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Bjarne Thorup Thomsen:

Geomodernism and Affect in Eyvind Johnson's Urban North

Reflections on *Stad i mörker* and related novel-, travel- and memory-writing

Eyvind Johnson's conceptualisations of the Swedish North contain an emphasis on the town, an urban dimension, which challenges perceived notions of the northern Nordic 'periphery' as predominantly a domain of natural forces and resources. His earliest novels *Timans och rättfärdigheten* (1925) and *Stad i mörker* (1927) are cases in point. The latter text in particular could be said to demonstrate the possibilities of a precariously positioned Northern town of moderate size to constitute a dynamic and multifocal setting for a modern narrative. Traces of these locational methods are found already in Johnson's debut book, a collection of four shorter fictions entitled *De fyra främlingarna* (1924), which contains as its most substantial contribution a novella, 'Snickarprofessor Tantalus', that pivots on a portrayal of intellectual ambition and public opinion in a minor town environment in the North, pointing ahead, as argued by Johnson scholar and biographer Örjan Lindberger (1986: 121), to stylistic registers – and to subject-matter, we could add – in *Stad i mörker*. Johnson's use of 'off-centre' townscapes as the stage for his both formally and topically innovative probing of emerging modern societies and states of mind would seem to bear out, and could work to exemplify, current critical endeavours at re-drawing the map of modernism.

With 'geomodernism' as one of its labels, recent scholarship has foregrounded the role of the margins of modernity in reconfiguring literary and artistic articulation, critiquing a centrist perspective on the development of modernism. In their introduction to a volume of essays entitled *Geomodernisms*, Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel argue that the term modernism could be broken open 'into something [that may be called] geomodernisms, which signals a locational approach to modernisms' engagement with cultural and political discourses of global modernity', promoting a new perspective on the evolution of modernisms 'as they make themselves and are made from the *outside in*' (Doyle and Winkiel 2005: 3). Doyle and Winkiel identify, moreover, 'a sense of speaking from outside or inside or both at once, of orienting toward and away from the metropole, of existing somewhere between belonging and dispersion' (2005: 4) as facets of the geomodernist sensibility. Doyle's and Winkiel's analysis is representative of a broader spatial turn in the current theorising of modernism, prioritising and progressing, instead of the more formal emphasis of previous approaches to modernism, our understanding of the diversity, density and complexity of the engagement with place that informs modernist writing. In his study of

space and geography in modernism, *Moving Through Modernity*, Andrew Thacker thus explores what he calls the polytopic quality of modernist writing, arguing that movement between and across multiple sorts of space – from the room and the street to macro geographies – is a key feature of modernism. In a similar argument, Per Thomas Andersen in a collection of essays entitled *Identitetens geografi*, focusing partly on Norwegian inter-war literature and partly on English-language postcolonial literature, presents an interesting investigation into the aesthetical manifestation of the phenomenon he terms, following the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, polygamy of place. Andersen is of the view that the plurality, or ‘polygamy’, of attachments to places, frequently far apart, which is a widespread human and sociological phenomenon under the current condition of globalism (Beck’s ‘second modernity’) has aesthetical precursors in the period of ‘first modernity’, more specifically in literature of the first half of the twentieth century and especially in the inter-war period. As prime Norwegian examples he cites Cora Sandel and Aksel Sandemose. Equally, the locational strategies showcased by Johnson’s early urban writing would seem to bear out Andersen’s argument. As a further example of the spatial reorientation of theories of modernism, in this instance fully in the context of a postcolonial analysis, Michael Valdez Moses in a study entitled ‘Disorientation: Conrad and the Imperial Origins of Modernist Aesthetics’ argues that the prevailing perspective in literary criticism on the geographic origins of European modernism needs to be amended to take account of ‘the decisive contribution made by the peculiarly disorienting experiences of the modern European consciousness at the imperial periphery’ (Moses 2007: 46).

Building on such decentring, polytopic and locational approaches to modernistic trajectories, we shall in the following explore the role of proximate as well as distant place in Johnson’s representation of the urban Swedish North in his second novel *Stad i mörker*, while also incorporating some comparative reference to *Timans och rättfärdigheten*. Furthermore, we shall discuss the affective, as well as the ideological, dimensions of the modern northern townscapes that Johnson presents in *Stad i mörker*. Additional occasional illumination of some of the artistic and topographical topics in question will be provided through the lenses of some of Johnson’s later travel- and memory-writing, especially texts focused on the Swedish North where he was born and grew up. In these hybrid genres, Johnson, with his growing cultural ‘capital’ as one of Sweden’s foremost autodidactic and modernising writers, operates as a cultural ambassador of the North, while at the same time using these mixed forms as opportunities to reflect on the relationship between his literary activity and the northern experience.

