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The lingering fog of childhood

Abstract
This paper explores the relationship between the image and the truthful representation of self, landscape, and memory for Swedish, particularly expatriate, poets. The prevalence of childhood imagery in the works of Swedish poets Lars Gustafsson and Tomas Tranströmer - and in my own work - is discussed in its relation to landscapes past. Writing to salvage moments, images, people, and selves from oblivion is likely to involve some form of revisionism, to permit some fictionalising of the past. This allows for the other truth to be spoken, the emotional truth rather than the historical one. In the autobiographical space and time of the writing, moments are relived and outcomes enunciated which could not have occurred at the time. Few would argue that a truth is universal after postmodernism, but even fewer, perhaps, would care to admit to lying. This paper explores how the image permits a poem to function as a metaphor in which slivers of truth come together. In the space and time of the poem, empirical and emotional truths can coexist.

Early memories, fume from childhood,
green bits of bottleglass
dug from earth.
- Lars Gustafsson,
from 'Seven Very Small Events' (lines 1-3)

If writing contains an inherent element of being stranded in the past, for an expatriate writer, who is already physically displaced, the exploration of childhood and the childhood landscape can be even more dislocating than for a writer working in her/his native context. For the expatriate the temporal displacement necessitated by writing is exaggerated by spatial displacement; her/his nostalgia is intensified by the permanent contrast between the native and adopted landscapes; and her/his sense of self-loss is exacerbated by constant reminders in time present of what is not present in current space. The landscape of childhood, which arguably must always be imagined or reconstructed to some extent, cannot, for an expatriate, be mirrored in present surroundings; the marker-buoys are missing. Stranded in an imagined homeland, the expatriate writer finds her/himself in limbo, at home neither in past or present, the native or the adopted culture.

Writing to salvage moments, images, people, and selves from oblivion involves some form of revisionism: it may admit fictional or dramatic

interpolations. As such, it makes room for the emotional truth to be spoken, not merely the historical one. This is not to say that the autobiographical element of writing the past is necessarily untrue. Rather, moments are relived and outcomes enunciated which could not have occurred at the time. Swedish poet Eva Ström speaks about 'fictive truth': in her poetry, the emotion is authentic, but the path to the realisation of that emotion may be fictive (pers. comm., 10 June 2007). In the introduction to *Froth on the Daydream*, Boris Vian teasingly confesses: 'this story is completely true, for I imagined it from beginning to end' (Vian 1963: 'Avant-Propos').

Believing in 'truth,' or rather 'truths,' does not equate with a belief in an objective truth, and few would argue that their truth is universal after postmodernism. Descartes' tower appears round at a distance, but as an observer approaches, the tower is found to be square (Descartes 1960: 72). This does not mean that the observer was lying, when s/he pronounced at a distance, 'The tower is round.' The past is like the tower; it holds two truths, temporally rather than physically separated, each depending on the perspective of the observer. It may be that some perceptions in time obey an inverse law to those in space: distance, John Updike has suggested, makes for clarity (Updike 1989). Reading signs that the child could not yet interpret or understand, an adult may see childhood more clearly than a child. Emotions that coloured interpretation of a past event, speech, or gesture may themselves require reinterpretation as a situation is revisited. The truth that to which a poet, persona, or speaker in a poem lays claim is akin to the claim a classical Greek orator or actor makes, that hers/is is candid speech or *parrhesia*. The conviction out of which the Greek orator or actor speaks, and the conviction inspired in her/his listeners, that there is 'always a direct coincidence between belief and truth' (Foucault 1983: par. 9), has affinities to the truths spoken and heard in a poem.

