

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN *THE THIEF*, BY GÖRAN TUNSTRÖM

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Abstract:

The linguistic diversity in The Thief, a novel written by the Swedish author, Göran Tunström, has as a central element the negative influence of the father figure. The evolution of the characters is profoundly connected to childhood and to the difference between the way they speak at home and the way they express themselves in society or among friends and teachers. The insertion of dialects as well as the use of comparisons and metaphors regarding the sacred / profane world, seem to point that cultural identity and unity is, paradoxically, acquired through diversity. We intend to tackle the relationship between the individual and the group / the family by using linguistic analysis of various fragments. Our aim is to show that the transition from childhood to adolescence is not only revealing for the child itself, but also for the entire community, as it insists on how we all have multiple social roles, while we never cease to be our true selves.

Rezumat:

Diversitatea lingvistică din romanul Hoțul, scris de autorul suedez Göran Tunström, are ca element central influența negativă a figurii tatălui. Evoluția personajelor este legată de copilărie și de diferența dintre modul în care aceștia vorbesc acasă și felul în care se exprimă în societate, printre prieteni sau profesori. Existența dialectelor, precum și folosirea comparațiilor sau a metaforelor privind dihotomia sacru / profan, par a indica faptul că identitatea culturală este, în mod paradoxal, dobândită prin diversitate. Intenționăm să arătăm relația dintre individ și grup sau familie prin intermediul analizei lingvistice a unor diverse fragmente literare. Scopul nostru este să punem în lumină ideea conform căreia trecerea de la

copilărie la adolescență este esențială nu doar pentru copil, ci și pentru întreaga societate, deoarece insistă asupra multiplelor roluri pe care le deținem în comunitate, în timp ce niciodată nu încetăm să fim cu adevărat "noi".

Keywords: identity, childhood, abuse, transition, memory

In *The thief*, a novel written by the Swedish author Göran Tunström, one of the sources of introspection- acting as a catalyst for the true identity of characters - is illustrated by the father figure. Following the emergence of non-compliance and dissolution, we realize that the non-being or the indifference of parents can install the child's fluctuation between his chronological and his spatial references. From the non-being different techniques used to approach a literary text, we believe that the primacy of details - typical of fractals - as well as the analysis of symmetrical and similar fragments could present, in its complexity, the transition from childhood to adolescence.

In order to refine the functioning of the self-similar sequences that exist between the various characters of the novel, we have spotted many literary events in relation to self biography. The first aspect that drew our attention was the desire to be in "the father's shoes". Let's only think about Göran Tunström's statement: "My mother says that I resemble my father so much"¹[our translation], that finally projects itself on the literary text, giving birth to a dual, yet logical author. From this perspective, Tunström is not only the writer of *The thief*, but the thief himself² [our translation].

Another element that we considered to be very important for the representation of self biographical and self-similar characteristics of childhood is related to a seemingly contradiction. Reading the novel we can discover many repetitions. The text, however, is not repetitive. In this regard, a most intriguing role is given to the polyphony of characters, since the children represent different, but complex aspects of the author's life and creations. Let's focus on Johan, abandoned by his real biological father or on his adoptive mother, a woman who dreams to be a writer while her husband can barely spell her name: Ida Veronica. This mutation, expressed further

¹"Min mor siger at jeg ligner min far så meget". Doris Ottesen, *Om kærtegn: det guddommelige i Göran Tunströms författarskap* (Frederiksberg: Materialecentralen, 1989), 81.

²"Det är jag som är Tjuven". Göran Tunström quoted by Lars-Olof Billvik, *Gudsriket i Värmland. En tvärvetenskaplig studie av Selma Lagerlöf och Göran Tunströms författarskap utifrån tre teologiska temata* (Lund, Lunds Universitet: Teologiska Institutionen, 1988), 13.

more through the dichotomy written / oral language, remains fundamental for the plot, because, as Philippe Lejeune presents it, "all men carry a kind of rough, constantly reworked, of their life story"³[our translation]. Or, from this point of view, adolescence, childhood, love, memory, marginalization – are all related to paternal filiation.