Proximity and Distance

Johnson's interest in the connections between the northern geographies and the workings of his literary creativity is evident in the travelogue *Vinterresa in Norrbotten*, which was published in 1955, first as a series of travel reports in the national newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, and subsequently in book form by Bonniers. The travelogue opens with the approaching by train of Boden, Johnson's home town in Sweden's northernmost region of Norrbotten, followed by arrival at Luleå, the nearby regional capital located at the Bay of Bothnia, and thereafter charts a journey north-westward through the vastness of the region, primarily along the important iron ore railway line via Gällivare to Kiruna, both new industrialised towns of the North. To complete the circuit, Johnson then travels back to Boden¹ from where he departs with Stockholm as his destination as the travel narrative closes. While passing through the landscapes of Lapland in the interior of the region, Johnson considers the criticism he has received at times in his career that he has not been faithful to Norrbotten in his writing. He does this by debating the notion of faithfulness itself, deploring the author who remains restricted to only one environment rather than availing himself/herself of the mode of distancing which, eventually, can be converted into a new kind of closeness. He goes on to document how travelling away, to continental Europe, liberated his literary engagement with the North. These and related observations seem to form part of an aesthetical credo that centres on locational cross-fertilisation, on import and export, on combinational creativity. As Johnson in *Vinterresa* returns to Boden, he reflects on the way in which street scenes and affective atmospheres originating in local Northern townscapes were transferred into texts set much further south: 'Och jag minns gatustämningar som först upplevdes i Luleå, Boden eller Haparanda men som jag försökt att placera in i böcker som rör sig med betydligt sydligare trakter' (Johnson 1955: 121). Complementarily, Johnson argues that if he were to venture into the difficult challenge of composing a novel centred on Boden, Luleå or other places in Norrbotten, consciously or subconsciously dimensions of other countries would slip into the text. This type of locational interchange and hybridity is summed up in the notion of a literary 'växelbruk' (Johnson 1955: 121), a rotational method which, in turn, is reminiscent of the confluence of proximity and distance, of 'inside' and 'outside' that Doyle and Winkiel (2005: 4) identify as indicative of the geomodernist sensibility.

In *Vinterresa i Norrbotten* Boden likewise forms the setting for reflections on *Stad i mörker* more specifically. This novel is commonly in criticism and public opinion believed to be modelled mainly upon Johnsons' hometown. Lindberger, for example, comments that 'det rör sig i Eyvind Johnsons bok inte om en gammal stad utan om en ung, och det kan inte betvivlas att atmosfären framför allt är hämtad från Boden' (Lindberger 1986: 153). Johnson himself, however, is more cautious about this connection, situating the topography and the

topics of the text somewhere between the local and the universal, the factual and the fictional, the novel being about 'några tänkta figurer i en påhittad, vintrig stad' (Johnson 195: 107). In a commentary on the view (debatable, as we shall discuss below) that the novel paints an overly dark and negative picture of his hometown, Johnson counters, in response to the question of location, that, while the narrative might be said to 'visa glimtar, en vag kontur av Boden eller kanske Luleå eller någon annan stad i nordliga Norrland' (Johnson 195: 107), it is impossible to disentangle the exterior or foreign components from what he has written with Norrbotten as its frame.

In the conditions of its creation as well as in the complex sense of place it communicates, *Stad i mörker* clearly reflects this creative interface between proximity and distance which Johnson foregrounds in *Vinterresa i Norrbotten*. The novel, Johnson's second, was written in the first half of 1926, mainly in the small town of Capbreton on the Atlantic coast of the south of France, at the Bay of Biscay, before it was completed in Paris. Referring in this instance to the Paris district of Ménilmontant where he rented a room at the time of completion, Johnson in a retrospective piece, 'En helt liten stad', published in 1949 in *Luleå gymnasietidning* (the journal of the Luleå sixth-form grammar school) rhetorically connects the townscapes, separated by considerable distance, of the novel's production and of its content: he 'satt [...] i ett rum högst upp i huset i den lilla staden och sysslade med en bok om en annan liten stad' (Johnson 1949: 16).² The inclination Johnson displays in 'En helt liten stad', and in many other memory pieces, to invoke communication lines between a wider geography and a northern locality on which his writing focuses is equally manifested in *Stad i mörker* itself, where it feeds into a topographical strategy of embedment, comparison or juxtapositioning, while the novel in other respects represents a literary project that aims to constitute and concentrate on the northern town as a modern universe, both as society and as textual setting, fostering new affective and ideological responses. This duality in Johnson's novel we shall now attempt to document.

Centre and Periphery (1): The town in the world

While the town depicted in *Stad i mörker* may seem isolated, larger coordinates impinge on it in a variety of ways. Its ambiguous status of both centre and periphery, of both significant and insignificant, of worthy of both celebration and critique is summarised pictorially in the text. The novel contains in separate chapters which we shall now explore two prominent episodes of mapping, in which it employs a concretised cartographic technique in order to let central characters encounter and contemplate the implications of the positioning of the town in a larger-scale system.

In a scene set, not untypically of the novel, in an institutional environment, in this instance the editorial office of the local newspaper, the acute gaze of the socially mobile and politically ambitious manufacturer Hammar travels across a map of Europe displayed on the office wall towards the demarcation of the northern town in the following manner:

Det är stort, Europa, tycker urmakarn. Han har just inte tänkt på det förut. Tyskland, Frankrike, England, ett stycke Skandinavien, ett stycke Ryssland. Och gränserna förändras då och då; ljudlöst, nästan omärkligt på kartan, med buller och bråk där ute. Där ute –? [...] Långt uppe en liten prick, en liten stad. Hammar upptäcker att den verkligen hör till Europa, är en punkt i världen, ett litet centra, kring vilket en landsbygd sluter sig – en kärna, ett säte – – –

Det är litet. Han måste erkänna, att det är försvinnande. Stockholm är en helt annan sak, men detta är f ö r litet. Man ser det inte utan ansträngning, och en främling skulle vara osäker på beteckningen stad eller by – (Johnson 1996 [1927]: 149).³

‘[P]rick’, ‘punkt’, ‘centra’, ‘kärna’, ‘säte’, ‘stad’, ‘by’: the poetical richness and the slippages of the nomenclature encapsulate the uncertain and contingent positioning of the town, which contributes to its geomodern attributes. The notion of fluid European boundaries and the journey undertaken by the protagonist’s perspective across these boundaries together enforce a sense of spatial flux (paralleled by the temporal flux achieved by the shift into the present tense during the course of the passage, a device frequently used by Johnson). The question mark following the concept of ‘[d]är ute’ communicates, moreover, an uncertainty about being outside or inside or both at once.

