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Bjarne Thorup Thomsen:

Eyvind Johnson's Hybrid North

Dynamics of place and time in travelogues and memory sketches 1943-1963

Hybridity of belonging, ambiguity of home, fusion of local and further afield are notions that inform in fundamental ways the work and life story of Eyvind Johnson (1900-76), Nobel Prize laureate in literature in 1974. In the following we shall focus on a selection of Johnson's more factual conceptualisations, in memory sketches and travelogues,¹ of the Swedish North where he was born and spent his childhood and youth. These pieces provide us with a picture of a multidimensional place that radiates mobility, complexity and change. If representations of the northern 'periphery' are sometimes prone to construct it as a static or slow antithesis to a dynamic 'centre', this is not a criticism which can be fairly levelled against Johnson. Rather, Johnson's articulations of the North have 'traffic' and (time) travel as some of their main tropes and tend to challenge, in a manner which make them of heightened relevance today, concepts of clear-cut boundaries of communities, regions, even nations, while combining in inventive ways 'insider' and 'outsider' as well as 'past' and 'present' perspectives on the northern environments.

When Johnson in travel accounts such as *Vinterresa i Norrbotten* (1955; *Winter Journey in Norrbotten*) and 'Sommar dagbok från Norrbotten' (1963; 'Summer Diary from Norrbotten') journeys into contemporary landscapes and townscapes that, at the same time, contain the traces or contours of his personal past, he acts both as an ambassador for the North and as a special reporter approaching from the South in order to cover the region. He familiarises external audiences with the environment that shaped himself and his writing as well as with the continuities and changing conditions in the North. In memory sketches such as 'Björkelund med omgivning' (1943; 'Björkelund and its Surroundings') and 'Upplevelse av Norrbotten' (1962; 'Experience of Norrbotten'), which belong to official anthologies celebrating milestones in the history of administrative structures and demarcations in the North, the ambassadorial role is particularly pronounced. It is clear to see how Johnson's growing cultural status or 'capital' is employed to

¹ The distinction between these two forms is by no means a clear-cut one in Johnson's case: as we shall see in the following, travel writing and memory sketch tend to coalesce in several of the texts under discussion, contributing to their creative hybridity.

provide prestige – and incisive insights into now and then in the region – in connection with these celebrations. While frequently preoccupied with the past, Johnson's observations are always also, explicitly or implicitly, grounded in a contemporary political, economic or environmental context, be it world-war preparedness, welfare development, cold-war crisis, or increased utilisation of natural resources. Arresting metaphors, typically founded on, and thereby conveying, specific features of the local natural or socio-cultural landscapes, are used to interrogate these developments. Further common stylistic denominators of the pieces we shall consider in more detail below is their lightness of touch, entertainment value and readability, at times combined with a degree of ironic distance, perhaps aiming to avoid sentimentalism and one-dimensional 'immersion'. This lighter approach differs from the starker and more sombre register and the overt politicisation found in Johnson's perhaps best known and earlier memory piece, 'Personligt dokument' ('Personal Document'), published in the seminal collection of self-portrayals by Swedish autodidactic authors *Ansikten* (*Faces*) in 1932.² This document will figure additionally in the following as a comparative point of reference.

Born in the borderland: Björkelund, Boden, the world...

In 1943 Johnson contributed to an official anthology designed to celebrate the quartercentenary of municipal status being granted to his home town of Boden in Sweden's northernmost region of Norrbotten. The context of the culmination of the World War confrontations provided the celebration of the strategically important town with special resonances and relevance, as evidenced by the emphasis on preparedness, and the value of peace, in the 'motto lines' on the title page of the book: 'Boden · mellan · två · världskrig · i · fredligt · värv · alltid · krigsberett · vid · 25 · år · i · högsta · beredskap ·' ('Boden · between · two · world wars · in · peaceful · pursuits · always · prepared for war · at · 25 · in a state of · the highest · preparedness').³ The weighty, cloth-bound and elaborately designed volume, published by the municipal council, in itself reads as a statement of solidity, steadfastness and significance. [illustration 1]