The father's entrance in Tunström's universe can be observed already from the author's first narrative texts. If *Quarantine*⁴ is based on the history of Henrik Synge and the relationship that this man establishes with his suicidal parent, *The dandelion ball*⁵ stages two heroes that are experimenting the suffering after the genitors' absence : Sigfrid and Bastian. *The holy geographers*⁶ is founded on Jacob's yearning after Hans-Christian Wermelin, his missing father, while the self biographical book, *The pastor's kid*⁷, uses the metaphor of reason and imagination in order to construct a renewed world of boyhood. The self analysis⁸ that Tunström is announcing in *The thief* seems to reflect, as well, the dual identity of the father, which makes us believe that for this particular Swedish author, the recollection of childhood and the denial of "classical" genetic anchor points towards the destabilization of the present and the emerging of the past's tyranny.

The proliferation of "once upon a time" produces a shift of the historical settings and leads to the existence of some characters that grow up beyond a fixed chronology or "normal" social context. These children prefer wandering to stability, vagrancy to confinement or dreaming to reality. Gone in search of traces of the alleged father or of freedom, Johan and Hedvig are equally exposed to doubts and uncertainties. We cannot remain insensitive to their despair or fear, while we hear them cry out, with the heroes from *The Christmas Oratorio*: "How could the world start again?"⁹ [our translation].

One of the ways needed to rebuild "childhood" is the use of language. Let's recall first the fact that with this novel, written in 1986, Göran Tunström enters the area of pioneering authors regarding the aesthetics of

³ "Tout homme porte en lui une sorte de brouillon, perpétuellement remanié, du récit de sa vie". Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 362.

⁴ Cf. Göran Tunström, *Quarantine* [Karantän] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1961).

⁵ Idem. *The dandelion ball* [Maskrosbollen] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1962).

⁶ Idem. *The holy geographers* [De heliga geograferna] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1973).

⁷ Idem. *The pastor's kid* [Prästungen] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1976).

⁸ We refer to the concept introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (Paris : Raisons d'agir, 2004).

⁹ "Hur kunde världen börja?". Göran, Tunström, *The Christmas Oratorio* [Juloratoriet] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1983).

ugliness. Children doomed to wickedness, to violence or trauma, take in this text a central role. The logic that governs the relationship between Hedvig and her father, Fredrik, or between Ida and her adoptive child, Johan, exposes the intergenerational conflicts in which youths are victims. This results in a splitting of the inner "self". Two types of fragmentation appear iteratively in connection with the homothetic structure of the novel: the feminization and the anthropomorphism.

Analyzed from the point of view of the mimetic shimmering, the link between Johan and Hedvig seems to derive from the family's instability. The brother / sister relationship reflects a mismatched collection of self biographical traces that are still keeping evidence of the suture. The source of the damage lies in the repeated rape of their mother, a violent image that the two heroes have to assist to (either directly - by actually seeing the sex scenes or indirectly - by hearing the sounds made by their parents while mating). The non-spoken language has here a well established place. However, far from installing a disjunction of the conscience, the physical abuse actually makes them grow closer to each other: "Hedvig and Johan gained the habit of falling asleep early, or better said: they were never able to fall asleep before the silence was installed on the other side. Every night they were forced to listen to a strange fight, to the cries of Ida and to Fredrik's moans and jumps in the bed writhing walls. They had acquired the habit to tighten against each other. It hurt so much to hear those noises¹⁰[our translation].

In *The thief* the voyeuristic act is associated to the incapacity of establishing real connections to the family members. Ida's lack of freedom inserts a lessening of commitment from her children. Hedvig and Johan promise each other to never repeat the shameful actions of their parents.¹¹ The heroes' aversion towards the sexual contact leads to a dual, self-reflected withdrawal. On the one hand, we can talk about the psychological distance

¹⁰ "Hedvig och Johan hade vant sig av med att somna tidigt, eller rättare sagt: de kunde aldrig somna innan det tystnade på andra sidan. Natt efter natt tvingades de lyssna till ett underligt slagsmål, till Idas och Fredriks stönande och gungande i sängen, som fick väggarna att båga. De vande sig vid att trycka sig inntil varandra. Det var så plågsamt att lyssna till de där ljuden". Idem, *The thief* [Tjuven] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1986), 50.

¹¹ See the quotation :

"We will never do this, Hedvig, when we grow up. Never - No, Johan, never"[our translation].

"-Så ska vi aldrig göra, Hedvig, när vi blir stora. Aldrig.