The media environment that surrounds this episode of macro mapping is no coincidence, as the editorial office in which manufacturer Hammar momentarily finds himself on his own, and which constitutes the proximity of place that governs the composition of the novel’s chapter VI, ‘Mellanspel’, is at the same time conceived as a veritable communication ‘hot spot’, with telephone and telegraph connected to the capital and further afield intervening in the narrative with news streams conveying fragments of current international and domestic events. The breaking news items range globally from unrest in China, via dictatorship in Italy to bank robbery in Stockholm; they even take in the cosmos, reporting the discovery of ‘En ny stjärna av okänd valör’ (130), while also referencing, tongue-in-cheek, the novel’s own place of origin, as mentioned above, pointed to in the fragment ‘Storm och fiskarbåtarna gå inte ut i Biskayabukten’ (130). Thus, while maintaining its local emplacement, the novel lets a plurality of exterior domains and discourses act on the town. Stylistically, the chapter is characterised by an abrupt, economical and elliptical diction,

which contributes to an overarching sense of speed and modernity, with the opening, impatient onomatopoeia 'Rrrrr rrrr rr rrr-rr-rr' (130) that renders the insistence of the news-line telephone developing into an acoustic leitmotif that punctuates the chapter, emphasising, additionally, the significance of modern sound, rhythm and phrasing in Johnson's novel, paralleling developments in contemporary music and poetry. A related acoustic motif features, incidentally, in chapter II, 'Februaris ansikte', in which the representation of whispering voices as 'Ssszzzzsssszzz-ssschyzzzz' (39) or similar feeds into the depiction of the public violation of the post office clerk and radical local politician Miss Ågren, the novel's female protagonist (see further discussion below).

Moving on to our second example of the role of mapping in the novel, this is taken from an earlier chapter, number III, entitled 'Andersson, helt enkelt', and centres, as its deceptively/ironically simple heading suggests, on the novel's other male protagonist, the sceptical, philosophically inclined school teacher Andersson. The chapter contains a scene informed by an equally intense consciousness of the ambiguity of positioning as the one ascribed to manufacturer Hammar as discussed above. In the scene in question Andersson's gaze performs a related, albeit more surreal, and more sombre, pictorial juxtaposing of south and north on another institutional wall, this time that of the class room. In a fashion again characteristic of its formal ambition and innovation, the text weaves patterns of motifs of light and darkness on the wall, as an affective contrast emerges between the southern sun-infused and exotic segments of the map and the blackness of the adjoining board, which appears to function as an extended mapping of the northern condition: 'Där hängde kartan över Europa. Den hade ljusa partier, sydliga, bördiga länder. Nästan gula av välmåga, platta, solbelysta . . . Men i ena vrån stod mörkret som en gapande svart mun: svarta tavlan . . .' (71). Thus, Andersson's more experimental cartography seems to situate the north as a corner or periphery (rather than a heart) of darkness so extreme that it falls off and exists beyond conventional mapping.

This spatial tension between local alienation and global connection is in keeping with the emotional thrust of chapter III in its entirety, as this is composed around opposites of feelings of confinement, spleen and stagnation on the one hand and longings towards a wider world and vision on the other. It is characteristic that Andersson's destination when he earlier in the chapter in a typical fashion traverses the townscape is the modern node of the railway station where he watches the long-distance train arrive and depart and studies the timetable poster with its lure of distant places and promise of geodynamics and vitality: 'Landet stod inte stilla', 'Världen är full av liv' (66). The school teacher, a southern incomer to the north, is in the earlier stages of the novel in particular conceived as a modern melancholic, isolated in his individualism and irony, regretting his career choices, and

harbouring unrealised desires of Odyssean travel, as expressed in the contrast between the professions of teacher and sailor: ‘han [var] skollärar Andersson, som velat bli sjöman’ (62), and in the recurring motif of the swell of waves: ‘Havet: det slår mot sina stränder’ (55). In his monograph on Johnson’s early work and years, tellingly entitled *Norrbottningen som blev europé*, Örjan Lindberger connects the coastal southern environment in which *Stad i mörker* was conceived with the novel’s method of letting townscapes be counterpointed by seascapes: ‘författarens minnen från vistelsen vid havet får färga skollärarens drömmar om det ovanliga, i kontrast mot gråheten och februaikylan i stadsmiljön’ (Lindberger 1986: 161). Lindberger goes on to argue more broadly that the novel’s contrapuntal and polyphonic method, which would become a hallmark of Johnson’s writing, and which we also saw exemplified in chapter VI and its connected media environment, may have been influenced by Johnson’s musical interests.

