

H. C. ANDERSEN'S TRAVEL BOOKS – A FAIRY-TALE VISION OF EUROPE

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Abstract

Hans Christian Andersen is well known as a writer of fairy tales, but a corpus of travel books also constitutes a large part of his literary heritage. Influenced by the poetics of the novel, the focus of travel books shifted from images of foreign countries, landscapes and descriptions of unusual situations, to the inner world of the traveller, which might be more interesting for a reader than the external world. The narrator thus becomes the protagonist of the tale, bringing such travel books closer to fiction. It is argued that Andersen's fairy tale poetics has its roots in his travel books. These books include many stories, each of which could be considered a separate text. The first book, *Skyggebillede* (1831), was based on his trip to Germany and contains a number of small narratives similar to fairy tales published after 1835. Here, Andersen transformed the traditional form of travel book, with his poetic vision of Germany more important than reality, which was only the background for the author's fantasy. His later travel books, *En digters bazar* (1842) and *I Sverige* (1849), contain texts which were included in Andersen's collections of fairy tales and stories. Here, his images of European cities, nature and other famous sites are not mere descriptions but also romantic pictures where fairy tale fantasy plays a very important role.

Keywords

Danish literature, Romanticism, H.C. Andersen, travel books, fairy tales

Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) is well known as a writer of fairy tales; however, a corpus of travel books is also a large part of his literary heritage. Travel books influenced by the poetics of the novel were the texts in which the main focus was not only on images of foreign countries, landscapes and unusual situations encountered along the way, but also on the inner world of the traveller. The latter might be more interesting for a reader than descriptions of external things.

The genre of the travel book is an old one, its main feature being a combination of documentary elements and the freedom of the writer's fantasy. For centuries, the popularity of this genre was mostly related to the information about foreign countries and nations that was imparted. In the eighteenth century, the genre of the travel book changed and became connected to literary fiction, especially after the publication by Laurence Sterne (1713-1786) of *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768). The travel book as a genre started to interact with the novel because, in general, novels have features similar to travel books, such as the "private hero on the individual road", described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) as the "chronotope of the road" (Bakhtin, 1981, 250). As mentioned above, travel books under the influence of the novel's poetics thus became texts in which the main

focus was not merely descriptive of foreign experiences along the way, but also introduced on the inner world of the traveller, mediating their interpretation of the exterior world. The narrator turns into the protagonist of the tale, which brings travel books of this kind closer to fiction.

The travel book became very popular in Denmark, especially in the eighteenth century, and this type of literary work was closely connected to the European tradition, but for the Danes, the genre not only consisted of texts about other countries, but was also a means of national self-identification as Europeans. Danish writers attempted to fix the place of Denmark in Europe, and their own place as literary figures within European culture. The best-known Danish travel books were Johannes Ewald's (1743-1781) *Levnet og meeninger* (Life and Opinions, 1775) and Jens Baggesen's (1764-1826) *Labirinthen* (Labyrinth, 1792-1793). They contain some elements of free fantasy, but these texts are basically documentary and truthful. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a new phase in the development of the travel book genre began.

A changing genre

The main contribution to the development of this genre in the Romantic era is that of Hans Christian Andersen, who took a new approach, undoubtedly connected to his fairy tales and stories. Generally, there is no distinction in his travel books between fact and fiction, with the picture of reality and the descriptions of the protagonist's emotions and impressions the products of the author's imagination. There are specific elements of the text which function as illustrations of the protagonist's thoughts. These elements have their own plots and systematic imagery and later many of them were published separately. It could be argued that Andersen's fairy tales ("eventyr") and stories ("historier") have roots in these existing texts extracted from his travel books. Andersen was a famous novelist, having published six novels, but none of them was based on the motive of travel. It is only in the novel *Improvisatoren* (Improvisator, 1835) that a reader can find images of a foreign country – Italy in this case. Andersen consciously separates these two genres: the travel book and the novel. The Danish travel book does not develop into the novel and remains an independent literary form.

Andersen had travelled a lot, and travel books are quite a significant part of his heritage. As he once wrote, "At rejse er at leve" (To travel is to live), thus, for the writer, travel was a natural way of life. He was one of few Danes to have travelled across most of Europe and even visited North Africa. As the Danish scholar of the same name wrote many years later: "Andersen is also an increasingly experienced practical traveller, who amasses enough experience to allow him to guide others on their tours: Europe becomes his territory, where he moves with confidence" (Andersen, 2007, 151).

Andersen not only gathered the material for his work from his journeys, but also found the most important emotional motivation for creativity in them; in his travel books, he frequently moves away from descriptions of the details and includes whatever he wants: legends, fantastic stories and imaginary images. In such a way, he creates a unique world, in which there is no border between fiction and truth. Many things that he describes had never happened to him, although in some cases they could have. Nevertheless, as Erik

Svendsen wrote: "The travelling author was not interested in news, nor was he interested in political and social tensions. One couldn't claim, either, that he did careful research. But in a certain respect he might be characterized as someone writing reports based on observation" (Svendsen, 1999, 486). Andersen was not a journalist, he did not aspire to accuracy and reliability, he was a writer, and imagination dominated his books. Initially, the travel book as a genre did not assume any normative form, thus its distinguishing feature is its vitality and the ability to adopt all kinds of texts, which is very appropriate to Andersen as a Romantic author.

