

# VĂZÂND LUMEA PRIN OCHII COPIILOR – ASTRID LINDGREN, SUECIA ȘI ROMÂNIA

## SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH THE EYES OF CHILDREN – ASTRID LINDGREN, SWEDEN AND ROMANIA

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### **Abstract**

The world famous children's books written by the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002) can with clarification be seen as an outcome of the particular welfare society that emerged through co-operative political and ideological forces during the twentieth century. In many ways her stories symbolizes the humanitarian solidarity which that social system originally was built upon, and by authentically and sensitively putting the world view of children always in focus, she set a new standard for children's literature. The article outlines a group of questions raised by the relatively recent launching of her books in Romanian, mainly concerning the different cultural and linguistic contexts that are brought together when Lindgren is translated into Romanian, and how this can both generate fruitful interchange as well as reveal gaps or differences that need to be overcome.

**Key words:** *Sweden, Children's literature, translation, Romania, Astrid Lindgren, Swedish Welfare State, Children's worldview, Constantin Noica*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *Suedia, Literatura pentru copii, traducere, România, Astrid Lindgren, sistemul suedez de asistența socială, viziunea copiilor asupra lumii, Constantin Noica*

The Swedish Welfare society that gradually emerged and consolidated itself from the 1930s and onward, reaching its peak and fulfilment in the 1960s and 1970s, is nowadays more and more often – and often with an air of nostalgia - described as a historically surpassed era. For

many Swedes it stands for a lost paradise or utopia of socio-economical prosperity and equality, an ideal society marked by economical solidarity as well as growth, and generating considerable cultural achievements also.

The literary scholar and essayist Göran Hägg's book *The Welfare years. Swedish history 1945-1986* (Hägg, 2005), is one attempt to overlook and summarize the meaning, characteristics and importance of this era, significantly encompassed as an époque now overrun by international, global developments contradicting the national state community that was the base of the welfare project.

Locating the beginning of the end of the welfare society to the murder of prime minister Olof Palme in 1986, Hägg gives a both personal (since he himself grew up embraced by the constant enforcement of the welfare system during the 1950s and 1960s) and objective summary of an era that managed to supply both equality, security, solidarity and personal freedom for its citizens, never politically hindering but only constructively regulating capitalist economic enterprise for the benefit of the society as a totality, or, as was summarized in the very concept "folkhemmet", as a home for the people.

This was the Swedish model or example. This was also what legitimated the role of a better conscience for the world, which Sweden so often officially took during this era, for example through the considerable achievements of and heroic figure of Dag Hammarskjöld as the chief secretary for the UN until his tragic death in 1961, or through prime minister Olof Palme's uncompromised attacks at USA for their immoral War actions in Vietnam in the early seventies.

Hägg's survey has a wide approach, drawing attention also to cultural matters, and among other things a specific example that in my mind is highly representative of the welfare society and its ideology and original vision: The world known children's literature author Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002). The question may be put whether not Lindgren, with the totality of her immensely popular oeuvre, remains the most compelling and forceful cultural advocate of ideals that now seem so distant, although still present and haunting the memory of not only one but many generations of Swedish - and Scandinavian - people

Ideals and visions stemming from a different, more humane, humble and considerate attitude towards the fellow man than what seems to characterize so much of our contemporary, celebrity-worshipping, individualistic if not narcissistic, both socially and economically competitive global quasi-community run by vast, corporal interests that seem to operate either beyond the reach of or even are guaranteed the passive agreement of more and more lame political forces, in times of what has been called "the withering away of the state".

"A fundamentally egalitarian and caring attitude allowed her to deflate pretentiousness and erase barriers erected by status and prestige", Eva-Maria Metcalf writes about Astrid Lindgren. The "values and idealism as well as basic humanitarianism" of the early Social democratic movement were "deeply anchored in Lindgren's character", and remained so all her life. (Metcalf 2002, s.33) In other words, both here life and work are inseparable from the particular Swedish society that was her context and home.

Emerging from our present perspective limited national state society, Lindgren may in this way symbolize also the importance of not hastily rejecting the unique specifics of your own cultural origin, as in the end a necessary condition for a true, profound, wider global engagement and perspective, which of course in the case of Lindgren is so convincingly confirmed by the enormous, worldwide acknowledgment of and affection for her work.