As for further functions of Andersson’s voice in Johnson’s novelistic symphony, it is likewise part of the school teacher’s remit to formulate the novel’s most far-reaching spatial dimension, extending deep into cosmos and other galaxies. This is the most radical articulation of the locational hybridity which, as we have seen, is a pronounced feature of *Stad i mörker* in a variety of ways, and of Johnson’s fiction-, memory- and travel-writing more broadly. In a key scene, in chapter I, ‘Symposion’, offering uninhibited night-time views into frozen space from the vantage point of the town hotel balcony in connection with the celebrations of the town’s twenty-fifth anniversary depicted in the chapter, Andersson introduces a ‘deep’ spatial and temporal measurement – ‘millioner stjärnor i ett ändlöst rum’, ‘tusentals år i en oviss framtid’ (28) – against which the morality, or lack of morality, of politics should be assessed, according to the teacher: ‘Evigheten överlämnar [politikern] till partiet, och partiet överlämnar den oftast åt – evigheten’ (28). This ideological macro measurement⁴ frames the novel’s subsequent, much more close-up, town-orientated critique of the machinations of impure politics, a topic we shall develop below. The novel’s cosmic outreach finds, finally, a further form of expression in the recurring references to the expansive spectacle of the northern light whose wild and fluctuating dance above the small human settlement captures its specific northern atmosphere, while it may also be seen as symbolising the exposure of the town to the world (this type of scenery figures, moreover, as the cover illustration of the first edition of *Stad i mörker*).

Centre and periphery (2): the town as world

While Johnson’s novel in these and related ways communicates the contingent and precarious position of the town in a wider geography or cosmos, it aims at the same time to

construct the northern town as a complex and proximate literary universe in its own right, with its own inbuilt centre-periphery problematics, and with affective and ideological investments of its own. On this level, the town itself carries in the text the status and terminology of cosmos, with the movement of people in the townscape being presented, for example, as 'planeternas gång i stadens öde rymd' (95), in keeping with a cohesive rhetorical tendency in the novel towards foregrounding the town as agent, as atmosphere, as adversary, as common collective condition. While the town life depicted in *Stad i mörker* has traditionally been interpreted almost exclusively in terms of stasis, suffocation and spleen (cf. our discussion of Andersson's responses and feelings above),⁵ it additionally reads as a domain of constant mobility, nascent modernity, political conflict, and of new interpersonal constellations and affective bonds. In regard to delivering innovative spatial articulation of subjective as well as communal topics, the novel works to demonstrate that an off-centre and smaller-scale setting is capable of matching the metropolitan environment typically associated with modernism. With the 1920s post-war climate of ideological fission but also of societal progress and economic growth as its period frame, the novel sets out to employ the town as a continuous stage for a contemporary drama.

This is a somewhat different spatial strategy from the one that informs Johnson's previous novel, *Timans och rättfärdigheten* – otherwise related to *Stad i mörker* in a range of respects – which includes a relatively extensive section set in Berlin (Johnson 1925: 43-64), the post- and inter-war European cultural metropolis par excellence. A key compositional and thematic device in *Timans och rättfärdigheten* is to let ideological oppositions explicitly encountered and formulated in the vibrant and inflamed debating climate of Berlin be subsequently enacted in the 'remote' northern town. This novel thus arguably represents, in terms of the relationship between the off-centre locale and modernist articulation, an intermediate stage or a stepping-stone towards the full, almost programmatic, centring on the 'periphery' as the privileged (albeit embedded as demonstrated above) place of action, affective atmosphere, ideological enquiry, and artistic innovation found in *Stad i mörker*. The spatial difference between the two novels regulates, moreover, aspects of character mobility and character connectivity in the two texts. In *Timans och rättfärdigheten*, the social conditions and ideological battle lines of Berlin are experienced during a formative stay in the city by one of its protagonists, a younger, reluctant, member of the northern manufacturing dynasty it focuses on, while two of its additional characters – a Berlin pacifist ideologue, Fritze, and the novel's working-class protagonist and employee at the Timans factories – become connected by various motifs (such as illness) and beliefs. In *Stad i mörker*, by contrast, no such international interchange in the operation of characterisation seems permitted according to its 'rules' of direct engagement with place. Indeed, none of the actors in its urban drama are allowed to leave the town, although they may at times harbour

desires or even plans to do so. It is indicative of this type of locational limitation in the novel that, towards the end of the narrative, when manufacturer Hammar's son is about to go abroad – in a case of a representative of a new generation being disenfranchised from or dissenting against the values of the industrial organisation he is intended to inherit that has obvious parallels with that of the Timan dynasty – he drowns close to his departure in a wake in the ice on the outskirts of the town, literally swallowed up by the powers of nature that operate on the margins of the urban environment. This is a clear concretisation of narrative limits, with the accident contributing, moreover, to an overarching sense in the novel of the town as proximate 'destiny'.

