

SUNNE - GÖRAN TUNSTRÖM'S LAND OF PEACE AND BEAUTY

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Abstract:

Our times have been described as the age of globalization, of emergent technologies, an "information era" where diversity and specificity express the complexity of several essential themes, such as identity, culture, language. But is today's society built on a culture of peace? This is the question we will try to answer, while aiming to understand the forces affecting the identity and the behaviour of individuals in the novels written by the Swedish author Göran Tunström.

Rezumat:

Epoca noastră este descrisă ca una a globalizării, a noilor tehnologii, o „eră a informației”, în care diversitatea și specificitatea exprimă complexitatea mai multor subiecte esențiale, precum identitate, cultură, limbă. Dar este societatea de astăzi una construită pe o cultură a păcii? Aceasta este întrebarea la care vom încerca să răspundem urmărind, în același timp, să înțelegem forțele care afectează identitatea și comportamentul indivizilor în romanele autorului suedez Göran Tunström.

Keywords: identity, trauma, childhood, Sunne, father

Introduction

“I still think about Sunne, when everybody sleeps. When the Main Street lies clean and shiny, when drops of dew still rest on the roses and on porches, when the roads seem to be recently showered [...]”¹ [our translation]. These words belonging to Stellan Jonsson Lök from *Famous Men who have been to Sunne*

¹ Cf. Göran Tunström, *Berömda män som varit i Sunne* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1998), 11. “Jag tycker fortfarande om Sunne, när ingen är vaken. När Storgatan ligger ren och blank, när droppar av dagg ännu vilar i rosorna och på verandor och väggar ser nyduschad ut [...]”.

[Berömda män som varit i Sunne] present the magic and the beauty of a unique place on earth that embodies in the eyes of the Swedish novelist, poet and playwright Göran Tunström the centre of the world. Sunne is, next to Island, one of the few places that reappear constantly in the magic realistic works of the writer. Among the texts that explore family relationships, childhood as well as the struggle to transcend grief, an important role is given to the trilogy: *The Holy Geographers* [De heliga geograferna]², *The Goddaughters* [Guddöttrarna]³ and *The Pastor's kid* [Prästungen]⁴, but also to *The Christmas Oratorio* [Juloratoriet]⁵ or *The Thief* [Tjuven]⁶ that we will primarily focus on in this paper. Combining autobiography, memories and imagination, Tunström has created a nest where the image of the father remains essential. In this article we will try to analyze the identity crisis that the characters experience while becoming adolescents, starting from its "heart": the apparently peaceful Sunne.

Sunne: a mythical land

The city of Sunne is often used by Tunström in connection to a potential renewal of the past. Located on the border between reality and imagination, this "promised land" appears to be at the same time a "forbidden place". Recurrent themes such as death, loss or solitude reinforce - for most of Tunström's characters - the feelings that one has to deal with while being in exile. Or, expressively enough, the author himself writes his Sunne novels in exile, as Chloé Rolland underlines it in the article "Göran Tunström aux limites de l'Islande". The critic insists on the idea of frontier and limit while analyzing the writer's psychological need to point out that the fictional Sunne is no longer just an abstract representation of a lost paradise, but also "a place [...] that allows the imagination to break through without destroying the fictional universe or breaking its consistency"⁷ [our translation].

Similar to the author's statement from *Winter trip* [Vinterresa]⁸, that the exile mystifies the place one has lost, most of Tunström's heroes leave Sunne. This is the case of Johan (*The Thief*) or Victor (*The Christmas Oratorio*) who choose to distance themselves from their native Sunne, while still being drawn by its beauty and magic. The impossibility to separate themselves from the matrix is also

² Cf. *Idem*, *The holy geographers* [De heliga geograferna] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1973).

³ Cf. *Idem*, *The Goddaughters* [Guddöttrarna] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1976).

⁴ Cf. *Idem*, *The pastor's kid* [Prästungen] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1976).

⁵ Cf. *Idem*, *The Christmas Oratorio* [Juloratoriet] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1983).

⁶ Cf. *Idem*, *The Thief* [Tjuven] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1986).

⁷ Chloé Rolland, « Göran Tunström aux limites de l'Islande », in *Problématiques de l'imaginaire du Nord en littérature, cinéma et arts visuels*, ed. Joë Bouchard, Daniel Chartier and Amélie Nadeau (Québec : Université du Québec à Montréal, coll. "Figura", 2004), 62. "Un lieu [...] qui permet à l'imaginaire de percer sans faire chavirer l'univers romanesque ni en briser la cohérence".

⁸ Cf. Göran Tunström, *Winter trip* [Vinterresa] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1984).

described by the novelist, who admits that in his eyes Sunne represents “the womb out of which my characters stepped out into the world, Sunne became the membrane in which they would dance, Sunne became, in the words of Rilke, ‘a soul’s miraculous mine’”⁹ [our translation].