² In the foreword of *Ansikten* the diversity of the literary voices represented in the anthology is emphasised, while the common ground that obtains between the writers is located in the material conditions they emerged from (*Ansikten* 1932: 5). 'Personligt dokument' was republished in 1977, the year after Johnson's death, in a double issue of *Svensk litteraturtidskrift* focused on the author's life and work, reflecting also a revival of interest in Johnson in the context of the new radicalism of the 1970s (see Johnson 1977).

³ All translations from Swedish into English in this article are by my friend and colleague Peter Graves to whom I am grateful.

Johnson's contribution to the celebratory work is a childhood memory sketch, entitled 'Björkelund med omgivningar', of the district or borderland of Boden in which he grew up. It opens by asking the apparently simple question 'Hur långt sträcker sig Boden?' (Johnson 1943: 310) ('How far does Boden stretch?'), only to go on to answer it in ways which together cut against finite 'us' and 'them' territorial thinking (and thus implicitly challenge fundamental premises of the belligerent behaviour of aggressive states). Johnson's strategy could be said to be about globalising the local in a two-way process: first by experimentally stretching the outreach of 'det bodensiska' to 'världens yttersta gräns' (1943: 310) ('the nature of Boden to the outermost limits of the world') and then, complementarily, to see the northern town as a concentrate of global trends: 'I ett nötskal – eller låt oss säga i ett mycket stort nötskal – återfann man världens allmänna utveckling' (1943: 310) ('In a nutshell – or, shall we say, a very big nutshell – the development of the whole world was to be found [there]'). Johnson thus offers a spatial 'definition' that is fluid and modern, conceptualising Boden in both centripetal and centrifugal terms. As for his own place in the town towards which the celebrations are directed, Johnson clearly, almost programmatically, identifies himself as an inhabitant of the margins and as originating at the crossroads. After a light-touch discourse on the difficulty, when he grew up, of drawing an exact boundary between the outlying area of Björkelund and Boden itself, Johnson concludes by asserting 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 björkelundsungar under alla förhållanden betraktade oss som gränsbor, ofta som något vildavästernbetonde trappers och nybyggare [...]. (1943: 312)

(I never did come to any real clarity during my childhood as to where our border actually ran; I do remember, however, that as Björkelund children we always thought of ourselves as borderers, frequently as trappers or settlers with a touch of the Wild West about us [...].)

This uncertain but dynamic localisation is bound up with mobility, incorporating routes and traffic that lead south as well as north, and breeds its own type of patriotism, which Johnson in his piece in a typical play with scale and time gives overtones of both the New World ('right or wrong, my country' (1943: 313)) and of nations fighting for their freedom in the context of world war and occupation: 'utåt var vi en tämligen enig front och på så vis en vacker förebild för just nu för sin frihet kämpande små nationer' (1943: 313) ('to the outside world we showed a fairly united front, thus setting a fine example for the small nations fighting for their freedom just now').

Thus, the local environment, and indeed the region, in which Johnson grew up was far from a static entity; instead, it was a community of change, growth and immigration from the national south.⁴ Johnson's family story is closely connected with the northbound expansion of the national railway network, with his father, from Värmland, arriving in the North as a navvy, while his mother, from Blekinge, followed a similar trajectory, employed in an ambulant bakery catering for the construction workers. The opening statement of 'Personligt dokument' puts emphasis on routes as much as roots and simply reads: 'Vi kom söder ifrån, från Blekinge och Värmland' (Johnson 1932: 185) ('We came from the south, from Blekinge and Värmland').⁵ Trains, stations, tracks, and the possibilities they offer, remain recurrent preoccupations in Johnson's work, not least in *Vinterresa*, as we shall see below.