What I want to reflect upon in this paper is how the now to large extent in Romanian

available books by Lindgren may relate to specifics of the Romanian cultural and social traditions. As a teacher of Swedish language and literature at the faculty of foreign languages at Bucharest university, I am constantly occupied in trying to keep present an intercultural perspective on the studies, in trying to as creatively and constructively as possible engage the students in cultural exchange and interaction, not by rejecting or overlooking their Romanian identities and frame of cultural references, but instead using them as a means for increased understanding. Or as Eugene Irimias writes in a recent, highly interesting article about learning foreign languages called "Cultural patterns reflected in language", specifically about students of economy but obviously with general applicability: "Students /.../ should be familiar with the idea that people's different communication styles reflect deeper philosophies and world views, which are the foundation of their culture. Understanding these deeper philosophies gives them the broader picture of what the world has to offer them." (Irimias 2007, p.161) Astrid Lindgren has without question imprinted a significant and lasting mark on the "deeper philosophy" that forms the cultural unity of Swedish speakers – understanding the world view revealed in her legacy is evidently of the essence for any attempt to grasp Swedish culture.

The cultural bridge between Sweden and Romania that needs to be established to make any interchange possible - since the historical, economical, political, mental and other differences between the countries are so obvious - is in my mind to be treated, pedagogically or in any other circumstance, as a potential resource and asset, and not as an impediment or hindrance.

This is certainly true also in relation to the translation of Lindgren's books into Romanian – and the question that needs to be asked considering this is: Can the world view or vision of life that is associated with Lindgren for Swedish readers be transformed and adapted authentically into

Romania and the Romanian language? Are there necessary cultural preconditions in the Romanian tradition and language for such a deeper transfer? Are there aspects of Lindgren's oeuvre that run the risk of not pulling all the way through to the Romanian readership? And if so, what are these and why do they occur?

In terms of representing to Swedish people higher ideals and an overall vision of deepest humanity that everyone at least in their minds seems longing to identify themselves with, and perhaps more and more intensively so after the beginning of the fall of the welfare society in the late 1980s, Lindgren's importance may perhaps, *mutatis mutandis*, be comparable to what Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica came to symbolize during the very hardest times of late Communist dogmatic regime, political isolation and mental oppression in Romania.

On the surface certainly very distant from Lindgren with his somewhat aristocratic, strictly intellectual profile, Noica presents in a different domain of culture, something that may seem similar to what Astrid Lindgren has come to symbolize, that is if we take her work with the seriousness it obviously deserve to be taken with. With his "culturalistic" vision, always pleading the importance both of the Romanian cultural specifics and the international, global connections, Noica strongly illustrated how a specific civilization and culture, that is the Romanian, during hard times could still survive and even develop, while at the same time securing the contact with the cultural tradition of the occident and of the world as a whole.

For him, just as for Lindgren, the specifics of his own cultural background and predicament became the very base for reaching out and interacting with the world, as is so convincingly and intriguingly manifested in the *The Paltinis Diary* by Gabriel Liiceanu, a book that gives a direct, multidimensional contact with philosopher Noica during the height of his immensely important contribution to Romanian Cultural life. Published first in 1983, it soon

became a cult book with strong symbolic value for a whole generation of Romanians – it showed how a paradise of culture could still prevail whatever inferno on earth one had to live under, and it showed how such a paradise demands both reaching inwards for originality and tradition, as well as outwards towards the other, to that which is foreign, distant, but still always within our reach.

If we return to Astrid Lindgren, and her symbolic, cultural, mental value in times of the evaporating, day by day more distant welfare society – has not her destiny in Sweden in the end become something not all too different from what was Noica's was during his very life in Romania? The claim Lindgren entertains, the love of her work, runs no risk of decreasing – quite the contrary. But the vision of life in her books, and so effectively made into movies and TV-productions also by that brilliant twin-soul and close working partner of Lindgren, film director Olle Hellbom (1925-82) – isn't this a vision that stands in a both sad and sharp contrast to the life people actually live in present day Sweden?