Developing our argument, even, indeed not least, the reluctant figure of Andersson contributes to the realisation of the modernist potential of locational limitation in *Stad i mörker*. At the same time as the teacher dreams of escaping what he perceives as the entrapment caused by the town, thus participating in the, significant, centrifugal drift of the novel's imagination, as discussed above, he contributes equally, as a modern literary figure of doubt and shifts, temptation, resistance, and concluding 'affective turn' towards the town (see further discussion in the final section of the article) to the renewal of the depiction of the very townscape he initially despises. An important element of this renewal is constituted by his recurring and apparently aimless but acutely observed meanderings through the town in the modernist metropolitan mode of, for example, Knut Hamsun's *Sult* (with the protagonist of which Anderson also shares, when indoors, the emblem of the solitary rocking chair...) And Andersson is by no means alone as a character in Johnson's novel in being delineated through the method of repeated mobility by foot within the streetscapes of the town; rather, this type of mobility seems to function as a unifying or levelling force, and the foundation for the development of affective bonds, within the novel's character collective. Thus, the growing ambition and activity level of Andersson's apparent adversary, the class-travelling manufacturer, likewise finds expression in increased engagement with the topography of the town: 'Och så tog Hammar promenader. [...] Han utvecklades; han blev en man på väg' (79), while the two protagonists' gradually developing conversational partnership and eventual friendship is similarly enacted primarily via their accidental encounters when walking the streets. As for further forms of street-walking, also the locality's more marginalised existences, in particular the prostitute Venus, are included in the novel's conspectus of the human condition represented as townscape traffic. As suggested by her name, Venus' knowledge of people's planetary movements in the town space is considerable. To a higher degree than any institutionalised body, she represents from her peripheral positions in shadows and doorways a morally uncorrupted embrace of the town: 'Hon kände staden utan att utnyttja sin kännedom för illvilliga ändamål'; [m]oraliskt sett stod hon högt över staden' (96).

The notion of the town as a modern system of mobility and interconnections is summed up metaphorically in *Stad i mörker* by the repeated representation of it as a mechanism, a machinery and, coloured by manufacturer/watch maker Hammar's mindset, as a clockworks. While some of the novel's social critique is invested in these symbolic structures – the town as an amoral force ('En stad har inget hjärta, ingen själ: den är en mekanism' (62)) and politics as a closed and self-perpetuating system ('staden styrdes av en mekanism, det gick av sig självt' (63)) – the machine metaphors simultaneously imbue the town with connotations as a (literary) site firmly rooted in twentieth-century modernity (cf. the periodization in the novel of the local/national turn into the 'machine age' as a recent occurrence, as conveyed in the formulation 'efter sekelskiftet och maskinindustrins födelse' (13)).

As for public sector and early welfare development, and political intrigue in this societal context, *Stad i mörker* similarly constructs its 'marginal' town setting as a microcosm of modernity. The novel explores in its town drama how (local) politics and its attendant power game are played out, using as a main plot motor the marginalisation and eventual demise of a progressive female politician and tracking the effects of this 'casual', but possibly implicitly instigated, 'vacancy' on collective and individual behaviour, Hammar's in particular (this is in principle, incidentally, not dissimilar to the key compositional device in J. K. Rowling's 2012 novel entitled *The Casual Vacancy*). On this level, Johnson's novel inhabits the linguistic landscapes of phenomena such as 'stadsfullmäktigeval' (22), 'skattetaxeringar' (224)', 'barnkrubba' (22), 'brandstod' (224)', 'folkbibliotek' (23), 'stadspark' (9), 'vattenledningsfrågor' (224)', excelling in introducing modern political, welfare and infrastructural terminology into literature, with its discourse at times resembling a hybrid between 'concrete' poetry and social commentary.⁶ Like so many aspects of *Stad i mörker*, the development of its political town drama is clearly predicated on concepts of centre and periphery. Johnson designs the drama in order to critique a centrist ideology of place and value that posits an elevated, and regulated, core of power, prestige and correct behaviour and an 'outlying' sphere of transgression and low esteem (with attributes of life and death, even, being incorporated into the construction of the contrasting positions).⁷ Manufacturer Hammar and Miss Ågren are employed to embody opposite movements in regard to these posited positions.

Hammar, on the one hand, is set on a trajectory that will, it seems, eventually take him to the town's 'high' centre (and more specifically and immediately a seat in the town council) towards which his dreams are targeted: he longs to become 'en av dem, som stodo medelpunkten av allt liv i staden nära' (21). Towards the end of the novel, Hammar even

conflates himself with the town as such: 'det är som man själv vore stan' (208). In contrast, Miss Ågren, the novel's proponent of gender equality, combat of child poverty through welfare provision, and the inclusion of green spaces and aesthetic consideration in town development, is the victim of a smear campaign that moves her from influence to isolation and, ultimately, death. Her alleged transgression, in the hostile, and politically motivated, assessment of the intense collective gaze during the town's celebratory party is the beginning of her downfall, with the public opinion's underlying binary ideology of an orderly and transparent topography of appropriate behaviour and an opaque immoral domain outside this evident in the following passage:

I ett städat samhälle, där vägarna gå raka i det klara ljuset från många seende, och där var och en stakat ut sin lilla kvadrat, att hålla sig inom, där får en fröken, omkring de fyrtio, icke lägga armen om halsen på en gift man. Visserligen lade fröken Ågren icke armen om Hammars hals, men det uppfattades så. Hon var den enda kvinnan här, som haft röst och energi att göra sig politiskt eller åtminstone kommunalt gällande i staden, och när hon visade ringaste tecken till svaghet, måste hon falla. (20)