Growth in the North

The theme of growth in the North, in this instance in the post-war period, fully frames the second example of Johnson's contributions to celebratory publications we shall consider. The anthology *Norrbotten kommer* was published in 1962, in connection with a major industry and trade exhibition held in Luleå, the regional capital, in 1960 to mark the 150th anniversary of Norrbotten as an administrative entity (*län*). The square and sleek volume, richly illustrated with contemporary photographs documenting the exhibition, its pavilions and its visitors, oozes, as the title suggests, regional self-confidence and sense of belonging in modernity.

⁴ In the booklet *Eyvind Johnsons Björkelund*, published by the Boden division of the Eyvind Johnson Society, it is documented how the building and expansion in the 1880s, 1890s and early twentieth century of the iron ore railway line from Luleå and Boden to Gällivare, Kiruna and eventually Narvik on the Atlantic coast, alongside the decision at the turn of the century to establish the major military complex of Boden Fortress, in itself a response to the increased strategic importance of Northern Sweden and the significance of the iron ore fields, led to an unprecedented population growth in Björkelund and beyond.

⁵ Already 'Personligt dokument' demonstrates how Johnson enjoys observing the mobility that formed a key part of his childhood and family experiences in a 'geometrical' perspective that complicates easy and elementary ideas of fixed spatial relationships: his account of the family's move to their own house within the expanding settlement of Björkelund in the village of Svartbjörnsbyn is articulated in terms both of further peripheralisation (in the village) and a new closeness to the centre that the town represents. 'Personligt dokument' likewise contains a much cited passage that reflects on the ambiguity of home and of travel 'directions' caused by Johnson's extended stay in a foster family: 'Jag vistades också hos släktingar några år som fosterbarn, och när jag kom hem var det som en besökande, trots att jag bodde alldeles intill; jag gick bort fast jag gick hem och gick hem ibland när jag gick bort. Senare har jag försökt att utreda detta underliga förhållande' (1932: 185) ('I also lived with relatives for a few years, as their foster child, and when I went home it was as a visitor in spite of living very close by; I was going away even though I was going home, and sometimes I was going home when I was going away. In later life I have tried to analyse this peculiar situation').

[illustration 2] The introduction, written by the head, *landshövding*, of the regional administration, Manfred Näslund, is a celebration of size and scale – ‘Norrbotten [...] rymmer ledigt 34 län av Blekinges format’ (Näslund 1962: no pagination) (‘Norrbotten [...] has more than enough room for 34 counties the size of Blekinge’) – composed with the aim of creating a national opinion for promoting structural progress in the economy of the North. It identifies four cornerstones of the regional economy – iron ore, forestry, hydro-electric power and agriculture – adds a fifth, tourism, and argues for extended traffic networks and further differentiation of employment and enterprise as the key to achieving ‘en rationell utveckling’ (Näslund 1962) (‘a rational development’) of the regional economy.

Positioned prominently in the volume immediately after the introduction, Johnson’s autobiographical piece, ‘Upplevelse av Norrbotten’, displays loyalty to the themes of expansion, size and dynamics in the North, while also, however, providing striking ecologically informed counter-perspectives to the agenda of economic and environmental rationalisation. An alternative notion of (threatened) ‘growth’ in the North is in play in Johnson’s contribution in the shape of precious dimensions of nature which are displaced or overpowered by the forces of economic progress and technological development. The global political context of nuclear armament and cold-war confrontation is, of course, an important additional backdrop to the tensions articulated in Johnson’s text.