One of the requirements of *parrhesia* on which Foucault lays stress is the element of risk. There is a risk in poets telling the truth as they know it: the past can hold secrets and, certainly, truths which were not supposed to be told. There is the danger of hurting and insulting loved ones, and of exposing the self to a degree that may be unpleasant. Again, because the experience of *what really happened* alters with time, so does our understanding thereof. None of the truths that come out of these formulations are lies; they are just versions of what really happened. Through a constant process of reconstructing and making sense of the world and our place in it, the loss of selves and places and people is relived and reformulated, becoming a key component of the writing process. In the history of Swedish writing, melancholy is a perennial element, and loss and melancholy are so intricately tied together as to be interdependent. The loss of childhood and the loss of selves and truths reinforce each other in an expatriate, who also suffers loss of social and cultural capital. When the literary tradition that the expatriate is forsaking is one already steeped in melancholy, the composite effect can be overwhelming.

The loss of a landscape thus means not just a temporal but a physical dislocation from the selves that were, a dislocation which magnifies the problem twofold. The obvious temporal and physical displacement is compounded by a more subtle loss of landscape - more subtle because the loss of the selves tied to the landscape is less immediately evident. Nostalgia for times past is generally understood, and *Heimweh* and *Maladie du Pays* are terms we have come to accept, but what of the dislocation from the other 'I,' the 'I' that can only exist in the native landscape? The expatriate writer writes to commemorate this dislocation.

The expatriate can, with time, find points of reference in the new landscape. And because poetry can function as place, a place where physical and emotional truths coexist, the native country can become a bank of memories, a series of images. Through these images, the expatriate is allowed to inhabit the invented homeland. In other words, the image can become the vehicle for this truth. The image does not in itself lie or deceive. Although there is a risk of framing in the selection of the image, the image continues to preserve a pristine sliver of truth. David Malouf suggests that we are 'makers, among other things, of landscapes' (1998: 45). If indeed we are, then we must also be makers of the notions of truth and inventors of our cultural identity. If we are what we are mirrored against, then the landscape is the backdrop against which we exist and write.

For an expatriate poet, writing is a quest for home and identity. In my collection *I Was Here*, part of the irony of the title is the absence of any poem called 'I Was Here' nor, despite several approximations, can the line be found in any poem. This seems the more appropriate in a collection that explores an approximation of presence. What could be regarded as the title poem, 'We Were Here,' is a dramatic monologue in which the voice moves between speakers none of whose voices offer a straightforward *parrhesia*, yet all of which offer different sides of the same truth.

The images of childhood in this collection, while defining moments, are not necessarily desirable, nor desired, moments. Now that they are indeed in existence, now that they are indeed part of the truth, it is necessary to revisit them as part of the journey back to the past to make sense of the present. The recalled landscapes can, as mentioned, function as a refuge from the present as well as a means of reaching an understanding of it. In the landscapes evoked, pivotal moments occurred, turning points which in hindsight can be recognised as Wordsworthian 'spots of time' (1979: 208). There can be no attempt at an honest representation of self without a truthful representation of the landscape. The literary representation of the self is therefore, for many expatriates, dependent upon a faithful representation of the landscape.

Swedish poet and philosopher Lars Gustafsson argues that poetry expresses only that which allows itself to be expressed:

> A consequence which is one of the most important is that we refrain from the visionary truth, from truth at a distance. Poetry becomes, as other linguistic forms of expression, a way to deal with the visual reality, with the ideas and the passions, and as all other linguistic methods to deal with reality, it has to settle for saying something about that which allows itself to be said, to be empirical, to make visible that which allows itself to be made visible, to win its experiences step by step. The world consists of a multitude of parts and none of them contains all the others. (cited Söderström 2003: 33)

Does Gustafsson's declaration that it is of utmost importance to refrain from 'the visionary truth, from truth at a distance' mean that the far-off observer of Descartes' tower is lying and hence that poetry cannot tell the truth? Hans Söderström contends that Gustafsson's statement is a 'strong retreat from poetry's ambitions as a privileged truth-teller' (2003: 33) yet his contention is debatable. Whilst Gustafsson here clearly refutes the idea that poetry speaks 'a higher truth', he does not assert that poetry is incapable of telling the truth. Indeed, Gustafsson contradicts any such devaluation of the poet as a *parrhesiastes*, when he goes on to observe:

> there is in discussions regarding image theories an overwhelming tendency to hypostasise the depicted structure, to want to see it as an object of the same order as its bearers. The claim that truth consists of the correspondence between the structure of the linguistic phrase and that of reality suggests that there are two images, two objects of the same type, in this situation and that one is compared with the other. But there is only one image, one structure, because a structure is a shape and not an occurrence and the question regarding the truth of the phrase is if a certain transport … is or is not *successful*. (Gustafsson 1978: 273)

A successful image can be a structure of reality as well as of words, a teller of truth or of many truths. Indeed, as Peter Hertz-Ohmes has remarked, Gustafsson, 'by challenging the accepted empirical criteria of truth' (1982: 114-15) has suggested 'that the ultimate connection of "language" and "reality" is to be sought for not in its relation to immediate subjective experience but in the possibility of constructing relations between particular experiences into structures by means of words' (Gustafsson 1978: 310).

The success of an image's connection makes it possible to tell a range of truths, about language, about empirical reality, and about possible relations between them. Such success may also make it possible to tell a lie: a poem cannot therefore exist on the outside of the world and claim to be representative of a higher truth (Söderström 2003: 33); it cannot exist apart from the factitiousness of its linguistic construction and the potential mendacities inherent of its fabrication. Hertz-Ohmes submits 'that Gustafsson has here helped synthesize a poetics for our time, a perspective that reaches the truth of fiction on the one hand through a process of construction and on the other hand through a process of deconstruction. It is ultimately the same truth' (1982: 115-16). There is in Gustafsson's work a relentless questioning of the relationship between language and reality:

> Latent in nature and in language, and articulated by poetry, they [the structures of his poems] can lift humanity up - the motif of gliding entered Gustafsson's work with his book *Fåglarna* (1984). Structures, when stiffened, or when stagnant, can be prisons in which cruelty, fear and death go the rounds, and mimetic language, as mere reactions to 'reality,' may be closing the gates. But Gustafsson's critique of language theory (*Språk och lögn*, 1978) discerns in a language a capacity to generate structures which, being agile, are unmistakable signs that materiality, dwell in it as we must, is transformable and can be levitated. Language is pregnant with alternative realities and alternative logics. (Middleton 2000: 71)

In Gustafsson's poetry all the aspects come together: the truthful simplicity of the language, the melancholy mirrored in the landscape, the nostalgia for the ever-lost childhood and the childhood self, but also the ability to reshape loss, *Heimweh*, and melancholy through a fictive, philosophically valorised *poesis*. Experience is being remade in some of these ways in this extract from 'Four Short Poems':

> So this summer comes to an end:
> summers, where did you all disappear to?
> The boy who with a dark look
> saw all those clouds coming up

over the sunlit fields.
And the father, on his blue bicycle,
always riding against the wind
in his bright parka,
enormous barns in the fields at dawn,
where is the place where it all
really happened? (2000: lines 1-11)

The search for 'I,' for 'truth,' and for 'home' entails an exploration of contradictions.

Sweden's leading poet, Tomas Tranströmer, plays in many of his poems with the fine line between 'here' and 'there', dichotomies that cannot be explored without the investigation of self and Other. In 'Portrait with Comment' Tranströmer concludes:

What am I? Sometimes, a long time ago
I came for a few seconds very close
to what *I* am, what *I* am, what *I* am.

But as soon as I saw *I*,
I disappeared, and a hole appeared
through which I fell, like Alice. (2002: lines 20-25) [note 1]

The poem resists any explicating statement, letting the action, the imagery, and the allusion resonate with metaphorical significance. As an American critic once said of Tranströmer: 'More words do not make the truth' (Schiöler 2001: 133).

