ISBN: 978-87-7349-818-7

Accessible online: http://ruconf.ruc.dk/index.php/norlit/norlit2011/schedConf/presentations

German Autum / ”Tysk höst” – The Swedish Author Stig Dagerman’s Journalism on Germany immediately after World War II.

By Roland Lysell

The poetry of the 1940s in Sweden represents one of the peaks of modern Swedish literature. Poets like Erik Lindegren (1910–68), Karl Vennberg (1910–95), Ragnar Thoursie (1919–2010), Werner Aspenström (1918–97), Elsa Grave (1918–2003) and Sven Alfons (1918–96), all of them influenced by Gunnar Ekelöf (1907–68), T.S. Eliot and French poetry from Baudelaire and Symbolism to Surrealism, developed modernist lyric into an intellectually advanced rhetoric poetry, at the same time very intellectual, very emotive and very dense. At the same time a new kind of prose was developed by the novelists Lars Ahlin (1915–97), Stig Dagerman (1923–54) and Gösta Oswald (1926–50).

Stig Dagerman is the only author in this group whose novels have encountered an international audience. He is still very much read today, especially in France and Germany and there is a Dagerman prize that has been awarded to, among others, Elfriede Jelinek and J. M. G. Le Clézio. His first work was *Ormen* (The Snake, 1945), followed by *De dömdas ö* (Island of the Doomed) in 1946, one of the most important Swedish novels of the 20th century. He was also an important dramatist. He was married twice, to Annemarie Götze, a daughter of German refugees, and to the actress Anita Björk (* 1923).

Dagerman had mixed feelings about the role of a journalist. He wrote 570 articles for various newspapers from 1941 to his death 13 years later. In the summer of 1941 he began to write for the important syndicalist publications *Storm* and *Arbetaren* (The Worker). He reviewed books, of course, and among his favorites were Kafka and Faulkner. Apart from his literary criticism in *40-tal*, *Prisma* and *BLM*, he also wrote articles on general themes. He was commissioned by the then fairly new evening newspaper *Expressen* to Germany in the autumn of 1946 to write a series of reports about postwar Germany. 13 articles were written and 11 were published. In 1947 these articles were collected and issued as a book with the title *Tysk höst* (German Autumn), a Swedish classic, reprinted in the Collected Writings edited by the Dagerman scholar Hans Sandberg.[1]

My aim in this article is not to discuss the articles as journalism. Mrs. Karin Palmkvist, has already done that in a doctoral thesis from 1989. [2] Her conclusion is: ”Dagerman’s reports from Germany differed from those of other Swedes at this time through the author’s consciousness of and reflections about his own role, his great empathy with the situation of the Germans, and the fact that he did not condemn the German people”. [3] Mrs. Palmkvist shows that in this aspect Dagerman was close to the Englishmen Stephen Spender (1909–1995), a favourite poet of the 1940s, and Sir Victor Gollancz (1893–1967), whose books about Germany appeared at roughly the same time. All of them discuss ”the problem of guilt and suffering in a universal perspective”, according to Mrs. Palmkvist. [4]

Dagerman spent two months in Germany, from October 15th (Hamburg) to December 12th (Frankfurt) – five days in Berlin, a week in the Ruhr district, and everywhere he tried to come into contact with so many private persons living under different social circumstances as possible. [5] Of course he despised the kind of journalist who stays at his hotel and only uses stuff from local newspapers in his report.

Dagerman’s material must have been overwhelming and it is a question of choice what to publish in the articles. My own aim is to discuss the articles from the view of a literary historian. How does the Germany of 1946 fit into the general aesthetics of the Swedish Generation of the 1940s (Fyrtitalisterna). I concentrate on ten dominating themes and stylistic effects: Politics, Scepticism concerning the state, The Question of a Deeper Reality and the Absurd and the Possibility of Consolation, The Psychology of the Germans, The Ruins, The Use of Metaphor and Intertextuality and The Function of the Artist.