After affirming the affinity between place and people by connecting his own child perspective with the young, administrative, age of the surroundings – ‘När det här länet var ett ungt län, nästen ett barn som län betraktat, [...] och jag själv hade nått den beaktansvärda åldern av 4 eller 5 år’ (Johnson 1962) (‘When this county was a young county, almost a child as counties go, [...] and I myself had reached the considerable age of four or five’) – Johnson’s main compositional device in ‘Upplevelse av Norrbotten’ is to set this child and, gradually, youth on a journey of discovery, adventure and ‘conquest’ in the vastness and variation of the Norrbotten region. The journey takes in both the city and the country, both nature and technology (primarily the wonder of the railway). In framing, moreover, the child perspective by adult memory, Johnson obtains a reflective position from which he can comment on the conditions in the region with contemporary implications. Deconstructing notions of ‘empty’, lifeless, wildernesses and static segments of the region, the sum of Johnson’s portrayal of Norrbotten seems to be that of a ‘vittutgrenat företag’ (1962) (‘enterprise with many branches’), combining organic and entrepreneurial features, human as well as animal activities, into a complex network. This is, however, a delicate balance, and

Johnson's contribution also reads as a warning against unsettling the natural environment in the quest for economic growth. In a striking meditation on the enforced 'exile' or withdrawal of the *rubus arcticus*, a world sensation among berries and an emblem of the North, the reservations against overexploitation are unmistakable:

Man njöt av en av världens allra finaste dofter och en smak, som ingenting sedan har kunnat tränga bort ur minnet, även om åkerbären i den skygghet, som naturen ofta visar inför rationaliseringen, numera har dragit sig längre och längre undan, ja, förskräckta har rymt från vissa av sina gamla hemorter. (Johnson 1962)
(We enjoyed one of the most wonderful scents in the world and a taste that nothing could ever dislodge from the memory, even though the arctic bramble – with the shyness nature often shows when faced with rationalisation – has now retreated farther and farther, actually fleeing in terror from some of its old habitats.)

This position is reinforced overtly in the conclusion of the contribution, voicing concerns that the cult of technology and rationality can lead to the forgetting of important spiritual and bodily dimensions of being.⁶

Building the North in travel writing: from the forefathers' foundations to the timber of welfare

The method of combining memory sketch and travelogue as found in 'Upplevelse av Norrbotten' can be recognised in the two more overt cases of Johnson's travel writing focused on the North, *Vinterresa i Norrbotten* and 'Sommardagbok från Norrbotten', which we shall reflect on as the next stage of our discussion. In a recent exploration of travel writing, its definitions and developments, Carl Thompson underlines the hybrid nature of the form:

The term is a very loose generic label, and has always embraced a bewilderingly diverse range of material. [...] Simultaneously, and partly as a result of this intrinsic heterogeneity, travel writing has always maintained a complex and confusing

⁶ In Johnson's critique of the dark side of technology and the worship of the machine a degree of continuity is noticeable with the positions he formulated in 'Personligt dokument' three decades earlier. With a large sawmill as setting, a central passage of 'Personligt dokument', containing echoes of Karl Marx, portrays machines as insatiable monsters whose primary purpose is to produce profit, reducing the worker to a tool in its mechanical operations and triggering subversive acts of sabotage. These formative experiences, Johnson recounts, has had the lasting impact on his mindset that his appreciation of machines, including their aesthetical attributes, is always mixed with a sense of antagonism. (Johnson 1932: 191). Similarly, 'Sommardagbok från Norrbotten' (see below), from roughly the same time as 'Upplevelse av Norrbotten', critiques the environmental consequences of the technological utilisation of the waterways of the North (Johnson 1963: 57).

relationship with any number of closely related (indeed, often overlapping) genres. (Thompson 2011: 11)

Similarly, Susan L. Robertson in *Defining Travel* (2001) presents the argument, of clear relevance to Johnson's practice as a travel writer, that although travel writing is typically categorised as non-fiction, its 'play of memory, ideology, and imagination suggests that it is also "creative" writing' (Robertson 2001: 61). In a related analysis, Paul Fussell distinguishes travel books from guide books with reference to the former being autobiographical and 'sustained by a narrative exploiting the devices of fiction', whereas they differ from fiction in claiming 'literal validity by constant reference to actuality' (Fussell 2001: 105, 106). Arne Melberg, in his 'guide' to modern travel literature *Resa och skriva* (2005), understands travel literature as a 'nomadic' form of writing which borrows freely from journalistic reportage, testimony, biography and from forms of fiction such as the short story, the novel and poetry (Melberg 2005: 32). Although it has often been marginalised by criticism and in cultural institutions, he sees it as a freer form of writing and a 'joker' in the literary game, offering the writer room for innovation and experimentation (2005: 9, 13).