Miss Ågren could be said to succumb to a lethal cocktail of gossip, political (out)manoeuvring and the cold climate, the three ingredients fitting neatly into the frame of the northern town. The novel develops its critique of the intrusive workings of the 'deadly' public gaze in bodily and affective terms, as exemplified by its second chapter entitled 'Februaris ansikte'. This is set in the modern environment of Miss Ågren's post-office work place, which is rendered in minute detail, but interwoven with depictions of the hostile sightlines of the embodied town and the surreal effects of the onset of illness. The chapter employs the partially frozen windows onto the high-lying street outside as a painterly expressionistic leitmotif, capturing (in the upper transparent segments of the windows) fragments of bypassing and stationary people, in particular faces (cf. the chapter title) and eyes – and above these the polychrome punctuation provided by the wintery head wear: 'De voro så gapande, obarmhärtigt stora, dessa fönster. [...] När folk sträckte på sig, nådde ögonen precis upp till den klara delen av rutan, och under jämn februaritemperatur, såg fröken Ågren endast ögon, och däröver olikfärgade vintermössor' (33-34). As the chapter progresses, and Miss Ågren's consciousness approaches its collapse, the oppressive dimension of the town's communal mentality is increasingly figured as a grotesque, collective body – 'en orolig grå klump' (51) – with multiple feet, heads and, not least, eyes.

The chapter in question exemplifies how Johnson in *Stad i mörker* is capable of letting the specific phenomenology of the northern town environment feed into the representational and formal innovation that inform the novel throughout. The aim of creating locational

atmospheres is, moreover, as important to the text as any social critique when capturing the concreteness of the northern 'sensescape', with acoustic motifs, always pronounced in Johnson's writing, as evident as visual ones, as in this streetscape: 'Björkalléerna stodo stela och överrimmade, och då och då föll en kvist, klingade, bröts av för ingenting och fick bli liggande. Alla ljud hängde ekande och klara kvar länge i luften, som var grön av ilsken kyla' (88-89).

Town and affective turn

In a section, entitled 'Cities of Darkness and of Light', of his seminal study of paradigms in the representation of urban and rural spaces through literary history, *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams identifies tensions in the understanding of the urban environment in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novel-writing that are of relevance to key concerns in *Stad i mörker*. While Williams tends to take his examples of urban representation from texts focused on large cities, he recognises that there is a wide range of variation in types and sizes of places which can fall under the heading of urban settlements. Broadly speaking, Williams argues that over time a paradoxical mixture of positive and hostile associations have gathered on the urban environment. In the period, more specifically, of industrialisation and democratisation, these tensions acquire a stronger sociological dimension. On the one hand, Williams argues, urbanisation and the mechanisation of labour seem to function as a motor for social atomism, separateness and estrangement; on the other hand, the concentration of people in towns and cities, in work and living places, represents a process of 'aggregation' that offers possibilities of new forms of human solidarity and affective relationships developing. This explains why, in the literary responses to the modern urban condition, 'elements of rejection' can be combined with 'elements of acceptance' (Williams 1975: 263). Williams goes on to document how contrasting images of the darkness and light of the city became established tropes for its tensions in literary and social thought during the course of the nineteenth century, while a new sociological way of seeing came to characterise the urban novel from around the turn of the century. Ideologically, the progressive aspect of the modern urban environment includes in Williams' understanding its ability to generate new democratic forms and ideas, among which he counts, importantly in relation to *Stad i mörker*, the emergence of cultures of town politics and channels for the furthering of welfare development: 'There was the active growth of municipal as well as metropolitan culture: the struggle for new amenities – the libraries and the institutes – in the new needs of the towns' (Williams 1975: 287).

The concluding sections of *Stad i mörker* represent a poignant articulation of the possibilities for new human solidarity and affect developing within the town environment, as argued by Williams. The novel's penultimate chapter, 'Och klockorna slå . . .', contains a complex perspective on the ambiguous relations, increasingly fluid boundaries and gradually developing sympathy between the subjectivities of Andersson and Hammar, manifested, again, not least while the protagonists are walking through the townscape and during the close encounters this entails. At the same time as Andersson continues to feel morally repelled – and personally challenged in what seems to him to constitute a power struggle between the two men – by Hammar's social and political 'climbing' (the examination of the role of the *streber* in society was central to Johnson's motivation for writing the novel), the personalities of the two men begin to show similarities and merge into each other in arresting ways, as if 'attracted' to each other and affectively coordinated. Andersson's ambivalences vis-à-vis the watchmaker could read as an embodied variant of the combination of hostile and positive associations connected with the urban environment in Williams' argument, especially as Hammar proclaims in the sequence in question that he feels like a town himself or wishes to become a town (237; cf. citation in the previous section), demonstrating how Johnson's modernist modes in *Stad i mörker* include intricate mirror effects between the representation of space and subjectivity. During the course of a few pages of the sequence, Andersson's attitude to Hammar shows a considerable degree of slippage and development. It begins with outright antagonism and competition: 'Du klättrar, du klättrar, Hammar. [...] Tänker du regera mig. Tänker du verkligen regera m i g. [...] Inte är du någon gud' (234). It continues with a mixed sense of overwhelming closeness, merger and consequent curiosity: 'Men Hammar ville åt hans hjärta, han ville ha det för stans räkning, för sin egen, för den kalla vinterns. Hammar ville in i honom . . . Vem är du då, urmakare?' (237-238). And it reaches a temporary conclusion with a formulation of the possibility of a common course and a dialogic companionship: 'Är du på samma väg, urmakare? Tänker du så? [...] Men jag vill tala [echoing Hammar's emphatic 'Jag vill tala!'] (237) a little earlier], förstår du inte at jag vill tala! [...] Varför skall du fråga mig, är jag någon man kan fråga? Ge mig ett svar i stället, urmakare' (238). Thus, the chapter explores the emergence of signs of solidarity, friendship, attraction or, in Williams' term, 'aggregation', between 'accidental' inhabitants of the same urban space. The development of the relationship between the two protagonists could additionally be read in the light of Judith Butler's recent discussion, although not specifically connected to the urban environment, of what she calls the predicament of bodily proximity, its unwelcome effects as well as its potential for the fostering of human responsiveness, both of relevance to life in Johnson's urban geographies:

