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Regional Aesthetics in Transition: Ideology, Infrastructure and History

WHEN GERMAN PROFESSOR of theology, Friedrich Wilhelm von Schubert, was travelling in 1817, the province of Östergötland, which will be in focus in this article, was entered either from the south (via Småland) or from the north (via Närke or Södermanland), and both these border areas have a distinct upland character.¹ In the other two quarters, the western and the eastern, the province is surrounded by water. On his northbound route, crossing the border to the province, the professor thus wrote: “One is now in the rich corn land of Östergötland, something which can hardly be imagined in these forests and mountains” (Schubert, 1823: I, 201). The border area thus evoked definitions of the centre, and the power of the – yet unseen – cultivated flat land was obviously considerable.

On a more general level, von Schubert may illustrate three features of travel literature. First, the traveller is dependent on predominating aesthetic ideals. Second, the beholder is directed by his (in this article, they are indeed all men) previous knowledge, collected not least from earlier travel literature. And third, the landscape is seen from the beaten track, at least in the sense that most travellers for obvious reasons depended on the existing infrastructure. All three parameters are of course subject to historical change. Viewed over time, a fairly stable, unchanging landscape can hence be described in the most different ways. This underlines that space and culture are always deeply intertwined and therefore must be analysed in their specific historical settings. Seen this way, the case of

Östergötland becomes an elucidating example of more general phenomena.

Ideological Aesthetics

The German theologian was, however, in another sense not fully representative, or up to date. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the stereotyped image of Östergötland was actually enriched with an element of mountains and forests. Travellers in the eighteenth century had almost in unison described the province as a pronounced flat land. In 1774, English historian Nathaniel William Wraxall noted as he entered Östergötland proper: “every thing had assumed a cheerful appearance, and the groves of fir were succeeded by a cultivated and liberal soil, covered with grain, and exhibiting marks of industry” (Wraxall, 1807: 93). The actual appeal of the flat land is made very clear here. But to say that the utility aspect prevented an aesthetic appreciation would of course be deeply un-historical. Combinations like “the beautiful and fertile flat land” (Meerman, 1810: II, 13) should be read aesthetically and economically. The useful *was* beautiful.

The mountains of Östergötland, if commented upon at all by the Enlightenment travellers, were usually depicted as obstacles. Danish historian Jacob Langebek travelled in 1753 on “a bad road, full of hills and slopes” (Langebek, 1794: 165). And these slopes were undoubtedly dangerous. Carts sliding off the road, cartwheels breaking, and horses not managing the weight or galloping were commonplace. And there were other perils as well. The Frenchman Drevon (1789: 189) reported fearing, during his entire passage through Kolmården, the dark and hilly region between Östergötland and Södermanland, that the peasant carriage drivers would kill him without further ado. He feels relief only at the sight of the city of Norrköping, down on the cultivated flat land. If the mountains have any value it is for the views of the flat land they offer, and it is common that the eighteenth century traveller leaves Kolmården unnoticed, but cries out in rapture once the flat land starts to unfold on the way down from the hills. According to Dutchman Johan Meerman in 1797, who simultaneously reveals his classical ideals, “The flat land, which spreads over a major part of Östergötland, has earned the province the pet name the Italy of Sweden”.

That the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century favoured the cultivated flat land to the woods and the mountains is well known. The roots of this utilitarian view can be sought in the classics as well as in the Scrip-

tures. My point here is that this ideal had a profound influence on what they actually saw, or at least found it worthwhile to tell their readers about. The Östergötland of the eighteenth century thus became synonymous with the cultivated and controlled flat land. Wild nature was given no value. The woods were indeed sometimes hailed for their economical importance; however, if they were inaccessible for a sound forestry, they lacked charm. Ideals were classic and utilitarian; the change that was about to come is palpable.

With the nineteenth century came a more positive outlook on mountains and forests (Nicholson, 1959). So-called Romantic ideals called for if not sublime, at least picturesque landscapes. Variation and contrast became keywords. The region of Kolmården – called Italian by the 44-year-old Meerman in 1797 – was now, in 1804, compared with Switzerland by the 20 year younger Englishman John Carr. Ideals had shifted; the place was given other connotations. Where Meerman gaped at the flat land, Carr saw something quite different: “vast rocks, lakes, forests of fir, and scattered hamlets: This was by far the finest prospect which I beheld in Sweden”. The outlook might very well have been exactly the same as Meerman’s, and it captivates the romantic Carr to the point that he patches together a few moving lines on “A Swedish Cottage” (Carr, 1805: 114; see also Schubert, 1823: I, 203).