The argument could be made that the composite, complex and also liberating nature of travel writing which the above analysts seem to agree on would offer Johnson a very appropriate cultural environment in which to explore and represent the multidimensionality of the North. Carl Thompson goes on to provide the following minimal definition of travel writing:

If all travel involves an encounter between self and other that is brought about by movement through space, all travel writing is at some level a record or product of this encounter, and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that is entailed. (2011: 10)

In the case of Johnson, the negotiation between similarity and alterity is made further complex, and fascinating, by the fact that he records and explores a region that contains (the remnants of) his personal foundations, a place that is already in itself a palimpsest of the familiar and the 'foreign' or new. Thompson argues that all travel writing has a two-fold aspect: it is a report on the wider world, yet also 'revelatory to a greater or lesser degree of the traveller who produced that report' (2011: 10). In Johnson's case, this two-fold dimension is less of a duality between place and mind than a coalescence: geography and psychology, landscape and mindscape converge to an extent in his reports from the North.

The publication channels of both *Vinterresa* and 'Sommardagbok' reveal high degrees of dissemination and impact and signals the growth in touristic interest in the North that we touched upon above. While the latter featured in the influential and long-standing Yearbook of the Swedish Tourist Association (*Svenska Turistföreningens Årsskrift*, first issued in 1886), *Vinterresa* was initially published as a series of travel letters in the newspapers *Dagens Nyheter*, with nation-wide circulation, and *Stockholms-Tidningen*. These media outlets would have framed both publications with a sense of presenting the fascinations of the northern 'periphery' to the national 'centre' and a national readership. The first instalment of *Vinterresa* appeared on 13 February 1955 in the Sunday edition of *Dagens Nyheter*. It was displayed prominently over six columns on page 3 of the paper, with illustration by Lennart Gran. [illustration 3] Later the same year the *Vinterresa* reports were published together in book form by Bonniers. The pocket-sized, hard-bound volume seems to echo the portability and durability of the traditional travel guide. Its grey-blue coloured cover connotes winter sky and ice, while two black and white vignette drawings, one front and one back, capture in a stylised and economical way the twin themes of travel and dwelling in the North: in the front vignette the narrow and arrowed angle of railway tracks leading towards the horizon and lined by electrical pylons, states the lure and pull of long-distance transportation, while the back vignette provides a tranquil image of timbered houses positioned between the whiteness of the snow and the darkness of the sky. [illustrations 4 and 5]

'Sommardagbok' and *Vinterresa* begin in parallel fashion with the approaching of the North, both suggesting the dynamic encounter between place and traveller that is to be played out in their continuations. In 'Sommardagbok' the approach is by aeroplane. As the narrator descends towards the Luleå archipelago and Kalax airport, it is as much the landscape that reaches out towards the homebound traveller as the reverse: 'Planet sänker sig, vi närmar oss Luleå. Nakna skär, sandstränder, klippor, skogiga öar höjer sig med sitt hav, den just nu metallblå ytan, upp mot oss' (Johnson 1963: 55) ('The plane descends and we are approaching Luleå. Naked skerries, sandy beaches, cliffs, wooded islands rise to meet us, along with sea that contains them, just now a sheet of metallic blue'). In *Vinterresa* the approach is by railway. As the train passes the Pite river at Älsbyn and draws closer to Boden, the journey transforms into a type of time travel, with a complex sense of direction: 'Känslan av att åka ett stycke baklänges i tiden finns, flyktig, i den exakta förnimmelsen av att åka in i något ganska nytt' (Johnson 1955: 11) ('There is the sense of travelling back in time a little, a fleeting sense, with precisely the sensation of travelling into something quite new'). This passage would seem to bear our Paul Fussell's assertion in 'Travel Books as Literary