That the body invariably comes up against the outside world is a sign of the general predicament of unwilling proximity to others and to circumstances beyond one's

control. This “coming up against” is one modality that defines the body. And yet, this obtrusive alterity against which the body finds itself can be, and often is, what animates responsiveness to that world. (Butler 2009: 34)

The chapter’s final scene illustrates this form of responsiveness as Hammar, in bed at home, contentedly listens to the chorus of chiming clockworks (cf. the chapter title) emanating from his workshop below, the soundscape constituting a symbolic town symphony – ‘De slogo för stan’ (243) – with the imagery also feeding into Hammar’s declaration of friendship with Andersson: ‘Mina klockor slå för dig’ (244). The notion of a collective whose members are in tune with each other (indicative, again, of the importance of sound, musicality and rhythm in the novel and in Johnson’s writing more broadly) is likewise found in a concluding declaration of belief in Johnson’s autobiographical sketch, ‘Personligt dokument’, published five years after *Stad i mörker* in the seminal collection of self-portrayals by Swedish autodidactic authors, *Ansikten: ‘Jag tror på samklangen’* (Johnson 1932: 197). Both the contemporary reviewer Artur Lundkvist and the Johnson’s biographer Örjan Lindberger use related metaphors of a confluence of voices or human conditions in characterising the novel, with Lundkvist envisioning it as a town tapestry showing ‘trådarna i den underliga väv som är människoöden’ (quoted in Lindberger 1986: 161⁸), and Lindberger as a ‘väv av stämmor, som avlöser varandra och flätas i varandra’ (1986: 161).

In an article entitled ‘Affekt og rum’, Frederik Tygstrup discusses the recent ‘affective turn’ that has taken place in the direction of the humanities and social sciences, following and building on the ‘spatial turn’ of the preceding period. While acknowledging that it is not (as yet) possible to draw a conclusive conceptual borderline between the notions of ‘feeling’ and ‘affect’, Tygstrup suggests that, whereas the former is individual and subjective, the latter is relational, situational and contextual: ‘emotionelle tilstande [er] ikke længere noget, vi har i os, men snarere noget vi finder os selv i, som vi passer igennem eller dvæler i. Denne omvending synes i nogen grad at være virksom i den seneste tids stigende interesse for affektivitet og affektstudier’ (Tygstrup 2013: 19). Referencing Raymond Williams’ seminal essay ‘Structures of Feeling’ as one of his theoretical sources⁹, Tygstrup goes on to argue that the affective turn shifts the focus from interior psychological states to a shared exterior reality, atmosphere or ambience: ‘lokaliseringen af en bestemt følelse skifter fra et individs indre tilstand til et mindre klart afgrænset felt, hvor der hersker en fælles atmosfære’ (Tygstrup 2013: 20). Affectivity, including receptivity towards others, is produced by contingency and proximity in a specific environment, suggesting that affects are spatial phenomena in need of analytical tools and methods to explore them as such, argues Tygstrup: ‘Her bliver det interessant at undersøge affektens miljø, det felt af relationer som

kendetegner specifikke situationer, såvel som de potentialer og muligheder, det understøtter. Eller med andre ord: affektens rumlige eksistens' (Tygstrup 2013: 24).

Following Tygstrup, and closing our discussion, it would seem meaningful to argue that *Stad i mörker*, its concluding parts in particular, can meaningfully and rewardingly be considered in the light of this new interest in affectivity as a shared and spatial phenomenon. A contributing factor to the novel's geomodernism is, as we have attempted to document in this article, its sustained ambition of capturing townscape atmospheres, ambiances and situational moods that impact in a variety of ways, both unwanted and in terms of fostering new forms of attachment and solidarity, on the characters who, by choice or by chance, find themselves in the northern urban environment. This perspective is broadly supported by the Johnson scholarship of both Lindberger and Carl Axel Westholm, who in his informative study of the novel, 'Skollärary Andersson, parlamentarismen och "det ovanliga"', highlights *Stad i mörker* as standing out in Johnson's early output, not by way of its northern setting as such which it shares with other early texts as mentioned above, but by way of the density and inseparability of the web of threads it weaves between environment, humans, and their development: 'I Stad i mörker, däremot, utgör småstaden – och denna småstads fixering till en nordlig breddgrad – en bakgrund, som på viktiga punkter är oskiljaktigt sammanvävd med romanens händelseförlopp och människoskildring' (Westholm 1957: 535). Andersson is the novel's prime example of a gradual human turn towards the town, ambiguous as the place may be, a movement that is accelerated in the novel's final chapter XI, its title, 'Denna stad i mörker', foregrounding the town as combining motif. Here, the teacher, resisting the subjective temptation of escape to the apparent freedom of the sea, commits himself to work for the future generation of the town, his pupils,¹⁰ and, it is suggested, to a cross-class love relationship in the local environment (itself symbolic of a conflation of centre and periphery in a social sense), while also declaring his friendship with Hammar: 'jag är er vän, ni är min första vän' (284). The teacher's development can be understood in ideological terms, as suggested by Westholm.¹¹ It can be read, furthermore, as emblematic of and embodying a turn away from a notion of emotions as purely subjective, as 'feeling', towards a new idea of shared affectivity. Overall, the protagonist commits himself to the same 'marginal' sphere whose possibilities as a site for modernist literary expression Johnson's novel so convincingly demonstrates.

