentrating on the juxtaposition between "here" and "there," past and present in memory sketches and travel literature (Eyvind Johnson) or between identity and alterity in autobiography and novel writing (P.O. Enquist), by highlighting strangeness and familiarity in dialectal or regional language (Sara Lidman, also Kerstin Ekman and Mikael Niemi), by focussing intertextual relationships between Swedish and world literature (Torgny Lindgren), even by positioning the human in relation to nature and animals (Kerstin Ekman). In order to examine these productive tensions, the essays employ philosophical and philological methods, they choose ecological or post-colonial perspectives, they investigate language or identity, they focus on narratological, poetological or intertextual concerns. The mediality of literature, the materiality of language (Sara Lidman), the quality of the book or publication channels (Eyvind Johnson) and the quality of the narrative voice (Kerstin Ekman), are all shown to be important factors. It becomes clear how the literary texts in question invite a variety of approaches and readings, and that they are very rich sources for further imagination and reflexion.

Working on this volume has been an academic task, but also a personal experience for some of the contributors. Antje Wischmann took up the offer to spend a week in Sara Lidman's house in snowy Missenträsk and makes this experience the starting point of her investigation; photographs of her stay illustrate her article and her personal approach. Thomas Mohnike also went from his home university in Strasbourg to Sweden to write about Mikael Niemi and started his work by conducting small interviews. Elisabeth Herrmann, who lives and teaches in far-away Canada, involved her three children, who contributed the illustrations for her article on P.O. Enquist, in her research. And the starting point for the editor was a generous invitation by Lars-Erik Edlund to spend two months at the University of Umeå in the winter of 2011, when this project was first conceived. In this way, the volume is also a tribute to the city and the University of Umeå and the literature of Norrland by Scandinavianists who have tried to balance their academic interests with a personal commitment.

NOTES

- ¹ Obviously, there is an important Swedish research tradition on these authors which is both acknowledged and repeatedly referred to in the current volume. Apart from a great number of articles—both scholarly and critical ones—I am thinking of groundbreaking works like Birgitta Holm's and Annelie Bränström Öhman's studies on Sara Lidman (Holm 1998; Bränström Öhman 2008), Ingela Pehrson's and Magnus Nilsson's books about Torgny Lindgren (Pehrson 1993; Nilsson 2004) or Örjan Lindberger's book on Eyvind Johnson (Lindberger 1986).

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