Phenomena' that travel can be an adventure in time as well as distance and that travel books 'manipulate the whole alliance between temporal and spatial' (Fussell 2001: 112). As the train rolls into Boden itself and towards the railway station, the objective and subjective dimensions of the travel experience become inseparable, establishing an important overriding insight in *Vinterresa*. We see how traveller very literally proceeds on the infrastructural foundations and material culture created by the hard labour of his father, foster father and others decades earlier:

Tåget svänger in i den långa, mjuka kurvan över Bodån, runt Sanden. Jag vet att vi strax är på något som hette *glacimur*: kilad eller tuktrad granit som håller ihop banslätten. Med den knogade min far och min fosterfar sommarn 1906 eller 1907. Dit bar min syster och jag frukostmaten från Björkelund. (1955: 13)
(The train glides into the long gentle curve over the Bodån river, round Sanden. I know we shall very soon be on something called the *glacis wall*: cut or dressed granite that supports the railway embankment. My father and my foster-father laboured on it in the summer of 1906 or 1907. That's where my sister and I used to carry their breakfasts from Björkelund.)

This sense of experiencing a multi-layered reality in the North permeates *Vinterresa*. The book contains throughout a vibrant interplay of a now and a then, a here and a there, to borrow the terms of the title, 'Här – där', of the section that fronts the book. Thus, busy busses – the trope of traffic again – can work as emblems of the ways of the present, but also open up routes into the linguistic landscapes of the past:

Vi stiger åt sidan för bilar och går förbi en bensinstation. Fullsatta bussar är på väg mot avlägsna byar – som med ens är så nära att jag hör deras namn viskas i örat med den rätta betoningen, det riktiga uttalet, av unga röster som är gamla eller försvunna nu. (1955: 20)
(We move aside for cars and walk past a petrol station. Full busses are on their way out to distant villages, which are suddenly so close that I hear their names being whispered in my ear with the right intonation, the proper accent, by young voices that are now old or departed.)

Similarly, hybrid soundscapes that conflate the mechanised roar of the modern and, behind this, the milder tones of past modes of mobility can be represented in an economical language of condensation, fragmentation and ellipsis, reminiscent at times of the voice of contemporary, 'concrete' poetry:⁷

⁷ Cf. the affinity between travel writing and poetry asserted by Paul Fussell: 'A travel book is like a poem in giving universal significance to a local texture' (2001: 115). See also Arne Melberg on the lyrical dimensions of travel writing (2005: 14).

En gata öppnar sig mot en frusen hamn. Tunn snö, ishalka en bit, gå försiktigt. Bjällerklang, fast här finns ingen släde, ingen rissla, inga hästar just nu. Jag hör det ändå – bakom ljudet av den tunga bussen som frasar och dundrar i väg. Och nu kan jag se det: vi som står här-där. (1955: 21-22)

(A street opens out towards a frozen harbour. Thin snow, some slippery ice, walk with care. The jingle of bells, though there is no sledge here, no sleighs nor horses just now. But I can hear it all the same – behind the noise of the heavy bus that swishes and roars off. And now I can see it: those of us standing here-there.)

Both *Vinterresa* and 'Sommandagbok' were published in the golden years of the welfare state development. And both accounts abound with references to multiple building processes. These constructive activities create continuities (cf. the foundations laid by the forefathers) as well as discontinuities with the past. In 'Sommandagbok', the following representation of Luleå's townscape aims to capture these (dis)continuities:

Driver omkring i stan. Man har rivit, man bygger nytt. Luleå växer åt alla möjliga håll, även uppåt, trafiken växer med stan. Ett av mina första tydliga minnen är härifrån. Vi bodde här en vinter när jag var mellan fyra och fem år gammal. Snö och is, och den jämfört med Björkelund då yrande trafiken, brusande stadsliv [...]. (Johnson 1963: 55)

(Wandering around the town. Things have been demolished, things have been built. Luleå is growing in every direction possible, including upwards. The traffic is growing with the town. One of my first clear memories comes from here. We lived here for a winter when I was between four and five years old. Snow and ice and, compared with Björkelund, the hurly-burly of traffic, the roar of town life [...].)