The esteem of mountains and forests, wild or interspersed with traces of human diligence, meant that the province had been re-coded. The Frenchman Daumont, for example, claims in 1830 that the city of Linköping is located “in the middle of a fertile valley” (Daumont, 1834: 54); to our eyes (and the city has not been moved), it resides if anything on a hillock on the flat land. Also other parts of the province were seen and commented upon using these new ideals. For many travellers, the region of Ydre, in the southern part of the province and a place actually frequented by several of the Swedish romantic poets, became the quintessence of Östergötland. Danish historian Christian Molbech, who for some time travelled with P.D.A. Atterbom, one of the chief Swedish Romanticists, actually refers to “the mountainous Östergötland” (Molbech, 1817: II, 116); the flat land is reduced to nothing more than an appendage. And a few years later, the poet Karl August Nicander almost lacks words for “the titanic masses of the landscape”: “What mountains!” (Nicander, 1831: 4). A very telling opinion is given by one Hans Peter Klinghammer: “To be sure, mountains and forests are the most characteristic features of the physiognomy of Östergötland; but that Östergötland, notwithstanding, primarily is a corn land becomes appar-

ent when one sees the vast and most fertile fields, which on the plains in between extend their lighter verdure” (Klinghammer, 1841: 187). Or put in fewer words: A flat land whose prime characteristic is mountains.

With the passion for mountains and forests sometimes came a depreciation of the flat land. When Jonas Carl Linnerhielm, an early and distinct exponent of the picturesque ideal, gazed upon the flat land he saw “nothing but fields and flat shadowless meadows” ([Linnerhielm], 1816: 26). Or consider what one traveller in 1830 just called “the monotony of the region” (Lessing, 1831: 168). This attitude, however, must not be exaggerated. A more common opinion is that the flat land indeed is dull, but that this is compensated for by its fertility. “The monotony of this land is easily excused by its apparent fruitfulness,” claimed, for example, the just-mentioned Linnerhielm (1806: 116). However, the most common attitude was still the old Enlightenment view. The aesthete Adolf Törneros wrote in 1823: “on the southern hills of Kolmården we stayed for a long time and let our glances dwell on the *goldene Au* of Östergyllen [a poetic name for the province], the living image of fertility” (Törneros, 1840: 269).

The power of the flat land was great. A utilitarian view on the landscape was incorporated in the Romantic one. Variation and contrast were, as mentioned, keywords. Östergötland, according to the same Törneros (1840: 278), “can show evidence of everything that the other provinces can boast of in terms of the mild and the wild, the pretty and the sublime; the meagre dreariness, however, has certainly not settled down here”. And no matter how romantic the poetry, it always sang the praises of fertility and wealth. Instead of seeing these notions as a shift from the utilitarian ideals of the eighteenth century, it is worth stressing the continuity.

Around 1800, the image of Östergötland was thus added a distinct element of mountains and forests. For some, albeit only a few, the province *was* primarily a mountainous region; the boarder areas in the south and the north comprised, they seem to have meant, the true and proper Östergötland. Expressions of this kind are easy to find in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. After that they more or less vanish. The image of Östergötland is once again almost completely dominated by the fertile flat land. So, what had happened? Had the dreams of mountains and bewitching forests just ended in 1830? Had ideals changed so swiftly? No, and the representational change should more correctly be dated to 1832, the year of the inauguration of the Great Canal.

Infrastructural Aesthetics

The influence of Göta kanal on the image of Östergötland can hardly be exaggerated. The canal meant that the majority of travel writers passed through the province on it. To these travellers, Östergötland became what could be seen from the steamships of the canal. If they previously had travelled on land through the forests of Småland, past the cities of Linköping and Norrköping to the dark Kolmården of the north, they now travelled on a route almost perpendicular to the old one, from Lake Vättern to the Baltic Sea, and the towns visited were now Vadstena, Motala and Söderköping. No mountains and forests, comparatively speaking. Of course, there were and had been exceptions. It is still reasonable to say that the majority of travellers after 1832 literally travelled through a different landscape.