Andersen's first major journey was to Germany in 1831. In the autumn of the same year, he published a travel book *Skyggebilleder af en Reise til Harzen, det sachsiske Schweitz etc. etc., i Sommeren 1831* (Shadow Pictures of a Journey to the Harz, Swiss Saxony, etc. etc. in the Summer of 1831). In this work, Andersen was heavily influenced by Heinrich Heine's (1797-1856) *Reisebilder (1826-1827)*, but his book was nevertheless original, with the young Dane travelling to a foreign country for the first time, attempting to express all the emotions he experiences. He is an inhabitant of a small country but open to the world and to alien cultures. Not only does Andersen describe all he sees but he also creates the atmosphere of an unusual and exotic world. The composition of this book is based on the combination of different stories, and many of them are more lyrical than epic. The protagonist-traveller in this book is not the author, but his alter ego, who is part of the book's literary world, and his impressions are not only the results of his emotional experience but also a starting point for the understanding of reality and life in general. There are two narrative levels: the informative – a narration about different places and events – and the lyrical, connected to a personal, emotional attitude of the author to everything that he sees on his travels.

Andersen attempts to describe his journey as if in a fairy tale. For example, the long and difficult ride in the coach from Hamburg turns into a magical tour, with elves in the flowers decorating the coach, evoking dreams in tired travellers, but only a poet can see these creatures and know about dreams of others. The poet thus takes a poetic trip in which everything is fantastic and fabulous. The greatest impressions experienced by the traveller occur when visiting the Dresden Gallery (1831), where the art fills his heart with emotions. Raphael's "Madonna" is described as a work of art that embodies the principle of harmony between the Earth and Heaven. Andersen had a mystical attitude to such art, understanding the great monuments of human genius as visualisations of supernatural matters. Contact with the arts was thus a pleasure for the traveller; however, this contrasted strongly with a visit to the Sonnenstein Castle in Pirna, located on the picturesque banks of the Elbe, which represents a very depressing moment. There he discovers a singular world enclosed behind the high walls: a mental hospital. While he also suggests it is a kingdom of fantasy, it is described as "a terrible chimera with the head of Medusa" (Andersen, 1986, 114). The author also tells us some stories about the inhabitants of this castle, but they are tragic and full of human suffering. In this book, Andersen created a poetic image of Germany where personal impressions take the form of small sketches or specific stories and it was this principle of distinct miniatures that became a major aspect of all of Andersen's works, not only in his fairy tales but also in his novels.

Framing fairy tales

Andersen's next travel book was *En Digters bazar* (A Poet's Bazaar, 1842), the result of his long trip around Europe in 1840-1841, during which he visited Germany, Italy, Greece and the Balkan countries, spending about nine months on the road. The first part of the book is different from the second because the traveller first went to familiar places (Germany and Italy), where his goal was not to describe what he saw along the way but primarily to record his emotional responses. However, in the south of Italy, which Andersen had not previously visited, he had already developed a specific ethnographic interest, not only describing the natural beauty but also the exotic local customs. This element of his work, creating an image of a foreign country as an exotic place, is new.

In contrast, the second part of the book is descriptive and takes the more traditional form of the travel book genre, with the author attempting to provide an account of concrete places. For example, Greece at that time was a new country, having recently won its independence from the Ottoman Empire, but it was also the famous birthplace of European civilisation. However, Andersen did not find the icons of Ancient Greece that he had expected there; just a few ruins of old temples on hillsides. The dissonance between the miserable present and the glorious past is the main impression imparted by the author. Here, he does not describe his thoughts but makes small sketches as in his previous travel book, although these stories are autonomous texts in themselves and complete fiction. Later, such stories as *Metalsvinet* (The Metal Pig), *Venskabs-Pagten* (The Shepherd's Story of the Bond of Friendship) and *En Rose fra Homers Grav* (A Rose from Homer's Grave) were included in his collections of fairy tales. Thus, while the travel genre should present a picture of objective reality, documentary in fact, the Danish writer changed its form, combining fact with fairy tales. In this case, the travel book becomes a framework for his fairy tales.

The image of the narrator-traveller now has a new function, as he becomes a writer and storyteller; telling an interesting story is more important than describing a journey. Anderson refuses the objective tone of narration, with everything seen by the traveller refracted through the prism of his internal perception of the world. Sometimes it takes the form of a fairy tale; for example, while suffering from toothache in Rome, he listens to a story told by his hiking boots. Andersen thus breathes life into inanimate things and brings a poetic voice to very prosaic and ordinary events. A story about bad weather in Rome moves from a traveller's complaints into a fairy tale. *The Metal Pig*, a story set in Florence about a beggar boy who became a painter, has all the necessary features of a fairy tale: the protagonist falls asleep on the back of a sculpture of a metal pig in the city market and goes on a strange journey, visiting the most important sites of Florence, with the Uffizi Gallery and the Church of Santa Croce among them. Here we have a symbolic act of initiation into the art world. If in *Shadow Pictures* the narrator-traveller describes his impressions of the Dresden Gallery, in this book, the protagonist – a small boy – sees all the great masterpieces, and his contact with them takes him out of the world of poverty and misery to become an artist and creator. The description of Florence is combined with the poetics of the fairy tale, where the fantastic plot does not conflict with the concrete description of everyday life in the city.