On the one hand, Johnson, as always, resists reducing the North of his childhood and youth to something static or slow. On the other hand, he acknowledges and appreciates how the North has changed, as also seen in this commentary, likewise focused on Luleå, on a capital-style commercial culture that is representative of the growth of consumerism throughout the nation in the welfare period: 'Vi går förbi skyltfönster som kunde vara i Stockholm eller var som helst i Sverige. Jag befinner mig i nuet, förefaller det mig, och vill inte beklaga det bara av den orsaken att det inte råkar vara förflutet' (Johnson 1955: 20) ('We walk past display windows that could be in Stockholm or anywhere else in Sweden. It occurs to me that I am in the present – and I am not going to complain just because it doesn't happen to be the past'). In Boden, the signs of welfare expansion, of the centrality of the North and a trajectory into the future are similar: 'Här Boden, som växer alltmer på bredden, på höjden, framåt. Ett centrum, det med' (1963: 56) ('Here Boden, which is spreading more and more, sideways, and upwards, and forwards. A centre even!'). Johnson's enquiry into the emergence of the welfare society in the North finds its finest

metaphorical expression as he stops in Södra Sunderbyn, between Luleå and Boden, to observe the orderly and well-organised behaviour of the thousands of timber logs transported down the Lule river. The timber and the accommodating system that surrounds it are tropes of the welfare society and its well-adapted and well-looked-after citizen (demonstrating how travel books can contain what Fussell calls 'parables of their times' (2001: 115)), in sharp contrast to the memories of toil, poverty and anger Johnson himself has invested in the nearby location of Sävast where he worked one summer as a rafter:

Första världskriget som skulle bli det sista. Fattigdom, slit, hemska – och älvens skönhet. Bryggorna gungar under oss. Timret flyter snällt in i rätta bommarna och mot buntverket. [...] Ingen oro här, ingen vrede i timret nu, ingen revolution där så att det brötar ihop och måste behandlas med dynamit. Ett välfärdstimmer på väg till sina ålagda uppgifter. (1963: 56)

(The First World War was supposed to have been the last. Poverty, toil, awfulness – and the beauty of the river. The walkways sway under us. The logs float in a well-behaved way into the right booms and on towards the bundling machine. [...] No fuss here, no angry logs now, no rebelliousness causing them to pile up and having to be given the dynamite treatment. This is welfare timber on its way to its allotted tasks.)

This may carry echoes of the criticism of the passivity of the worker presented in 'Personligt dokument', but is equally indicative of the ways in which social conditions have improved and how the North of Sweden is moving with the times.

An aesthetics for the North: distance as closeness, darkness as light, labour as art

The mutual bonds between travel and writing are well established: writing makes sense of the travel experience, as Susan Robertson suggests (2001: 61), while concepts of travel can illuminate strategies of writing. Both 'Sommar dagbok' and *Vinterresa* incorporate broader references to Johnson's literary activities. *Vinterresa* in particular contains, bound up with the journey from Luleå and Boden to Kiruna and back to Boden that forms its core narrative,⁸ an important self-reflective dimension which explores the relationship between artistic representation and the northern experience. We shall conclude our discussion by briefly considering the notions of hybrid creativity and 'transport' of motifs, material and perspective which seem key to Johnson's literary practice and 'programme', in *Vinterresa* articulated with particular reference to the writing of the North.

⁸ This corresponds to what Paul Fussell calls 'the completion of the circuit' (2001: 109) and identifies as an important compositional device in travel writing.