-Nej, Johan, aldrig". Ibid. 51.

characterizing the child and the parent, on the other about the unwillingly recurrence of the father's gestures. While repeating obsessively the words "at-the-same-time", Johan and Hedvig suspend the future and gain emotional stability: "Hedvig and Johan have only the right to use the dew water to brush their teeth. [...] The first of them who discovers a leaf waits for the other. Then they shake their heads and pronounce just a word. And to say it each of them dips his mouth into the soul of the other: 'At-the-same-time'¹²[our translation].

A second critical element for the child's identity is expressed by the illegal incursion of the two brothers in their teacher's library. Johan proves himself to be the protector of his sister, since his gestures reveal a double responsibility towards Hedvig. He is the initiator to the Swedish reality of his time; but in the same time he represents Hedvig's guide to language or to the fantastic world of books. Their friendship grows progressively to an intellectual space, while their singularity is gained through the freedom given by reading.

The common aspects between the use of dialects and the standardized language as well as the link between the abused child and his buddy is equally detected by Stina Hammar who insists in *Duets torg*, on the heroes' non-compliance, and on the fact that each of them is for the other "the true half"¹³[our translation].

The schizoid movement of consciousness is also described by anthropomorphism. If mother's rape has brought together the brother and his sister, anthropomorphism seems to derive especially from incest. Exposed to the sexual brutality of her father, Hedvig refuses to accept herself as a human being, and unconsciously destroys her true "self". She distances herself from the world, refuses to talk or connect to other persons and prefers the company of animals. Her denial of civilization results in the adoption of a raven named Germund, that becomes her best friend, her confident. In *The thief*, the raven acts as a specular double of Hedvig. It has a well defined personality, it is courageous and strong and, unlike the girl, it is capable of

¹² "Hedvig och Johan får bara använda daggekåevatten att borsta tänderna i. [...] Den som först hittar ett blad inväntar den andra. Sedan nickar de och säger ett enda ord. Och de säger det med en mun in i varandras morgonöppna själar: 'Sam-tid-igt'". Ibid., 46.

¹³ "Johan och Hedvig är var för sig ofärdiga. Johan har bara ett halvt ansikte, sedan hans fostermor Ida trappade honom i stengolvet när han var liten. Hedvig är Johans förlorade 'äkta hälft'". Stina Hammar, *Duets torg : Göran Tunström och tankekällorna* (Stockholm: Akademisktryck, 1999), 75.

facing traumatic situations. This is why "he accompanied her to school and did not appreciate at all staying in the hallway during classes [...]"¹⁴[our translation], an action that legitimizes its central location at the family table: "At table, Germund had his plate, at the right of that belonging to Hedvig. She served him first. She leaned towards him and whispered words that nobody else could hear. Together they were a highly dignified couple and the fear reduced their court to silence. It would be difficult to say who held the real power during their brief reign period. Germund took perhaps the major decisions. Hedvig was the spokesperson¹⁵." [our translation]

The identity of Hedvig takes the form of a labyrinth where childhood's specificity can easily be lost. The different part of the "self" fit into each other, resulting in a non-linear or sometimes even chaotic nesting. Among the key-moments of the psychosomatically development we mention the refusal of the priest to baptize the raven. The snub brings an inner fragmentation, a kind of betrayal on the part of humanity, divinity, but also family. The dissolution of identity is here combined with a decentralization of the "self". In this regard, the killing of the bird indicates not only the loss of a true friend, but is equivalent to a metaphorical suicide, to an emotional collapse¹⁶ : "- Germund first. [...]

- He is my only friend, she said. [...]

- I cannot baptize a raven. I have already made a fool of myself.

-Then you cannot baptise me either.

-I am also your friend, Hedvig, whispered Johan.

She turned her beautiful thin face and her white long neck:

- You, indeed. But you, you are already baptized.

She took a step towards the baptismal font, she clenched her hands around Germund's neck and broke it, until her knuckles were white and his

¹⁴ "Han följde med henne till skolan och trivdes inte alls med att få sitta i korridoren under lektionerna". Göran Tunström 1986, 78.

¹⁵ "Germund hade en särskild tallrik på Hedvigs högra sida i mitten av matbordet. Hon serverade honom först av alla. Lutade sig över till honom och viskade ord som ingen annan kunde höra. De var tillsammans ett mycket värdigt par och deras hov skrämdes till tystnad. Vem som ägde den reella makten under deras korta regeringstid var svårt att säga. Kanske fattade Germund de stora besluten. Hedvig var språkröret". Ibid., 78.

