



Literature and Migration

Interview with Stefan Helgesson, Director of Graduate Studies at the Department of English Literature in Stockholms Universitet

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REM: What do you think of the relationship between literature and Immigration?

SH: I conceive of this relationship, first of all, in terms of literature and *migration*, rather than *immigration*. Immigration – which could be defined as the process establishing a home in a new country – is one aspect of migration. But it is also tied to a static conception of the nation-state as a stable entity that will receive, absorb, or indeed alienate and exploit, immigrants. Migration, by contrast, draws attention to our global age of accelerated mass mobility, with exceedingly complex affective bonds being forged between individuals and a multiplicity of places. The lived reality of any national society today is, to a lesser or greater degree, one of migration. The conceptual separation of immigration from the nation has therefore dangerous political implications. In academic theory, this point was made already in the 1990s by Arjun Appadurai and Homi Bhabha, who taught us to think beyond the closed categories of place-bound and cultural identity. But today, with the rise of extreme right-wing populism that that conceptual separation of immigration and nation is once again rife and politically toxic.

From this follows that literature in our day is not just affected by but must also be responsive to migration. Empirically, one can quickly establish that any number of contemporary writers are either migrants themselves or grapple with the memory and consequences of migration: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, Nina Bouraoui, Patrick Flanery, Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Roberto Bolaño, Aleksandar Hemon, Junot Diaz, Chika Unigwe, Yoko Tawada, Jonas Hassen Khemiri, Yahya Hassan. The list goes on. More than that: it is, typically, among the “migrant writers” that one finds the most successful and critically acclaimed writers in the world today. I place, however, the label in scare quotes, since this obviously is not a homogenous group. Indeed, as soon as one looks more closely at any given writer’s work, the explanatory force of “migration” as an interpretative will vary tremendously.

As many scholars have observed, the sociological fact of migration poses challenges to the conventional ways of approaching literature by way of the nation and national languages. It exposes assumptions of belonging that have been taken for granted (if you write in Swedish you are a Swedish writer, if you come from the USA you are an American writer, etc.). It multiplies audiences, making the address of any given literary text complex and unstable, and it affects what Foucault once called the “author-function”, since the significance of authorship will not be uniform across different societies and literary cultures. The predicament of the migrant can also result in an instability in the use of language, in productive as well as constraining ways.

REM: How do you think this relationship concerns your professional position, as an academic, and your personal production, as a writer?

SH: I am first of all a literary scholar and critic; my writing career is modest, although important to me personally. In very concrete terms, migration shapes much of my teaching. English students in Sweden have a wide range of backgrounds, which has both to do with the make-up contemporary society and with the particular role of English as a mediating language in an age of migration and globalisation. One way, for me, to respond to this as a teacher has been to devise courses that incorporate the various border-crossing perspectives of postcolonial studies, translation studies and world literature studies. In brief, to use the teaching of literature as one means of making sense of and providing a critical angle on our contemporary predicament.

In my creative writing, my own formative experience of migration – moving between southern Africa and Sweden in my early years – is arguably the main driving force behind what I do. I'm hesitant to reflect on it too deeply, as I sense that there is a generative energy there that needs to be left alone to do its job. But I can just flatly state that my first novel, *Leve fortsättarna* (2010, "Long live the continuers"), tells the story of some Swedish individuals in Mozambique in the 1980s. And the manuscript that is still in its early stages takes my parents' experience of working many years in apartheid South Africa as a point of departure. One thing that intrigues me, is that I am only able to write creatively in Swedish. This says something, I believe, about an urge in me to inscribe these African experiences in the Swedish language, to provide a home for them in what is both a national language and a language that must exceed its own national boundaries in order to accommodate the experience of migration.

REM: How does immigration and literature relate in contemporary Swedish culture and politics?

SH: It has been high on the agenda for many years, with ups and downs. The 1990s were a watershed decade with a considerable influx of refugees from the Balkan wars and a corresponding rise in right-wing extremism which petered out some years later. The last couple of years have been even more critical, with the so-called Sweden Democrats (representing what I would call fascism-light) becoming the third largest party in parliament and an increasing polarisation in social media and the public sphere generally. I still choose to be optimistic about the ultimately egalitarian and hospitable ethos of Swedish society, but there has been a disturbing normalisation of nationalist and covertly racist positions that would have been regarded as extreme ten years ago. Added to that, there has been an accumulation of overtly racist deeds, such as the school killings in Trollhättan in 2015, or the white supremacist murderer Peter Mangs who was at large for several years in Malmö. Then again, for each horrifying event, there are yet more counter examples of public acts of hospitality, generosity and inclusion. I'm wary, in other words, of depicting the situation in all too sombre colours. But it is a complicated situation with worrying implications for the future.

The literary response to all this has been powerful. It is notable that so many of Sweden's prominent writers since the late 1990s are themselves shaped by experiences of migration: Alejandro Leiva Wenger, Jonas Hassen Khemiri, Athena Farrokhzad, Jasim Mohamed. Wenger has published only one book, but is my personal favourite: he manages to deconstruct the Swedish language – and its concomitant allocation of identities – from within. There is also a considerable number of writers especially in Arabic and Kurdish who reside in Sweden. But one needs to move beyond the tokenism of names and backgrounds to recognise that migration more generally is on the literary agenda. One of last year's most successful Swedish novels was *Swede Hollow* (yes, that

is its Swedish title) by Ola Larsmo, an historical novel about “failed” Swedish immigrants to the United States around 1900 who end up as slum dwellers in St Paul. The resonances between this novel and the current situation are obvious, and a way for “ethnic Swedes” to shift their perception of “immigrants” in Sweden.

REM: What is your opinion on the latest Trump politics on immigration and its possible effects on cultural production and reception.

SH: I find Trump’s stated policies – inconsistent as they are – horrifying, since they convey no sense of an underlying, informed, humane intelligence. There are versions of conservatism I can respect without agreeing with them; Trump is just a buffoon and an ignoramus – hopefully a sign of white, patriarchal supremacism in its dying throes. Twitter is truly his medium: a president for an age of distraction, verbal attrition and fleeting opinions parading as knowledge. One can always hope that sheer incompetence will limit the amount of damage he can do, but that is a very wry form of optimism. A more robust optimism can be derived from the fact that only a minority of the American people voted him in, and that the popular vote went to Hillary Clinton.

His attacks on the NEH, NEA and other public bodies in the cultural field, as well as his hostility towards scientific knowledge, are unimaginably destructive. His anti-immigration policies are outrageous and risk condemning millions to shadow lives in constant fear of discovery. In brief, this is a moment in the history of the United States that calls for civil disobedience. In my more pessimistic moments, my fear is that this could be the case in Sweden as well, a few years down the line.