I. Politics

Confronted with everyday reality, Stig Dagerman severely criticizes German active political parties:

The Liberals are conscious of the present situation, but they are unable to act:

> ’We’ that can mean the Liberal party, which in North Germany is rather small but has a good reputation on account of its anti-Nazi attitude, but which in South Germany is large and suspect for there we can hear it said ’Think Liberal, act Socialist and feel

> German.' But 'We' can mean much else. 'We' can be those middle-class German intellectuals who were at heart anti-Nazi but never had to suffer for this and perhaps never wanted to suffer for it, who never voluntarily went against the grain and are now bearing a kind of anti-Nazi jalousie de métier against the legitimated anti-Nazis, those who were politically persecuted. (p. 38)[6]

The CDU is a chameleon without any ideology of its own:

> The CDU is a chameleon who won in Hamburg thanks to crude anti-Marxist propaganda and tried to win in Berlin through an equally diligent use of the word 'socialism'. (p. 47)

The social classes are still there:

> The thesis of a classless Germany involved a cynical exaggeration. After the collapse, class frontiers have been sharpened rather than blurred. The bourgeois ideologists confuse poverty and classlessness when they assert that by and large all Germans are financially in the same desperate straits. (p. 36)

The Social Democrats seem to be a bit pathetic, e.g. Paul Löbe:

> The most tragic aspect of the big meeting under canvas which I attended in Frankfurt-am-Main just before Christmas and where the old Social Democrat and former Parliamentary President Paul Löbe spoke, was not perhaps that it was impossible to spot a single young person in the thousand-strong audience. What was tragic and frighening was that the audience were so advanced in years. (p. 62)

On several occasions the difficulties between generations are focussed by Dagerman, the Social Democrats do not want to accept the youth.

Kurt Schumacher, a Social Democrat leader, is criticized for being dangerous and helpless:

> What can be held against Dr. Schumacher is that through his doomsday sermons against the victors he adapts a limited national perspective instead of a socialist and international one. (p. 91)

Schumacher is dangerous ”because of his enormous popularity” (p. 89). Three pages of the book from page 89 onwards are devoted to considering his weaknesses.

Several times Dagerman attacks the Bavarians who sent starving refugees from Hamburg and Essen back home in miserable trains. There seems to be no German solidarity (p. 69); ”Just think fellow-countrymen evicting fellow-countrymen. Germans against Germans. The worst of all” (p. 56), somebody remarks. Many Germans suspect the Russians for trying to create a ’Verelendigung’, through people coming from the concentration camps and from the east, in the western zones to cause a political chaos for the British, French and Americans.

The real losers of the war, according to Dagerman, are the German antifascists:

> For there is in Germany a large group of honest anti-fascists who are more disappointed, homeless and defeated than the Nazi fellow-travellers can ever be: dissappointed because the liberation did not turn out to be as radical as they had thought it would be; homeless because they did not want to associate themselves either with the overall German dissatisfaction, among whose ingredients they thought they could detect far too much hidden Nazism, or with the politics of the Allies, whose compliance in the face of the former Nazis they regard with dismay; […]
> These people are Germany’s most beautiful ruins (p. 24-25).

This point of view is further developed in later chapter:

> But there are numerous anti-Nazi Germans who had hoped for another outcome: people who reject the kind of unity without freedom offered by the Communists, regret that the anti-Nazi enthusiasm of the spring of 1945 failed to create something other than the ensuing situation of party division and impotence in the face of reaction. (p. 98)

The real losers of the war are apparently the German antifascists.

This political scepticism already occurred in texts by Erik Lindegren. In the 1930s Lindegren tested many political views, including Marxism and Freudianism, but always reacted against dogmatism. His only sympathy was a sympathy for anarchism and syndicalism. After the war, in the early 50s, Karl Vennberg was involved in the discussion about 'The Third Position' (Tredje ståndpunkten). These intellectuals were neither pro-American nor pro-Russian, but wanted to find a third solution in world politics.