For what is the world view we meet in the works of Lindgren, whether in books or films? Well, first of all, what we get is the world and life seen through the eyes of children. This was from the beginning what most clearly defined the dawn of the golden era of Swedish Children's books in the 1940s, "[T]he world was now to be portrayed through the eyes and the voice of the child itself", as children's literature scholar Boel Westin writes, and Astrid Lindgren was the one to carry out this task with incomparable sensitivity and versatility. "No one has been more responsible than her for revitalizing Swedish children's literature and in the process arousing the interest of adults as well as children", Westin concludes. (Westin 1996, p.23-24)

The fact that she so successfully attracted and grasped the affection of both grown-ups and children can be seen as reflecting the common belief in consideration for the weak, powerless, "small" members of the society that with such agreement was supported during the dawn and development of the welfare society, that is during the very time that Lindgren made her debut and established herself as the leading children's books writer in Swedish.

To take the children seriously, to care for them, to understand them and not to the least the child that you harbour inside yourself - this was in solid accordance with the official commitments of the welfare ideology. In this way, Lindgren can be seen as a natural, and of course exceptionally achieved and successful, product of that very society and historical era, which sprang out from among other things Ellen Keys vision of the twentieth century as the "century of the child" in her famous book from 1900.

And what is, then, of real and vital significance in the world as it appears to and is experienced by children? What do we see and pay attention to, what do we consider important and what do we dream about, if we adopt the world view of children as it so authentically is presented through Astrid Lindgren? In fact most of the predominating values of modern society may seem reversed if we take a close look at any of Lindgren's stories. Natural simplicity, togetherness, companionship, friendship, joy in the most ordinary, familiar aspects of every-day living, joy in fantasy and imagination for its own value, not in the sense of necessarily making all your dreams come true – these are the values that last and have meaning in the world of children.

The fact that the fantasies of the children often do materialize in Lindgren's works, like

with little boy Eric whose imaginary friend Karlsson-on-the-roof in the end proves to actually exist, is not to be interpreted literally, it is just a plea in fiction for such dreams and visions to be taken seriously for their own value – as dreams and fantasies they are real and important for the children, like for all of us. In our present day of liberalist consumerism of extravagant experiences, this may be hard to understand, whereas a child knows this without knowing, and takes joy in hearing about Karlsson without actually expecting him to turn up outside the bedroom window.

The treasure chest in the world of children never contains real money, but instead feathers, stones, flowers, just as in the wonderful children's story about "Dunderklumpen" by one of Lindgren's colleagues Beppe Wolgers, who also played the father of Pippi Longstocking in the Pippi films. In a fairy-tale that satirizes economic greed from the point of view of children, a treasure chest that for a while threatens to split the friendship and harmony among a group of cartoon characters, in the end is found to contain only the gifts of nature collected by a child. This strongly illustrates the purity and naturalness which is the very essence of the tradition that Astrid Lindgren is the starting point of and set the standard for in Swedish children's culture. And as for the famous treasure chest of Pippi Longstocking herself, with its never-ending resources of golden coins that she always shares so generously with her friends - it is merely a joyful fantasy symbol of strength and independence.

So I find that this culturally delivered sense of purity, authentic innocence, and natural sense for what actually has true value in life, may resound what Constantin Noica from a completely different frame of reference preached, and himself was a living example of – culture as a means of spiritual focus and purity, a point of complete purity and integrity, a path secured from and above seductive sensations and ugly dealings with a world gone wrong. Both Lindgren and Noica present an ideal, a utopia if you like, but one that they vouched for with their own lives, which makes their visions and beliefs all the more compelling and convincing.

Noica put his trust in firm intellectual training through means of high culture, through an extreme focus on ascetic, monk-like reflection and what he called "cultural training", whereas Lindgren reached in through fiction for the inner child in herself and, as it proved, everyone else too. But didn't they both long for the same purity, the same kernel of untouchable resistance towards the evils of the world, the temptations, the false attractions, the unnecessary excesses, the greed and over-swollen ambitions?

In any case, the Romanian cultural tradition with its highly developed originality, authenticity, sensitivity, and depth, demonstrated for example in Noica and his disciples Liiceanu and Pleșu but of course in many others too, should obviously offer the necessary preconditions for acquiring and genuinely appreciating the fullness and richness of the children's literature that Astrid Lindgren created, for realizing and internalizing the wider meaning and ideological vision of her work. At the same time, there may be difficulties, and considering these first and foremost in relation to the language.

The Swedish language has - in a way obviously corresponding to the deeply rooted and long democratic political tradition and history – in the last decades and even before that, to a comparably high degree been constantly modernized. This in the purpose of creating equal possibilities for all of its speakers, and thus effectively breaking down social hierarchies through simplifying the language to level accessible to those with high education as well as those without any specific theoretical qualifications, and erasing also more and more the difference between spoken and written language.