¹⁶ "When Hedvig kills Germund, it is like a suicide. In fact, she dies by her own decision" [our translation]. "När Hedvig vrider huvudet av Germund är hennes ändå också ett självmord. Äntligen dör hon av sitt beslut". Stina Hammar 1999, 87.

blood spurted. Then she threw the raven in the font and rushed out.”¹⁷[our translation].

The violent attitude towards friends appears also in *Stella*, a text taken from *The true life*. The raven is in this case replaced by a parrot that the protagonist tries to steal and kill. If in *The thief*, the murder leads to a double killing (of Germund and of Hedvig), in *Stella* the death is limited to the potential resurrection of identity. In other words, death appears to be a part of a larger and more complex puzzle that the child approached by curiosity. Let's recall a dialogue between Stella and Jakob regarding the need to kill the parrot and its social implications: “ - What were you doing?

- I wanted to kill the parrot, as you saw.

- Why ?

- Simply...that is what I felt. [...]

- Was he old, this parrot?

-I don't know.

-You don't know. It wasn't yours then?”¹⁸ [our translation]

Prevented by Jakob's voyeurism, the murderous act indicates only the burst of an identity crisis. At the end, the “about to be” crime helps the girl establish a friendship with the boy: “Jakob got up and took her by the

¹⁷ “Germund först. [...]

- Han är min enda vän, sa hon. [...]

- Jag kan inte döpa en kråka. Jan har redan gjort mig löjlig.

-Då kan du inte heller döpa mig.

-Jag är också din vän, Hedvig, viskade Johan till henne.

Hon vred det späda fina ansiktet på den långa vita halsen:

-Du ja. Men du är ju redan döpt, du.

Hon tog ett steg fram mot dopfunten, knöt handen runt Germunds nacke och bröt den, tills de små knogarna vitnade och blodet sipprade fram. Hon slängde kråken i dopfunten och rusade ut.” Göran Tunström 1986, 85-86.

¹⁸ “ - Qu'est-ce que tu faisais ?

- J'avais envie de tuer le perroquet, tu l'as bien vu.

- Pourquoi ?

- Simplement...je le sentais comme ça. [...]

- Il était vieux, ce perroquet ?

-J'sais pas.

-Tu ne sais pas. Il n'était pas à toi, alors ?”. For this story we have used the French version, since the Swedish one was unavailable to us. Göran Tunström, 'Stella', *De planète en planète* [Det sanna livet], 1993, 868.

hand. [...] They often stopped to look back. The liquorice ribbon bound them together"¹⁹[our translation].

Taken into account the irregularity, the lack of freedom, the linguistic diversity and the disappearance of parents, *The thief* describes the spiritual adventure of a child while moving to adolescence. The mental wandering refers to the modular imbrications of the "self". This is the case of Johan, a character that transforms the scenes of wandering and hiding in areas of revelation and intellectual foundation. Of all the symbolic places in the text, it is Hägern's library that installs the synaesthesia game. The journey into the bookish universe is to the young Johan an opening to infinity. Indeed: "so reduced the outside world, but so vast the inner world for those who knew where the Keys were!"²⁰[our translation].

A fruit of a passing relationship, the progeny of Johan makes us worry early in the novel by the strangeness and brutality that characterizes it. Abandoned by his biological father, the boy is raised by Ida and Fredrik. But nothing positive ever comes from the relationship between Johan and his adoptive parents. It is only through reading that the boy is able to go beyond the family's abuses and discover himself. In the text, this dichotomy is expressed by the use of dialects *versus* refined and well-developed vocabulary. This recovery occurs gradually, by each incursion into the mystical land of the library.

For Tunström, the spiritual wandering is placed at the edge of the sacred and it implies a transformation of the inner child. The change experienced by Johan is exposed by the juxtaposition of adjectives ("new", "genuine", "bohemian"), nouns ("threshold", "way", "entrance") or verbs ("enter", "cross over", "find") and indicate the idea of illegal border transgression. By following the path of the bohemian, we realize that his transformation is facilitated by the sterility of the family and of the social environment. The "at-home" gives place to a stroll in a city-abyss embodying the attributes of a palimpsest. The walk suggests in this case the transition towards new horizons, but also the exploration of the unconscious.