Previously framed by woody mountains, now by water. The complement to the flat land was no longer heights and forests, but billows and, not least, islands. The archipelago was discovered. The German priest A. Dreising's travel experiences from 1839 show a novelty, a complete chapter on "Skärgården" (the Archipelago), with the concluding judgement: "The journey through the Swedish archipelago was idyllically beautiful!" (Dreising, 1885: 37). Englishman Robert Colton seconds this and calls his meeting with, what he beforehand thought would be, the "[t]he frightful Baltic" the "*bonne bouche*" of his entire trip to Sweden ([Colton], 1847: 70; for the lure of the sea, see Corbin 1994).

The canal itself was a major attraction, and as such it lent prestige and directed an increasing number of travellers to the province. Göta kanal became an obvious and prominent part of the image of Östergötland. Travel literature from Östergötland not discussing the canal is almost unthinkable. The canal was a monumental work of proportions hard to grasp today. Not only Swedes compared the enormous project with the most magnificent achievements of ancient Rome. References to Rome are frequent and should be understood literally. "The splendour and solidity of the locks can be compared with the buildings of the most brilliant Roman epochs", the German von Hallberg-Broich exclaimed – fifteen years prior to the inauguration (1820: 117f). Göta kanal made Sweden to "a nation in Europe" ([Sturzen-Becker], 1858: 31), a Sweden more often described as poor and backward.

Also in a literal sense, the canal spoke of wealth. "The price on land has increased in a most astonishing way", one traveller remarked ([Sturzen-Becker], 1858: 32). And the canal's importance for tourism is certainly not



A monumental work of proportions hard to grasp. “Bergs slussar”, *Album för resande å Götha kanal* (Stockholm, 1858).

a late discovery. Göta kanal was built for the transport of goods and people and as an important link in the military defence. However, already from the start it was also made use of for sheer pleasure. The poet Herman Säterberg, the year before the official opening, strongly recommended that his readers take a journey on the canal in high summer; it was “one of the most pleasant” in Sweden (Säterberg, 1896: 248). And Sturzen-Becker refrained from remarks on the canal’s “importance in economic terms and its grandeur as a mechanical monumental work” and only wanted to “stress its originality from a picturesque point of view” ([Sturzen-Becker], 1858: 30). There is, however, no reason to isolate the economic and aesthetic appreciations. As the same Sturzen-Becker exclaimed, in an obvious Enlightenment vocabulary: “Seldom has the useful in such a successful way been united with the beautiful, ‘utile dulci’” ([Sturzen-Becker], 1858: 31).

The towns are of course part of the image of the province. Norrköping represented manufactories and industries. The port had a rising reputation as the foremost manufacturing town of the nation, sometimes nicknamed “the Birmingham of Sweden” (e.g., Lessing, 1831: 168; Daumont, 1834: 68; [Sturzen-Becker], 1856: 26). Norrköping was modern, its public services impressive. By Swedish standards, the town was big and rich. Linköping was, particularly during the eighteenth century, renowned as an ecclesiastical centre of learning. The cathedral, the school, and the library were all among the foremost in Sweden. During the beginning of the nineteenth century, the town was given the pet name “little Stockholm”, due to its prosperous social life and public entertainments (Molbech, 1817: III, 71). These different estimations do not simply reflect the development of Linköping’s city life; they are also significant for changes in travelling. In the eighteenth century, travellers were very often the learned; in the nineteenth century, they were tourists.