A new form for the fairy tale

The result of a three-month stay in Sweden in 1849 was the book *I Sverrig* (In Sweden), published in 1851. For the Danes, Sweden was not an exotic country and in this sense the trip there was not a subject for travel books. However, Andersen was the first writer to "discover" Sweden as a destination for tourists and artists. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Sir Walter Scott's (1771-1832) romantic poems had turned Scotland into a tourist Mecca. In the same way, Andersen's book paid attention to the original and majestic beauty of Scandinavia. The Danish writer not only visited Stockholm but also went to Dalarna – a region of magnificent landscapes and epic beauty. After Andersen's tour, the famous Danish artist Wilhelm Marstrand (1810-1873) went to Dalarna to capture the life of the local people and the virgin nature of this region.

In the book on Sweden, rather than a poet-narrator as in his previous books, Andersen attempts to be an ordinary tourist: "En sædvanlig Reisende, svarede jeg, en Reisende, der betaler for Befordringen" ("A common traveller, I answered, a traveller who pays for transport", AK) (Andersen, 2003, 17). He considered that the book should be descriptive and a more typical travel book than others. In the prologue, the author tells us all he knows about Sweden. However, in fact, this text is built on the same principles as his other travel books: the vivid impressions of the natural landscape are combined with stories and legends. He writes about picturesque landscapes, Swedish towns, the people, and tells us about the history and culture. This kind of narration is combined with the author's philosophical concerns, and he also includes some tales which are not directly linked to his journey, *Svinene* (Pigs), *Marionetspilleren* (The Puppet) and *Den stumme Bog* (The Dumb Book), all of which can be considered as separate texts. Later, they were published in his collections of fairy tales and stories. In fact, *The Dumb Book* was one of the best examples of a new literary form which Andersen called "historie" and started to publish in 1850.

In his Sweden book, Andersen speaks about the subjects that were the most important to him: art and poetry. He attempts to fix the poet's place in the world, where the only judge is the public, although this kind of reader is often very hard on an author, unable to understand a poet's vision. However, in this book, the poetic vision of another country was more important than the reality, which was only the framework for the author's fantasy.

Twelve years later, in 1863, his next travel book, *I Spanien* (In Spain), was published. Andersen had made a journey to Spain, accompanied by the son of his friend Edvard Collin (1808-1886). The writer had never been to Spain and the country proved very attractive to him with its unique culture. Andersen travelled across the country, visiting Seville, Cordoba, Toledo, and even crossing the straits to visit Tangier. This book is a little different from the previous examples discussed above: the image of Spain is more romantic, the narrator is more of a tourist who wants to see and to know, and he is not immersed in the world of imagination. In fact, his touristic impressions of the trip are the main subject of this narrative. Andersen is very indignant towards bullfighting; he describes the coach journey along the dusty roads with humour; and he looks with sadness at the decline of the once glorious sites of Toledo and the Alhambra. He also writes more about his homeland, and aspires to return soon. There is no philosophical discussion or historical extrapolations and,

what is most significant, there are no fairy tales or stories, only a few verses. For some reason, *In Spain* is his most traditional travel book.

The final book Andersen wrote in this genre was published in 1868, *Et Besøg i Portugal 1866* (A visit to Portugal in 1866). Andersen lived in the house of a Portuguese businessman for three months, who he had met in his youth along with others. When he became a world famous writer, they invited him to visit them in Lisbon. Andersen describes his book as "momentary recorded memories". During this journey, nothing remarkable occurs and, therefore, there is a calm and cautious tone in the narrative, which is the main feature of this book. Portugal appears to be the least poetic country the Danish writer had visited. It is apparent that the genre of the travel book had exhausted itself for Andersen, as it lacks in originality, which was a permanent characteristic of his previous books, consisting of original tales and images generated by the author's imagination, with the description of the road travelled merely the framework for the real content.

Conclusion

Andersen's travel books were a very significant achievement in Danish romanticism. They inaugurate a new stage not only in the development of this genre but also of fiction in general. Andersen's fairy tale poetics has its roots in his travel books. Andersen transforms the traditional form of the travel book, because for him the poetic vision of another country was more important than the reality, which merely provided the framework for the author's fantasy. His later travel books contain texts which were subsequently included in Andersen's collections of fairy tales and stories. His images of European cities, nature and major sites are not simple realistic descriptions, but creative romantic depictions of different places, in which fairy tale fantasy plays a very important role.

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