In the case of Lindgren, this is evidently important in terms of making it possible for her

to grasp also the very language that children speak and use, not only in dialogues but also when conceiving the narrator's voice in her tales, which either literally belongs to that of a child, as in *The Brothers Lionheart*, or naturally and without any form of patronizing puts itself on the level of the children, as with the stories about Emil, where his mother functions as the narrator.

For Lindgren's purposes, the Swedish language was the perfect tool, and the question is whether her full and authentic identification with not only the world but also the language of children can be transmitted into Romanian, so that not only Romanian children but also grown-up readers in Romania can assimilate the vision depicted, without the language coming in the way, so to say, and creating the very distance that Lindgren in Swedish managed to break down between the world of adults and that of children?

To this I certainly have no answer, but suffice it to say that Romanian literature in general definitely seem to be more weighed down by traditional standards and requirements connected with literary language, more rigid in its expectations on texts in order for them to achieve the status of "high" literature. And to the extent that this truly is the case, it is possible that Lindgren's vision, which concerned grown-ups as much as children, in fact may demand an expansion of the reader's mind that the Romanian written language and the connotations it generates in Romanian readers itself obstructs a full transfer of Lindgren's authentic message and appeal.

Also, we have the once even in Sweden controversial element of the feminist commitment, which most evidently comes forward in the creation of that most famous of Lindgren's characters, Pippi Longstocking. "[T]he child of the century" she has been called, and evidently she remains one of the most influential figures ever to be created in children's literature. "Within its genre Pippi Longstocking was probably as influential as Simone de Beauvoir's *The second sex*", because "[w]ith her ultimate refusal to grow up and adapt, Pippi set the stage for female heroes in children's fiction who would break down the narrow confines prescribed by traditions and changed the outlook of many readers", as Eva-Maria Metcalf writes.

Pippi is a girl who defies all attempts at conventional definitions, who breaks all thinkable traditional rules and expectations set for girls, and perhaps most controversially of all, she does this with never-ending humour. Although you still may meet people even in Sweden who readily declare their general love of Astrid Lindgren, however making a small reservation for Pippi, her importance and successfulness as a symbol of female freedom, independence and integrity is deeply established in Sweden of today, and of course in many other places of the world too.

But how about Romania? With its as it may seem to a foreign resident exceptionally strong and vital patriarchal mentality and cultural tradition, is Romania ready for a girl who lacks manners and constantly wears clothes that neither match nor fit? A girl who does nothing to make herself pretty or adorable in terms of the way she looks, who always speaks out loud, uncensored and without hesitation, who asserts herself in every situation, always being the subject, the strong one, the one refusing - with joy instead of anger - to be controlled?

Again, one can only speculate, but evidently we here once again strike a point that marks a vital cultural difference between Sweden and Romania. The emancipation movement with its strong traditions in Sweden and in Scandinavia in general ever since the breakthrough at the end of the nineteenth century, and even long before that, seems profoundly distant from Romania with its decisive cultural ties to the Balkan region. It is certainly no coincidence that Pippi was conceived by a Swedish author, and the existential female freedom she so seductively embodies

may be hard indeed to compare with any cultural element stemming from the Romanian frame of reference, be it children's literature, movies, poetry, or anything else.

On the other hand, for example the typical nonsense phrases she so often excels in, playing uninhibitedly with both the way words sound and with their meaning, and the generally reckless absurdity of her overall appearance, is in fact surprisingly similar to the tendencies of the dadaist movement, or to dadaism in general, which of course has its origin among Romanian intellectuals – something that once again indeed strikes one as no coincidence, given the considerable inclination for the comic and absurd point-of-view on life that seems to flow so naturally out of the Romanian spirit.

In fact the question is whether not Romanians with their inherent sense of the absurd, providing the world not only with dadaism but also with the absurd drama, through Ionesco and others, should not be especially well equipped culturally for understanding the liberating world view that Pippi Longstocking symbolizes? The critical point in this matter may very well be whether the concept of women and womanhood, so typically stereotype and fixed in a society with strong patriarchal - and even paternalistic -traditions, is or can become open-minded enough to see and assimilate the progressive, playful, self-ironical freedom of mind when expressed through the original words and actions of a strong little female subject called Pippi. An attitude to life that most certainly has already have been acknowledged and rejoiced in by the children of Romania.

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