SILENCE BECOMES THE TRAVELLER: A VIEW OF CONTEMPORARY SWEDISH SOCIETY

Alexandru GAFTON
Universitatea „Al.I. Cuza”
algafton@gmail.com

Abstract:

Travel memoirs or notes are texts which enjoy great popularity not only among almost all categories of researchers (humanists, artists, naturalists, sociologists, psychologists), but also among those who are fond of belles-lettres.

Both the judgments by means of which a world perceives itself, perhaps adjusting itself according to certain desiderata, and the external judgments which may undergo changes according to certain patterns, are essentially subjected to sensorial and conceptual subjectivity, requiring its periodical adjustment to the natural laws of organic matter.

Keywords:

Travellers, Swedish society, the perception of otherness.

Since these writings provide various kinds of differently processed practical information, either including interesting interpretations or simply bearing the traces of the traveller’s sensitivity, passion and skills, while disclosing his innermost thoughts and feelings, they may have a considerable effect on many types of readers.

The very same features, however, charge these texts with a dose of relativity. By all means, the texts of specialists (geographers, historians, architects, psychologists, sociologists etc.) are not lacking in such limitations, either. They all relate to something and, regardless of the incorporated amount of material or experience, that particular thing remains central and predominant, whether it belongs to axiology, theology, to the perspective of their own research field or simply to aesthetics.

BDD-A20381-EN © 2015 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:31:41 UTC)

In this regard, the irony deployed by G. Călinescu when he presents Dinicu Golescu, the one who measures markets, buildings, spaces in general, is quite amiss. In St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the central area of the pavement provides a metric comparison with other relatively large religious buildings, apparently comparable. This fact may become a stimulus and suggestion for a more elaborate and demanding mental effort, by which the one who scrutinizes the entire space tries to imagine how many average *basilicas* would fit in there, volumetrically speaking. While those who are not animated by the fruitful urge to observe, imagine and compare spaces may regard it superficially, only after such an effort could one reach a deep understanding of the fact that those who designed and built St. Peter's Basilica had a sense and knowledge of proportions so consistent with the understanding of natural space and with its conversion into architectural space that, without such an effort, the viewer does not realize how big the Basilica actually is! Then, only in that moment can one understand how proportionate that building is in all three dimensions, how the exterior merges with the surrounding space, the complexity of the ways in which the inner spaces are managed architecturally and in which the in-built constructions are incorporated, with all the consequences deriving from this fact and affecting our senses and mind.

Therefore, the approaches which deal with a subject from a narrow perspective do not seem to be productive at all, and even less ironic, especially when dilettantes ironize other dilettantes. Except for the fact that the data and criteria which may be controlled and perhaps scientifically accepted are strictly technical in nature, these kinds of issues do not belong to only one domain; they pertain to a space dominated by a certain degree of subjectivity, the superior understanding not casting aside the right to simple human judgement. This domain seems to be rather a field in which perspectives intersect each other and where ideas flow free.

Naturally, the traveller does not often understand everything he observes and the scientist cannot place on a high level of understanding all of his findings. Nevertheless, their inevitably interpretative accounts are the ones which constitute the most powerful imagery. In fact, this is the way human beings perceive, represent and think their world and by which they act within it.

BDD-A20381-EN © 2015 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:31:41 UTC)

Locals, in their turn, who may be credited with a certain degree of understanding of their world, have their own limitations, though. These limitations are – apparently paradoxically – due not only to their consubstantiality with that particular world, but also to their lack of understanding of how other worlds, generated by other mentalities, are built. They may perfectly function in their own world, but this does not necessarily mean that they have fully understood it on the conceptual level since they rather naturally assimilated the environment they live in. As a matter of fact, such limitations cannot be attributed to the *other one*, nor can they be eliminated by the simple practice of one's own world.

Intransigence is probably the most relevant thing for the observation and understanding of how human beings dogmatize their perceptions, their understanding and the bonds between them and their own world and environment (travellers are no exception to this either, despite the fact that they have acquired the routine of traversing several spaces). Everyone is interested, almost without fail, in the other's opinion about their own world. Although Goethe considered that we get to know ourselves best through others, this interest is almost never oriented towards the willingness to accept the opinions of others – not even in an adjusted way. What everyone really wants is to check and "rectify" the other's perceptions, to lead the other to his/her own understanding, even if this means to modify the other's profound concepts and mindset, including the knowledge of their own world (at home)!

Be it a traveller or a local, everyone seeks the opinions of the local / traveller about the world of the traveller / local. Whether he does it at home or among foreigners, he imagines himself testing the abilities of the other with a wise omniscience and from the position of a unique referential being. However, what he pursues is the correspondence between what others say and what he perceives and thinks, regarded as a truth beyond any doubt. Any deviation from his worldview is shattered by the argument he believes to be the supreme and the ultimate one, i.e. from the other's description he cannot recognize anything of his world, and therefore everything is an aberration!