Historical Aesthetics

The “gothic” cathedral and the dust-laden library certainly had an appeal in the nineteenth century, with its awakening historical interest. Linköping was also recognized as the place of the battle of Stångebro, a battle that liberated Sweden from the power of the Pope and gave Freedom to the nation; in post-revolutionary times, the so-called blood bath of Linköping in 1600 was seen as nothing less than “[a] memorable assertion of political rights” (James, 1816: 103). Notwithstanding, Göta kanal directed travellers elsewhere. Linköping and Norrköping were to some extent abandoned as places to visit. And Norrköping had little to offer in historical peculiarities. The many fires had extinguished the old; instead one spoke of “the current regular and joyful look of the town” (Daumont, 1834: 66), characteristics that hardly appealed to those dreaming of the Middle Ages. Linköping and Norrköping can also be said to have been superfluous as places to visit. Except for forests and mountains, the canal route offered almost everything else that the nineteenth century traveller could ask for. By the approach to the canal, after a journey through the archipelago, the traveller met the ruins of Stegeborg Castle, “famed in Swedish history for hard fighting and romance” ([Colton], 1847: 71), then the town of Söderköping, “once renowned as the fairest city of Inner Sweden, in days gone by” (Atkinson, 1848: 205), and then the medieval church of Vreta kloster, “this old memorial site” ([Andersson], 1846: 8). The other side of the nineteenth century traveller, the

heir of the Enlightenment and the believer in Progress, in Historical Change, was satisfied with the canal itself, of course, and with the clattering and bustling Mechanical Engineering Industries of Motala.

Many routes included the short detour to Vadstena, by Lake Vättern. The changes in the impressions of Vadstena from over more than a century of travelling are very telling regarding how the landscape was gradually invested with history. Meerman, who visited in 1797, was dismissing: “The city is dead” (Meerman, 1810: 69). The same thing, but with completely different connotations is voiced half a century later, by Erik Magnus Pontin: “Wadstena is, if I may say so, a kind of Herculanium, the city of the dead, where great riches from days gone by are gathered.” The mere disposition of Pontin’s account, verging on mediative ecstasy and making claims of capturing Vadstena both past and present, is significant; only the last 25 of the 260 pages deals with “now” – a “now” starting in the sixteenth century.

Examples are manifold. The ugly and crooked streets of Vadstena become precious memories of days gone by; the tumbledown heap of stones becomes a castle in unfortunate disrepair; the abbey, which during the eighteenth century generated disparaging anecdotes about lecherous nuns and monks, is transformed to a place for contemplation; and Superstitious Birgitta gradually achieves some status as Saint Birgitta. Closely tied to this historicism and romantic love for ruins, expressed in lavish volumes of prints like Thersner’s (1817–1867) and Anckarswärd’s (1828–1830), was the popular habit of walking. With romanticism hiking came into fashion. And the rambler was not only closer to contemplation over the transient nature of human efforts. He could just as easily, and whenever he felt like it, stop and let himself be filled with whatever emotion that happened to be flooding, concerning nature, friendship or the common people (von Platen, 1981).

This is of course a simplistic picture. That the landscape was invested with history and that this phenomenon was concentrated around Göta kanal, the symbol of technological progress and modern times, is however obvious. A beautiful picture of this association of old and new is seen by the impressive steps of locks at Berg. The steamship travellers avail themselves of the opportunity to see the old graves of kings at nearby Vreta kloster, “the noise and din of new times” penetrates into the dusky medieval church (Hedberg, 1861: 17), and at a given signal one returns to the ship and its next goal, the industries of Motala.

And the sum of gems is certainly impressive to the historical dreamer: Stegeborg, Söderköping, Bråvalla, Linköping, Skännige, Vreta kloster,



Even from within the medieval church one could hear the noise from the steamships on the nearby Göta kanal. "Wreta klosters kyrka", *Från Stockholm till Götheborg: Pittoreska vyer från Götha kana loch dess närhet* (Stockholm, 1841).

Bjälbo, Ulfåsa, Vadstena, Alvastra all march past, with murders and monks, bishops and blood baths. "I am in love with everything I have seen", wrote Erik Gustaf Geijer in 1825 as he had just entered into Östergötland, "and I see it for the first time. This is indeed a bit embarrassing, since I am striving to become a Swedish historian." (Geijer, 1834: 93). Östergötland was filled to the bursting point with memories.

Aesthetics of Wealth

The present article has described and analysed the travel book image of the province of Östergötland from Enlightenment to Romanticism (ca 1740–1860). The genre grew considerably during the period at issue, wherefore one, with some simplification, can argue that it was then the image of this specific province, as that of the rest of Sweden, was constructed. I have, guided by Samuel E. Bring's *Itineraria Svecana* (1954), studied approximately 150 different texts. Half of these were published after 1836.