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Notes:

¹ The fact that Johnson's travelogue in terms of direct depiction of place is fully focused on the domain of Norrbotten and contains within this region what Paul Fussell in his essay 'Travel books as literary phenomena' calls 'the completion of the circuit' (Fussell 2001: 109) and identifies as an important compositional device in travel writing seems to indicate a locational intention of privileging the northern 'periphery' similar to spatial 'rules' operative in *Stad i mörker*, as we shall document [in this article](#).

² In a dialogue with another lodger in the house (who wants to use Johnson's typewriter in his efforts to organise a revolution in Cuba...), Johnson gives further light-touch insights into the conditions of the novel's completion and the creative interaction between 'north' and 'south' in its conception: '– Vad skriver ni om? [/] – Om snö. Det är bråttom. Det är en renskrift. Allt är färdigt, det är gjort nere vid Biskaya, men de vill ha snygga [manuskript](#) i mitt land' (Johnson 1949: 16). It is worth noting, additionally, that Johnson includes in his retrospective piece the information that the birthplace of surrealism is located in the immediate vicinity of where *Stad i mörker* was completed.

³ In the following, page references only will be provided (in brackets) after citations from *Stad i mörker*.

⁴ At the same time, the risks in terms of loss of engagement with the practicalities of politics and with political intervention that Andersson's 'deep' perspective may imply is not necessarily exempt from Johnson's critique. In his preceding novel, *Timans och rättfärdigheten*, Johnson includes a scene, part of a section of the text that is set in post-war Berlin and infused with ideological debate (see further discussion later in this article), in which one of the protagonists, a visitor from a northern Swedish town, distances himself from a local ideologue's 'millennialistic' tunnel vision that shares some features with Andersson's views in *Stad i mörker*, on the grounds of its idealistic disassociation from a mundane reality in need of more immediate change: 'Här låg en människa, som såg för långt framåt. Hans hopp skymde hans blick, och den grå verkligheten omkring honom försvann. [...] Om tusen år! Varför bekymra sig om den tiden, om den ens kommer att finnas?' (Johnson 1925: 62-63).

⁵ See, for example, Folke Isaksson in his informative essay 'Den norrbottniska Odysseus. Eyvind Johnson, Norrbotten och Europa': 'Det är en förtätd och dov skildring av livet på en liten, nordlig ort, påminnande om Boden, och av en tillvaro som är präglad av kyla, avstånd och inskränkthet. I denna lilla stad, som tycks sakna förbindelser med vitalare regioner, tycks livet frysa bort' (Isaksson 1998: 103).

⁶ Similar nomenclature – in addition to locational hybridity – is operative when Andersson wonders about the terminology used in other galaxies: 'Om de har vackra namn, som vi, vackra namn på fula ting? Om de har ordet stadsfullmäktige, ordet val, proklamation, framsteg, representant?' (26).

⁷ It is noteworthy in the context of the critique of centrist thinking – and in the context of textual mapping and 'celebration' of a northern town – that Johnson in his contribution to an official anthology published in 1943 to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of municipal status being granted to his home town of Boden clearly, almost programmatically, identifies himself as an inhabitant of the margins. After a discourse on the difficulty, in his childhood, of drawing an exact boundary between the outlying area of Björkelund where he grew up and Boden itself, Johnson goes on to assert the indeterminate, the liminal, and the 'new settlement' dimensions of his childhood environment: 'Någon [större](#) klarhet om var gränsen verkligen gick kom jag emellertid aldrig till i min barndom; och jag minns att vi björkelundssungar under alla förhållanden betraktade oss som gränsbor, ofta som något vildavästernbetonade trappers och nybyggare' (Johnson 1943: 312).

⁸ Lundkvist's review was originally published in the newspaper *Arbetaren* on 28 May 1927.

⁹ The essay is published in Danish translation in the same journal volume as Tygstrup's article.

¹⁰ Johnson memory piece 'Då: 1913-1914', published in the collection *Stunder, vågor. Berättelser från resor* (1965), contains a section that describes how a teacher abandoned Johnson's school class immediately before the final exams and the confusion and disappointment this caused (Johnson 1965: 331).

¹¹ Westholm reads the harmonisation of the positions occupied by Andersson and Hammar as reflecting Johnson's commitment – away from his previous syndicalist scepticism – to the system of parliamentarianism and its shared political practice (as represented by [Hammar](#)) in the wake of changes in the political system in Sweden after the First World War (Westholm 1957: 543).