Thus Stig Dagerman criticizes all contemporary German political parties. The only exceptions are the small groups who were anti-fascists during World War II.

II. Scepticism concerning the state

Discussions on the questions of democracy and human rights are common among the authors of this generation. According to Dagerman, the elections in Germany have lost their democratic function:

> Throughout that autumn there were elections in various places in Germany. Participation was perhaps surprisingly active but political activity limited itself to voting. (p. 15)

Law and justice have lost their force and people seem to condemn the Germans, independent of existing laws. Hunger does not seem a righteous punishment, according to Dagerman:

> Even from a judicial point of view such an argument is quite untenable because the German distress is collective whereas the German cruelties were, despite everything, not so. Further, hunger and cold are not included among the indictable offences of legal justice, for the same reason that torture and abuse are not (p. 11-12).

A common way of criticizing the Germans seems to be to criticize them for their obedience to the state (p. 12). Thus an old lawyer is severely criticized (p. 70), and the so called 'Spruchkammern', civil courts where people have to prove that they never were Nazis, are illusory as evidence tends to bought. You can feel a cold draught from the time of terror, "kall fläkt från skräckens tid" (p. 75).[7]

Anarchic syndicalism was in those days sceptical concerning the state as such. Germany became a good example for Dagerman to corroborate his thesis.

III. The Question of Deeper Reality and the Absurd

The importance of silence is emphasized in this work as well as in many other Swedish literary works of the 1940s: ”The silence and passive submission of these apparently insignificant people gave a sense of dark bitterness to that German autumn.” (p. 5.)

Even reality as such seems to be questionable:

> It is important to remember that statements implying dissatisfaction with or even distrust of the goodwill of the victorious democracies were made not in an airless room or on a theatrical stage echoing with ideological repartee but in all too palpable cellars in Essen, Hamburg or Frankfurt-am-Main. (p. 9)

One of the persons asserts: ”Why not see this too in a historical perspective, why not judge what has hapened as if it had happened a hundred years ago? Strictly speaking reality doesn’t begin to exist until the historian has put it into its context and then it’s too late to expereince it, and vex over it, or weep. To be real, reality musts be old.” (p. 115.) But at the same time the man with the stick passes the whole bread queue; somehow very brutal power seems to dominate a reality that does not exist. (p. 115.)

Sometimes Dagerman notices an idiotic absurdity. Hannover was destroyed, but the prominent statue of King Ernst August of Hannover was not damaged at all (p. 19); Ernst August being extremely unpopular in his own kingdom.

The new kind of consolation could also be said to be typical of the 1940s: ”It is not a matter of finding consolation in the midst of distress – distress itself has become a consolation.” (p. 19.)

Thus Dagerman shares the metaphysical scepticism of the 1940s. Even if we know nothing about the deeper reality that we are dependent upon, it makes us the victims of its revenge and

we have to accept the absurdity of human existence and the fact that distress has become a consolation.

IV. The Psychology of the Germans

What kind of Germans does the narrator of German autumn meet? Some of them are bitter. In the chapter ”Bombed Cemetery” we meet Fräulein S., once the owner of a fishmonger’s shop, who now inspects ruins to check that those who are able to work really are at work: ”Fräulein S. is said to be very bitter but at the same time grateful for a job that gives her the chance of keeping her bitterness on the boil.” (p. 29.) Many Germans feel that they do not deserve the punishment they are now getting. (p. 30.)

Another interesting character is the lawyer, who has a friend who writes comical novels, once a silent anti-Nazi, nowadays a ”master of fragile resignation who leans over the equally fragile Meissen porcelain” (p. 38). Even more intellectual is the hermit writer who has isolated himself in a villa in the Ruhr district writing books and giving lectures on Burckhardt and Mörike, ”a young author with the tired smile and the aristocratic name, smoking cigarettes for which he has traded away books, drinking tea whose taste is as bitter as the autumn outside.” (p. 113.)