Truth and writing are, for Tranströmer, one and the same. When asked about the insistence on landscapes past that is such a prevalent motif in his work, and about his obsession with the past, he has answered:

I do that to create a new relation between the past and the present, to break through conventional perspectives. I think the historic view is important, that you do not stay with that which is of topical importance but that you switch between departure points in time. (cited Karlström 2001: 92)

Here, Descartes' tower metaphor enters again. Gustafsson's dissertation explains that according to philosopher Alexander Bryan Johnson this is not (as Descartes has it) an argument for the deceptiveness of the senses, but that 'there for every given point at the distance between the tower and the horizon is a visual tower and that all elements in this series of towers are different' (1978: 107). This metaphor, transposed to childhood, can mean that our representations of childhood are also many - indeed, that there exist many childhoods in the stretch of time between our birth and our present. A poet who allows her/himself to explore these departure points seems to have a genuine interest in telling the truth, as wholly as possible and - indeed, the notion of 'spots of time' takes on a new meaning.

Richard Hugo's oft-quoted comment that 'the poem is always in your home town, but you have a better chance of finding it in another' (1979: 12) is especially applicable to the expatriate writer, who has to reinvent her/his work in a foreign land. Often s/he discovers what Salman Rushdie calls an 'imaginary homeland' (1991: 10), a country of the mind in which the places of birth and childhood and the locality where s/he now resides are synthesised. An internal landscape is surely as valid as an external one, and the recollected

image represents a truth as powerful as the impressions of a present landscape. Graham Swift says in *Waterland*:

> … only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man - let me offer you a definition - is a storytelling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall - or when he's about to drown - he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life. (1992: 62)

Perhaps this marker-buoy is the most crucial aspect for the expatriate writer: the narration of self presupposes and brings into being a sense of place and a (re)definition of identity. Imagination is a mental dwelling-place where selves and truths cohabit, a place where the writer can retrieve fragments of what would otherwise be forever lost and weave these threads and patches into identities that would otherwise never come into existence. Thereby the past is allowed a truly active role in the making of the present. The expatriate writer may find her/himself somewhere in some mezzanine state, some limbo, much as the children in my book of poems are always between here and there, between self and Other, in an in-between condition like that in the poem 'November':

> We took the first tentative step,
> held our breaths,
> placed our feet far apart
> on the black ice.
>
> The surface gave,
> as it always would (2008: lines 1-6)

For an expatriate these contrasts become more visible, indeed palpable. Gustafsson, who lived and wrote in America for about twenty years, comments in 'Austin, Texas' on the disappointment that the new context, the broiling and burning climate of the Texan capital, never quite compares with the old:

> For Benjamin, it's all natural.
> But never really for me.
>
> Never again to need my wool mittens,
> sleeping like nice kittens in the closet! (2000: lines 33-36)

Since poetry does not ultimately force selves or habitations to compete, perhaps Limbo can be promoted in the end from a place of dwelling to a place of homecoming.

Although expatriates' poetry may be driven by a sense of displacement and homelessness, the path the poetry takes is one of homecoming, of recovering the homeland that has been lost. Being able to walk down familiar paths, if only in memory, confers a sense of security; the ways traversed become a sanctuary. Freud points out that 'identity is like a graveyard of lost loves and former identifications' (cited Leach 2002: 292). Identity is as much who we were as who we are. While past landscapes can become more real than present ones, more representative of the 'truth,' they need not totally engross the creative mind. If the past is a country of memory, it is equally a land of

the imagination. It takes time to dig up the memories, to unearth the things forgotten or buried. This process involves discovering truths, and with them, parts of the self which had been jettisoned. An image hidden in the past can speak candidly about emotional truths and be an important key to the unlocking of the present. For an expatriate poet, marooned in a sea of stories, there is a sense of homecoming in knowing that the voices and experiences are still there, lost and vocal, in the lingering fog of childhood.

Notes

1. My translation. The Swedish word for 'I' - 'jag' - is capitalised in the original (JAG). <In English, this effect is<, of course, eradicated as 'I' must always be capitalised,> [Direct translation into English, in which 'I' is conventionally capitalised, would erase Tranströmer's typographical emphasis,] hence the added italics. return to text

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