It is apparently paradoxical that anyone, local or traveller, who judges the country of the other may be even more fierce, especially if he comes from a culture which reckons itself superior by the long lasting things their ancestors achieved through the centuries (even though he himself

BDD-A20381-EN © 2015 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:31:41 UTC)

exerts the opposite with all his actions). The foreigner is always ready to explain how the world actually is to those who are willing to listen and how many misunderstandings of reality there are! Anyone who carries out the experiment of approving everything a foreigner says may see that what he really needs is not approval – often he does not even feel the need to transform the other into a being who perceives, understands and judges just as he does – but what he does need is to push his limits till it makes clear that the two worlds are strictly hierarchical, that one has nothing to do but to follow the other exactly. It is not knowledge which is transferred and broadened but it is a single Procrustean bed. The foreigner always has a story about the other, by which he bespeaks his perception of a sordid, incoherent, sad world or, in any case, of a world charged with such attributes, his judgements being definitive and irrevocable. Unlike Romanians, most people find pleasure in sharing their experiences from a few days' sojourn in some place and at different times. Each time he would describe in detail how he was assaulted by a journalist or how he experienced, certainly indirectly, the regime. He would also tell how brave he was (unlike the great majority of Romanians who should have done the same in every second of their lives) when he rejected a supposed offer to praise the regime. Each time people forget to tell how they obtained the visa to enter a country which is selective not only regarding entrance but also regarding exit!

Such interactions, in which everybody presents and "judges" the other's world and then the image of their own world, bring about a consequent disagreement. This shows that, in fact, each and every one is stuck in their own world, that the world of the other cannot be seen but through one's own world, just like everyone perceives reality only through their own physical eyes. A parallel enumeration, in eight columns, of the "flaws" and "fine points" of the other's world, done both by the local and the traveller, would show little in common, due either to a misunderstanding of each other or rather to their different perspectives, and things would not change significantly even after several years of living in each other's world. The newly discovered "flaws" and "fine points" would be due, in the same proportion, to the level of understanding and to the mentality background generated by the consubstantiality with one's own world.

BDD-A20381-EN © 2015 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:31:41 UTC)

Only the "detachment" of those who no longer belong to either world could bring some sort of agreement, mainly among them, which is a significant fact in terms of judging this particular matter, but which has no consequences in terms of the communities' real life. Therefore, the understanding of the other and of their world should be preceded by acceptance, such "catechesis" is nothing but the sign of leading the other to one's own understanding of the world, meaning the annihilation of the other's identity, all these made in the name of correct understanding, but, in fact, based on the misunderstanding, disapproval and rejection of the other's perspective.

*

Bearing this in mind, we venture to share some of our thoughts acquired during our short, 10 days' stay in Stockholm, thus exposing ourselves to the risk of being contradicted perhaps by both non-Scandinavians and Scandinavians. Our consolation is the thought that, after all, Columbus did discover lands which he believed to be the Indies and, to a certain extent, they really were some kind of "Indies".

*

The traveller who has often travelled through the Germanic world and especially the one who has lived in it will see in Stockholm a world which bears the general features of the Germanic world, in different degrees and only partially, of course. Some of these characteristics are natural features; others are developed by the culturally determined will(power).

What is fascinating in the Germanic world is space partition. Just like Romans or Slavs, Germans have straight bipolar streets with buildings on each side, but here the three-dimensionality of space is much more deeply understood. The streets are not necessarily built as spaces between parallel rows of buildings or as streams intersected at more or less right angles, but neither can they be compared to the entangled sinuosity of the Asian or North African world. Between two arteries there is a real network of freedom, lanes and piazzas, i.e. separations and unions. This kind of geography represents the way these communities relate to each other, being congener with the way in which public space has been internalized and then reflected. Buildings bear the clear traces of the same historicity. Impeccably built, lasting over the decades, consistent with the living which derives from the diachronic perspective and which integrates it as a main pillar, they are a

BDD-A20381-EN © 2015 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:31:41 UTC)

sign of the continuity of living. It is difficult to say whether it is natural or deliberate, but it most certainly is consciously assimilated.

Quite exemplary may be the experiences in spaces where tourists usually do not enter, except for certain smaller proportions, such as the Opera and the Museum of Natural History. The traveller may find himself at a performance which normally would not be any different from other performances; it may even be as good as the one which, on its premiere, hosted the royal family among the spectators. It is very likely that he would encounter opera singers who are not much known on world stages but who deliver an excellent performance. He most certainly would be amazed by the unusual relation between the high quality of the musical act, the artist's great modesty and the warm, somewhat familiar, absolutely real "day-to-day" appreciation of the audience. Very well-trained from the perspectives which may be revealed in this particular kind of space, the audience has in front of it artists who seem to be devoid of any vanity and futile ambitions, which generate histrionic gestures or success measured by the long/prolonged ovation and the number of applauding hands. Although they have the necessary conditions which would allow them to bring famous singers, Swedish people prefer to listen to artists whom their own reality can provide. Perhaps this fact maintains their equilibrium, which seems to say that by means of exceptionality it is not possible to found a society which would be well-balanced in terms of the dynamic between stability and variability. It seems to me that it is the sign of the deliberate will to consolidate a stable edifice, which would not be one of the stages constructed for the transitory genius. This feature seems to show that Swedish people are not keen to live in the moment but to live a well-balanced life and on a historical scale, avoiding spectacular but ineffective effort.