Initiated at a mental level, the "possession" of the spirit is later reflected on the body. The traces of the transfiguration become visible

¹⁹ "Jakob se leva et la prit par la main. [...] Souvent, il s'arrêtait pour se retourner. Le ruban de réglisse les liait". Ibid., 870.

²⁰ "Så litet av yttre värld och vilken stor inre för dem som visste var Nycklar fanns!". Göran Tunström 1986, 104.

through "the heat who was rising in his body [...]. He looked around him with completely new eyes and saw the books' variously colored covers"²¹[our translation]. The revival is also illustrated in the sentence: "Fifty pages later Johan woke up dazed and *new*: a light from another world illuminated his head"²²[our translation].

The universe that the child discovers following the entry in the Hägern's library is vast and unpredictable and characterized by potentiality. However, the movement of Johan is the subject of a soon-to-be-gained maturity. "The self" emerges from the conscious action of entering a prohibited area. The recurrence of unintentional gestures and attitudes, subject to the incomprehensible²³, accompanies the crossing of childhood's threshold: "Upon entering this home, Johan crossed the threshold that would forever separate him from the humble side he had so far shown Fredrik. He was about to find his way"²⁴[our translation] or "Near him was another world. And, as if he had looked for a real entrance to this world he arrived in what was the office of the Hägern"²⁵[our translation].

Mircea Eliade noted with regard to the relationship between the sacred and the profane that the break operated in space allows the formation of the World, because it is able to find the central axis of future²⁶. We agree with the philosopher. Indeed, the transition to maturity equals in *The thief* to the entrance in the unconsciousness. From this perspective, the teacher represents a link between the past and the present, between the reality and the imaginary universe. Johan, who was actually "eating"²⁷[our translation] knowledge is ensured of the superiority of his status by the enthusiastic

²¹ "Värmen steg i Johans kropp. Han såg sig om med nya ögon och de föll på böckernas olikfärgade omslag". Ibid. 100.

²² "Femtio sidor senare vaknade Johan till liv, omtumlad och *ny*: ljuset från en annan värld genomspolade huvudet". Ibid., 101.

²³ Carl Jung analyzes this relationship in 'The relations between the Ego and the Unconscious', Joseph Campbell, ed., *The Portable Jung* (New York: Viking Press, 1971).

²⁴ "När Johan klev in i huset tog han ett steg över en tröskel som för alltid skulle avskilja honom från den hunsade del av sin personlighet han hittills visat Fredrik. Han stod i begrepp att finna sin väg". Göran Tunström 1986, 99.

²⁵ "Johan ville in i tavlans värme. Helt nära honom fanns en annan värld. Och som om han letade efter en verklig ingång till den världen kom han in i det som var Hägerns arbetsrum". Ibid., 99.

²⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The sacred and the profane. The nature of religion* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).

²⁷ "Han *ät*, skulle han senare säga". Göran Tunström 1986, 104.

encouragement of Hägern: "But it's rather your story than mine"²⁸[our translation] or "The silver Bible is *your* book, Johan!"²⁹[our translation].

As the story progresses, the Bible becomes the pivot around which the story of the protagonist is woven. The discovery and the recovery of ancestral legacy associated with Johan's mental drift appear, paradoxically, as a source of life and fertility. The narrator points out in this regard that the boy "had a treasure"[our translation].

The spiritual journey of the character indicates the potential to solve the problem of becoming, by setting a personality transplant resulting in the multiplication of the "self". Johan – a shy child, Johan – a courageous lecturer, Johan – an empathic brother, Johan – an abusive lover, Johan – the thief, are all one and the same person. The transition from the profane sphere to the transcendental level reveals, in rotation, the heroes' faces, it *forms*, *deforms* and *transforms* his soul.

This movement is also undertaken by Tunström who reveals in his literary creation the wounds of his first years. This is the way he makes us discover the vicissitudes of filiation and the structuring of the single parent families. Gone in search of the early disappeared father, just like Johan, the author becomes aware of the paradoxes that characterize his journey. Since Rolf Alsing states that he has "travelled a lot in order to arrive at home"³⁰[our translation], we can only hope that the country he was dreaming of was not a lost but a promise land : childhood.

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²⁸"Men det är ju mera din historia än min". Ibid., 129.

²⁹"Silverbibeln är *din* bok, Johan!". Ibid., 130.

³⁰"Han reste bort också för att komma hem". Rolf Alsing, *Prästunge och maskrosboll : en bok om Göran Tunström* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2003), 8.

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