There is also something double-bound about the unimportant persons who are accused of being Nazis in the ’Spruchkammergericht’, Herr Krause and Herr Sinne (p. 78–81). But of course also more proletarian persons, like the man who plays a ”portable organ” on Sundays and a simpler ”barrel-organ” on weekdays appear in the book (p. 43). Even a hysteric girl in a wheel-chair is focussed at the end of one of the articles (p. 58).

The essential theme for Dagerman is that a new kind of morality is developed: ”The new morality postulates that there are conditions in which it is not immoral to steal since in these circumstances theft means not depriving someone of his property but a more just distribution of available goods; likewise black-marketing and prostitution are not immoral when they have become the only means of survival.” (p. 45.) The new reasons for keeping together are cynically formulated: ”The knowledge that none of them needs to suffer alone has generated a kind of communal wellbeing”. (p. 56.)

Obviously the young generation has Dagerman's sympathy. The desperation of young people is often focussed. Dagerman criticized the egoists: "anyone who knows the art of wearing whatever colours he chooses" (p. 82) is a very free translation of "den som kan konsten att sko sig med vilket läder som helst".[8]

In showing complicated characters reacting in complicated ways Dagerman fulfills the intentions of his contemporaries. Drastic formulations is another common trait among the poets and prose writers of the 1940s. Dagerman quotes Brecht: "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann die Moral" (p. 14). "Apathy and Cynicism ('…dann kommt die Moral') were two conditions which marked the reactions to […] the executions in Nuremberg and the first elections (p. 15).The German spirit of the late 1940s is obviously dominated by bitterness and apathy.

V. The Paradox

The Paradox is a common rhetoric strategy of the generation of the 1940s, sometimes in weeker forms, when describing both metaphysical and social reality. Karl Vennberg, for instance, writes about the choice between the indifferent and the impossible. When Dagerman describes the advent of the refugees from the East he concludes:

> Their presence was both hateful and welcome – hateful because they arrived bringing with them nothing but their hunger and their thirst, welcome because it fed suspicions which one would willingly entertain, distrust which one would willingly cultivate, and despair by which one would willingly be possessed.(p. 5-6)

Another situation reminding us of a paradox is the description on p. 96 of "det fattiga och hederliga, det välmående och tvivelaktiga"; the "pathetic confrontation [. . .] between two kinds of Germany: the poor but honest, the prosperous but dubious (p. 96). [9] When he describes politics Dagerman also tries to formulate pseudocontradictions: the Allied Forces are accused of "the attempt to eradicate militarism by means of a military regime" (p. 16).

VI. The Ruins

The ruins are extremely important in *Tysk höst*; one of the chapters is even called ”Ruins” (p. 19). In the first chapter the writer seems to take a journalistic cynical position: ”Ruinhögar av internationell typ” – ”high piles of rubble (standard international variety)” (p. 8). [10] But later, at the end of the Bombed Cemetery chapter, Fräulein S. describes the bombed cemetery as a sort of objective correlative to Germany: ”This is Germany, Mr. D., a bombed cemetery.” (p. 33.)

In fact, this is a normal way of describing cemeteries in the book. ”We wonder around in this endless shambles of a graveyard” (p. 23). The ruins are monuments or symbols of death and destruction. The ”fallen Prussian colonnades rest their Greek profiles on the pavements” in Berlin (p. 19), some Hitler buildings look like mausoleums (p. 85) and a man who has lost his family walks around like a ”wandering Second World War memorial” (p. 94).

In the chapter of Ruins the ruins are even described as a stage scenery for a play:

> Rusty girders poke out of the gravel-heaps like the stems of long-since foundered boats. Slender pillars which an artistic fate carved out of collapsed tenements rise from white piles of crushed bath-tubs or from grey piles of stone, powdered brick and melted radiators. Carefully manipulated façades, with nothing to be façades for, stand there like scenery for a play that was never performed. (p. 21)

Interestingly enough this Hamburg landscape is compared to Guernica and Coventry, more conventional symbols of evil human destruction: ”All the figures of geometry are on display in this three-year-old variation of Guernica and Coventry” (p. 21).