Östergötland was transformed from flat land to flat land. The romantic love of mountains can actually be seen as a short interlude; indeed, the

flat land was always there, fertile and captivating. And if the discovery of the forests and mountains around the turn of the century was dictated by aesthetic ideals, the return to the flat land was conditioned by something much more down-to-earth, the construction of Göta kanal. At the same time, the province was invested with history. History had taken place there due to the wealth and importance of the province. And wealth and importance had grown on the flat land. On the whole, the picture of the province was enriched, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. To be sure, the development involved a nuanced conception of the image, but at the same time the clichés and stereotypes were reinforced; the image of Östergötland was constructed.

Östergötland was a comparatively well-appreciated province, and were this appreciation to be explained in one word, it would be wealth. The main explanation for this wealth was the cultivate flat land, and the signs of wealth were to be seen everywhere: in the “unusual amount” of churches, “expressions of a well-being, which does not begrudge Our Lord more than its inhabitants” ([Sturzen-Becker], 1858: 24), in a plentitude of ditching (Schubert, 1823: I, 127), in bigger and sturdier horses, and, not least, in a conceited, haughty and proud peasant population. Karl August Nicander made the following note: “I noticed already on the road that I had entered Östergötland. No peasant acknowledged me; the boys hardly nodded their heads. The country was flat, seemed fertile” (Nicander, 1950: 21). The province was rich also in other aspects. “No region in Sweden, I believe, can be compared to Östergötland when it comes to a great variety of scenery” (Törneros, 1840: 278); the fact that several of the romantic poets came from Östergötland no doubt made it easier to express such an opinion. And the province gradually became richer in history, traditions and memories, particularly medieval ones. The flat land was also the foundation of the manufactories of Norrköping, manufactories turning to modern industries and gaining the city the reputation of being a Swedish Birmingham. And when Motala, with its steam engines and foundries, sometimes was lent this epithet, it could hardly be seen as a sign of weakness for the province.

Göta kanal, signifying wealth, did not only direct the routes *within* Östergötland, it also lured travellers *to* the province, which to an increasing extent came to represent Sweden. Carl Johan Billmark’s expensive travel book, depicting a tour from Stockholm to Naples and published in 1852, contains 100 lithographic prints. Eleven of these have Swedish motifs; Billmark’s favourites were on far more southern latitudes. Five of the Swedish pictures are, however, from Östergötland, depicting Stegeborg,

the canal at Söderköping, the steps of locks at Berg, the church of Vreta kloster and the castle of Vadstena. A contemporary mix of past and future wealth.

Comparisons were made with Italy, or Switzerland. And besides such stereotypes, one often projected images from home on the rich surroundings. The Danes saw a bit of Denmark, the Britons Britain, and the Germans Germany. And the landscape was by no means as monotonous as Skåne or Uppland; sometimes it was “dreamy like Norrland” ([Sturzen-Becker], 1856: 25), sometimes “distinctly southern” ([Pontin], 1846: 5). Comparisons were many and varied. And how they laid it on thick for the benefit of local patriotism! The most beautiful ruin in Sweden was Stegeborg, or Alvastra. No soil was as fertile, no oats were as high. No industry was more effective than Motala’s, no city as historic as Vadstena. And no view was more beautiful than that from Kolmården: “as soon as we reached the summit, a view of Östergötland emerged, which surprised and captivated us, like the Israelites at the sight of the Promised Land” (Quandt, 1843: 185).

The soil of Östergötland was rich, and so it had been for ages. Hence, the image of the province was one of wealth and history. Tradition, however, strengthens itself, and must not always get its nourishment directly from the fertile fields. Ideals, memories and rich soil, gradually combined with modern industry and the bewitching power of the steam and literally dictated by the physical infrastructure in the form of the impressive Göta kanal, created even richer images. What we actually see, or choose to see and tell about, is of course always dictated by certain ideological as well as highly material conditions, and these conditions (be they aesthetic ideals, political values, roads and canals, or economical terms of production) are subject to change. With regard to the case of Östergötland in the period of Enlightenment and Romanticism, this article has shown some of the mechanics of this kind of aesthetic transition.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The present article is a development of a Swedish version (Lundell, 1998).