While passing through the landscapes of Lapland towards Gällivare and Kiruna, Johnson considers the (friendly) criticism he has received that 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 (new) closeness. He goes on to document how travelling away, to continental Europe, liberated his literary engagement with the North – how short stories and sketches focused on France and Germany transformed into northern narratives that ‘burst’ (*brast*, 1955: 80) forth. These and related observations seem to form part of an aesthetical credo that centres on cross-fertilisation, on import and export, on combinational creativity. Johnson sums up the ways in which literary sentiments, settings and characters tend to travel and transform between inspiration and realisation in the concept of ‘ett växelbruk’ (1955: 106), a rotational method, with which most novelists will be familiar: the demigoddess in the age of Homer, the girl in Richelieu’s France, the Berlin bohemian of the 1920’s, the revolutionary exile in contemporary Europe – all may have taken their first steps in a Norrbotten village or town (1955: 111).

This type of creative hybridity works both ways, of course. When Johnson reaches Kiruna, the degree of electric illumination in the industrialised townscape leads him to represent it as a wintry bay of Naples relocated to Lapland. To complete the circuit, also Boden, generally assumed to have inspired Johnson’s early novel *Stad i mörker* (1927; *Town in Darkness*) which formed a dialectical relationship of light and darkness, north and south with *Stad i ljus* (1928; *Town in Light*), focused on Paris, is in *Vinterresa* re-claimed as a place of both light and darkness. While disputing the close connection between *Stad i mörker* and Boden, Johnson is nevertheless careful to conclude *Vinterresa* with pronounced descriptions of his hometown as a site which fuses the light and the dark in a modern mode: ‘mörker med fin elektrisk belysning i’ (‘darkness with fine electrical illumination’), ‘Genom det elektriskt genomlysta mörkret’ (1955: 123; ‘Through the darkness that was penetrated by electric lighting’).

We shall finish with arguably the finest articulation in *Vinterresa* of the fusion of north and south, of the manual and the spiritual, of traditional ‘high’ art and the modern craft of the labourer, as found in the following tribute paid by Johnson to the extreme efforts of the workers who connected the North and created its enduring structures and travel lines:

A. J. Rost [Johnson's foster-father⁹] var med om Nuoljatunneln. Vattnet droppade, rann eller sprutade över hans hals, axlar och rygg när han stod och enpickade. Enpicka var att hålla borrarstålet med vänster hand och borrarläggan med höger – i en ställning som jag senare upptäckte att Michelangelo hade klagat över de fyra-fem år han målade taket i Sixtinska kapellet. Sträckt hals, vildskäggigt ansikte som vänds uppåt mod Förtjänsten, Dagspenningen eller någon annan gud, någon annan makt. En bild, en reproduktion i barndomen och ungdomen, en sann tavla någonstans i Italien som visade hur det kunde vara i Nuolja. En arbetare som grävde, borrade, sprängde fram konst. (1955: 78)

(A. J. Rost [Johnson's foster-father] worked on the Nuolja tunnel. The water dripped, ran or sprayed over his neck, shoulders and back as he stood there 'solo drilling'. This involved holding the chisel drill in the left hand and the lump hammer in the right while working in a position that I later discovered Michelangelo had complained about during the four or five years he spent painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Neck stretched back, face and wild beard turned up towards Wages, the Daily Rate or some other god, some other power. A picture, a reproduction in my childhood and youth, a real painting somewhere in Italy showing what it might be like at Nuolja. A worker digging, drilling, blasting out art.)

As epitomised in this passage, Johnson's work is an unfailingly sensitive, innovative and incisive instrument for the capture and exploration of the dynamics of the North.

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⁹ Johnson's biological father, Olof Petter Jonsson, died from silicosis in 1915, thus falling victim to the working conditions of his time. His mother, Cevia Gustafsdotter, lived until 1942.

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