Death can also be connected to erotics, at least when making advertisements: ”On big posters a young woman, her skull showing faintly beneath the mask of the faces, warns against venereal disease. One has to learn to see death in every woman one meets.” (p. 102.)

Many people cannot get on the trains, of course, but Dagerman prefers to focus on a woman who cannot get on the train, although she must reach a deathbed (p. 107).

It seems that the Ruins are not only symbolic ruins but also possess the metaphysical qualities of Walter Benjamin’s ruins in his book about The Baroque German Plays.[11] The whole world

seems to be place of execution. The hermit writer of the last chapter seems to hide in a very serene baroque attitude where suffering is transformed into something sublime; but after having left him the narrator seems to see ”a chubby baroque angel” ”displaying his ghostly wings against the darkening ruins” (p. 117); ”den en barockens knubbiga ängel jag tycker mig se avteckna sina spökvingar mot de mörknande ruinerna.” [12]

My thoughts go to Lindegren’s important lyric volume *mannen utan väg* (1942), where ruins of a general character are mentioned. Both Lindegren and Dagerman can be read according to Walter Benjamin, who stresses the importance of the baroque ruin landscape, representing a world waiting for a salvation not yet to come. Dagerman had not read Benjamin, of course, but still his way of making literal ruins metaphysical and allegoric is similar.

VII. The Metaphors and Intertextuality

Like his colleagues Dagerman has a good sense of finding good images to represent. The first one is the autumn leaves: The first chapter begins: ”In the autumn of 1946 the leaves were falling in Germany for the third time since Chruchill’s famous speech about the fallling of leaves”. (p. 5.) The potato, ”Germany’s most sought-after fruit” (p. 28) is used several times and in the 12th chapter a green apple eaten by a small girl stays in focus. Another symbol is the cake of the Liberal lawyer, which is even called ”symbolic” (p. 41). It consists of false cream and dry bread.

A story about a Goldfish is told by a soldier as a story in the story: The four occupiers of Berlin ”rule over a pond and each has his own goldfish. The Russian catches his goldfish and eats it up. The Frenchman catches his and throws it away after pulling off the beautiful fins. The American stuffs his and sends it home to the USA as a souvenir. The Englishman behaves most strangely of all: he catches his fish, holds it in his hand and caresses it to death.” (p. 49) Dagerman also quotes allegorical phrases like in ”In Deutschland ist nix mehr los” (p. 103).

Many of Dagerman’s images and metaphors are those especially cherished by his generation. One of them is the winter. Dagerman’s Munich chapter begins ”A Sunday in early winter in Munich, with a cold sun” (p. 83). A favorite in Greek mythology is Sisyphos, a famous cat of Karl Vennberg was even named after him. In *Tysk höst* the woman who wants to go by train

from Celle to Hamburg with four heavy potato sacks is compared to Sisyphos: ”She does not yet know that she is a Sisyphus who has rolled her stone up to the hilltop; soon it will tip over and vanish far below.” (p. 108.) Friedrich Hölderlin was especially celebrated in 1943, 100 years after his death. Vennberg introduced him to a Swedish audience in *Arbetaren* and Lindegren published a poem, later included in *Sviter* (1947). Dagerman writes: ”We can imagine that German soldiers with Mörikes’s poems in their inside pockets subjugated Greece, or that after yet another Russian village had been levelled to the ground the German soldier returned to his interrupted reading of Hölderlin, the German poet who said of love that it conquers both time and bodily death.” (p. 114.) A last example is the theme of Ascension and airplanes could be found in W.H. Auden’s *The Event of F 6* and in Lindegren’s imagery.[13] *Tysk höst* ends with a final overview when the plane leaves Frankfurt:

> Three thousand five hundred metres. The ice-ferns thicken on the windows. The moon has risen, a frosty ring round it. We are told of our whereabouts. We are flying over Bremen but Bremen is not to be seen. Lacerated Bremen is lying hidden beneath dense German clouds, impenetrably hidden as the mute German agony. We fly out over the sea and on this rolling, marbly floor of clouds and moonlight we take leave of Germany, autumnal and icebound. (p. 120)

Intertextuality is extremely frequent in the poetry of Lindegren and Vennberg and in the prose of Oswald. In this context I would like to point out an important example that shows the method of Dagerman. On p. 76 a line from the second stanza of the Horst-Wessel-Lied is quoted, ”Die Strasse frei den braunen Batallionen”, in the context of the trials. When *Tysk höst* was written the song was very wellknown, also in Sweden. The reader is thus reminded of the whole stanza:

> Die Straße frei den braunen Bataillonen.
> Die Straße frei dem Stumabeilungsmann!
> Es schau’n aufs Hakenkruz voll Hoffnung schon Millionen.
> Der Tag für Freiheit und für Brot bricht an!
>
> [Clear the streets for the brown batatalions,
> Clear the streets for the stormtroopers!
> Already millions look with hope to the swastika

The day of freedom and bread is dawning!]

Obvious keywords are ”bread” – the lack of food is a frequent theme in the book – and ”hope”, contrasting the despair, or hopelessness, of postwar Germany. The apparently superficial quotation in fact stresses the ironic contrast between the dawning hope of the Nazis (the losers of the war) and the despair of the postwar Germans, a despair of course caused by the illusions of the Nazis.[14]

VIII. The function of the artist

The Swedish generation of the 1940s is very far from idealism, as well as from agitprop or l'art pour l'art. Literature has an aim fo fulfill, but this aim is metaphysical. The dream of the artist is that his work of art might transform suffering, a good example is the woman who reads Rilke with her friends in a concentration camp. But in the actual context this woman does not want to write about the force of poetry, she would prefer to write about her husband, who has turned mute after spending eight years in Dachau. In Dagerman's *Tysk höst* art is usually contrasted to poverty and it is frequently superseded by physical reality. Thus, the metaphysical aim of art is not shown to be a failure, but it is treated with a certain distance, a distance typical of Dagerman, but not of his generation.

Notes

1. Dagerman, Stig, *Samlade Skrifter*, med kommentarer av Hans Sandberg. Vol. 1-11, Stockholm, 1981-1983; Vol. 3, *Tysk höst*, Stockholm, 1981.

2. Palmkvist, Karin, *Diktaren i verkligheten. Journalisten Stig Dagerman* [The Author in Reality. Stig Dagerman as Journalist], Stockholm, 1989.

3. Palmqvist, p. 268.

4. Ibid.

5. See the map in Palmqvist, p. 95.

6. All page references in this paper are references to Robin Fulton's English translation of the book: *German Autumn*, London & New York (Quartet Books), 1988.

7. The Swedish quotation is from Dagerman, *Tysk höst*, p. 89.

8. The Swedish quotation is from Dagerman, *Tysk höst*, p. 56.

9. The Swedish quotation is from Dagerman, *Tysk höst*, p. 116.

10. The Swedish quotation is from Dagerman, *Tysk höst*, p. 11.

11. Benjamin, Walter*, The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*), translated by John Osborne, London (Verso), 1992.

12. The Swedish quotation is from Dagerman, *Tysk höst*, p. 140.

13. Concerning Lindegren and the ascension theme: Lysell, Roland, *Erik Lindegrens imaginära universum* (diss.), Stockholm, 1983.

14. The Horst-Wessel-Lied was first published the the Berlin Nazi newspater *Der Angriff* in September 1929. The approximate English translation is quoted from http://en. wikipedia.org/wiki/Horst-Wessel-Lied.

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horst-Wessel-Lied.