In several novels, this mythical village is connected to the idea of light and beauty. In *Famous Men who have been to Sunne* the positivity is expressed with the help of memories, as we highlighted in the fragment we quoted earlier. In *The Christmas Oratorio* [Juloratoriet] the interest for immanence emerges from the combination of words and phrases indicating an aura of positivity where the writer insists on the beauty of the city. Paradoxically, *The Christmas Oratorio* opens with an accident that spreads its reflection in the future. However, the fate of Aron Nordensson, a Swedish farmer who loses his wife, can be perceived as being only half negative. Indeed, while reading the book, we realize that the death of Solveig (a name that in Swedish means “the road to the sun”) opens the door to a frame-story, where Sunne remains a central symbol. Prior to the cattle accident, Solveig is due to sing Bach’s Christmas Oratorio in the church of Sunne, but her death makes it impossible for the others to perform and the event is postponed. Years later Aron’s grandson, Victor, who became a musician, returns to Sunne to direct Bach’s famous composition. The story ends with the description of a peaceful, accomplished and happy Victor admiring his creation in the expressive words of the choral.

For Victor as well as for Göran Tunström the initiatory journey begins in this mythical town, a brand of refuge and hope. The idea is also underlined by Rolf Alsing who points out in his monograph that for the Swedish author, Sunne is “an existential place that is connected to the sun”¹⁰, as the etymology of the word suggests¹¹. In *The Christmas Oratorio*, but also in other Sunne-novels, the description of the landscape begins with the sunny and cloudless sky and focuses only afterwards on the parish where Tunström’s father used to preach. This particular narrative style has been explored by critics in connection to the character’s identity-crisis. The quiet, never-ending grieving Sunne remains indeed a peaceful place. However, this time, the peace is emphasized by the father’s disappearance, which transforms Sunne into the land of the dead.

⁹ Cf. Skans Kersti Nilsson, *Den förlorade paradiset. En studie i Göran Tunströms Sunneromaner* (Göteborg: Litteraturvetenskapliga instituten, 2003), 138. “Sunne blev den livmoder ur vilken mina karaktärer klev ut i världen, Sunne blev den membran på vilket de skulle dansa, Sunne blev, för att tala med Rilke, ‘en själarnas underliga gruva’”.

¹⁰ Rolf Alsing, *Prästunge och maskrosboll: en bok om Göran Tunström* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2003), 13. “För honom är Sunne främst en existentiell plats vars namn har med solen att göra”.

¹¹ The name of the town is linked to the Swedish “sol”, the English “sun” and the German “die Sunne”.

Sunne: a land of paradoxes

Many critics have depicted that Sunne appears to be Tunström's Macondo, an existential setting for the characters' hopes, nostalgias, suffering or loneliness. In order to understand this idea, we will focus on the novel *The Thief*. Here Tunström recreates the image of the village just like in the 50's. The Sunne painted in these pages is a place where the author grew up during the years following his father's death.

Hugo Tunström was a Protestant minister who died when Göran was only 12. The loss of the father figure is one of the central issues in Tunström's work. An author who manages to talk "not only *about* his characters, but also *with* them"¹² [our translation], as Rolf Alsing characterizes him, Tunström is appreciated today mainly due to his autobiographical texts and *The Thief* is one of them. But unlike other autobiographical novels, the mediocre present overpasses the past. Johan, Hedvig and their brothers have to endure the parents' lack of interest in intellectual activities, thus feeling lonely and misunderstood. They can only be free while reading and this is the main reason why the library becomes a cathartic place for the siblings. Johan, avoided by his biological parents, but also by most of the children because of the physical handicap he suffers from, tries to convey to his adoptive father the richness of his intellectual discoveries. However, the idea of any attempt to dialogue is perceived as ridiculous, in the eyes of Fredrik. Nevertheless, The Silver Bible becomes a springboard towards an ontological reality. Johan soon discovers that he can acquire a homogeneous identity, despite the sterility of its social and cultural environment through reading. As Skans Kersti Nilsson underlines in *Det förlorade paradiset. En studie i Göran Tunströms sunneromaner* (Skans Kersti Nilsson 2003: 1-50), Sunne acquires a "tröskelposition" – a "threshold position" –, becoming a geographic as well as a spiritual place that the characters refer to when in despair.

Conclusions

Mentally, Göran Tunström never left Sunne. He still lives there with his parents in the parish of the village. That is why, the characters he is building are, in most cases, *prästunger* : pastor's kids. The consistency of the path of Tunström's solitary figures such as Sidner, Pétur, Jacob and Henrik seems to find the generator in the image of Sunne and more specifically in the symbolism of the parish. The shimmer of the past through these unconscious flashbacks is painted by the author in an interview where he confesses that "almost all my dreams take place in Sunne. And seventy percent of them are related to the parish"¹³ [our

¹² Alsing, *Tunström*, 165. "Författaren talar *med* sin gestalter, inte bara *om* dem".

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11. "Nästan alla mina drömmar utspelas i Sunne. Och till sjuttio procent handlar de om prästgården".

translation]. Therefore it is going without saying that Tunström's novels convey a paradoxical approach towards Sunne, since they merge peace and beauty on the one hand, but also loneliness and suffering, on the other. And if the author experienced "two childhoods: one happy and one unhappy"¹⁴ [our translation], it is our turn to play our part in the complex process of creation by choosing that image of Sunne that reflects, most likely, our true selves.

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¹⁴ *Ibid*, 22. "Göran Tunström upplevde två barndomar, en lycklig och en olycklig. Den lyckliga varade så länge pappan levde, men när han dog vändes tillvaron upp och ned".