The building of the Museum of Natural History is a real palace, a learning space made available to Society by the State. Therefore, its aisles are freely traversed by a continuous flux of visitors of all ages. The spaces dedicated to minerals, oceans, the planet, the solar system, the world of insects, to the human body and to different moments of history, etc. are extremely well-equipped with moulds, demonstrative devices, samples of the presented reality, as the case may be. Children may learn here about the physical world, about its laws and rules and how they can interact with it. Adults, in their turn, may probably better represent their acquired

BDD-A20381-EN © 2015 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:31:41 UTC)

knowledge and skills, combining life and its learning in the most solid and realistic manner.

These few observations seem to be also confirmed by the way in which visible everyday life is conducted within the public space, beginning with the most trivial levels of action and behaviour and continuing with the most serious ones. The behaviour while crossing the street, for instance, is quite particular in the Germanic world. Generally, regardless of the city's size or traffic intensity, pedestrians in Germany observe traffic light conventions. On the other hand, in a city like Zürich, pedestrians cross the road when the light is red rather than when it is green, and the drivers are extremely forbearing. Even the construction of the streets – i.e. the way they have been conceived – allows such kind of behavioural freedom. In this respect, the liberty taken by those in Stockholm is comparable to that of the Swiss, but adjusted to the fact that their streets are wider, clearly delimited by sidewalks, though without the heavy traffic of a common European capital city.

Wherever the traveller looks, whether it is on buses or trains, in shops or squares (animated by the average traffic or by a traditional holiday), in areas of heavy pedestrian traffic, in entertainment spots or into the organization and functioning of private houses, he will observe the same rational Germanic spirit, which arranges things in an efficient manner. Control, however, is much more strictly exerted than in Switzerland and it is incomparable with what it is in Germany. It is difficult to say whether in Germany the conventions have been more naturally established and thus internalized to such a degree that they became invisible or whether they have been conceived so as to better agree with the mentality which generated that world.

The same liberty, amazing for Romance peoples, but significant for such an analysis, appears in the domain of language. According to the centrifugal policy of Germanic people, every individual may use their own dialect or patois without any fear of being excluded, since nobody understands why they should adopt another (linguistic) norm which is not their own, under the conditions of a significant equality, oriented towards the understanding of the purposes of language in the world. This idea is promoted in schools and among society at large, and, regardless of the way in which one or the other would relate to this important issue, all of them are

BDD-A20381-EN © 2015 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:31:41 UTC)

far from the opprobrium which would accompany such a behaviour and attitude in the Romance world. This could be one of the signs which indicate their willingness to acknowledge and respect the formal identity of their fellow citizens.

Overall, Stockholm reflects the great openness for which Sweden is usually known to foreigners. This receptivity refers, among other things, to the way in which the general mentality influences everyday life, that being the base on which Swedish society is established and on which it develops. In agreement with the general cultural trends of the West nowadays, the Swedish world deliberately lifts its natural confines, promoting the receptivity to physical and spiritual alterity. The commonly heard encouragements like "if you enjoyed your stay in Sweden, come to live here" leave no room for interpretation. Sweden seems to have surpassed tolerance as idea and practice. Assimilating the Darwinian concept of the unity of all living matter, it reached the Lamarckian proclamation that there are no limits to the educability of the very same living material. Under such circumstances, there are more and more situations in which Swedish people usually conduct themselves without any discrimination and with no instinct of conservation. This reflects an almost complete demolition of the ideology which tries to argue that nature may be dominated by culture and that the former could and should be changed according to cultural precepts. It is a way of thinking and acting which is easily reproduced and spread; hence it will have consequences not exclusively for Sweden and its fruits will be seen before long.

*

Many of the remarks formulated above inherently derive from the way in which natural realities are organized and in which communities have gradually developed. Others derive from the particular manner in which mentality has been adapted to reality, but also from the way in which this specific mindset has understood and managed to restructure the world on this double basis. Ultimately, such results are generated by the organic co-evolution of mentality and the surrounding reality, those who built this world being constructed by this very process. The cultural interaction with the mentality of other milieus may produce more or less profound changes, especially under the reign of the will(power)

BDD-A20381-EN © 2015 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:31:41 UTC)